How do male primary teachers cope with the fear and uncertainty they experience in relation to physical contact?

EDUCATION 3–13

V. CRUICKSHANK ET AL.

Vaughan Cruickshank[a], Martin Kerby[b], Margaret Baguley[b] [Q1]

[a] University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia 1

[b] University of Southern Queensland, Brisbane, Australia [Q2] 2

CONTACT Vaughan Cruickshank vcruicks@utas.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Young children often look to their teachers for affection and acceptance, particularly if they are injured or upset. Yet, many male primary teachers experience substantial fear and uncertainty about making physical contact with their students. This study used 53 open ended survey responses and semi-structured interviews with five experienced male primary teachers in Tasmania, Australia to investigate the coping strategies and supports these men use to deal with this challenge. Findings revealed a variety of coping

strategies and supports, and that the fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact and false accusations needs to be reduced if more male primary teachers are to feel confident interacting with their students in the same ways their female colleagues do.

KEYWORDS

- Male primary teachers
- coping strategies
- physical contact**[Q3]**

Introduction

Australian male primary teachers will be extinct within 50 years. McGrath and Van Bergen's (2017) bold prediction was based on over 50 years of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and is of great concern to stakeholders such as parents and school leaders who in recent years have led the call for more male primary school teachers. Educational authorities in countries such as Australia (Education Queensland 2002), New Zealand (Early Childhood Council 2013), and the United Kingdom (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) have responded to these concerns by initiating recruitment drives intended to attract more males to the profession. Despite these efforts, the percentage of primary teachers who are male continues to fall (ABS 2020). This trend suggests that rather than attracting new male teachers, the focus might be better directed to retaining those already engaged in the profession. This focus would require a close analysis of the challenges male primary teachers face, and the coping strategies they employ to meet these challenges.

Within the primary school context, both female and male teachers are subject to gender stereotypes that influence the way they act and the character traits they either consciously or unconsciously choose to display (Cruickshank et al. 2019). Connell (2002) argued that primary schools have established what she called a 'gender regime' (53) where everyday practices often reinforce a division between what are considered acceptable masculine and feminine roles. Of the many impacts of this division, and one of the most damaging, is that men are encouraged to avoid roles requiring the nurturing of young children. Previous research (e.g. Palmer et al. 2020; Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) has found male primary teachers who feel actions such as hugging an upset child are acceptable for their female colleagues but are far less certain if this acceptance extends to them. This gendered double standard has resulted in these men experiencing substantial fear and uncertainty around making physical contact with their students. This situation can make for difficult working conditions because young children often need reassurance when they are hurt, injured, or upset (Bhana and Moosa 2016; Reid et al. 2019).

Fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact has been identified as a challenge for male primary teachers by numerous researchers (e.g. Cruickshank, Kerby, and Baguley 2021; Ashcraft and Sevier 2006; Gosse 2011; Johansson, Hedlin, and Åberg 2018; Mistry and Sood 2015; Petersen 2014). For example (Gosse 2011) surveyed Canadian male primary teachers (N = 223) and noted that they were very reluctant to interact with their students in ways that many women would consider accepted ways of nurturing their young pupils. Similarly, Petersen (2014) surveyed South African pre-service primary teachers (N = 230) and noted strong perceptions that men were unsuitable to work with young children and were a potential threat through sexual abuse. These perceptions could potentially be attributed to increased media coverage and public awareness of high-profile cases concerning physical and sexual abuse of children by men (Cruickshank, 2018 **[Q4]**).

Male teachers can be extremely fearful of the possibility of being falsely accused of making inappropriate physical contact with their students. Ashcraft and Sevier's (2006) interview participants (N = 14) and Johansson, Hedlin, and Åberg (2018) interview participants (N = 20) indicated men were very concerned about this possibility, with one male teacher in Johansson et al. study stating 'being wrongly accused of paedophilia, that's my biggest fear. Because even though I would never do anything like that, a false accusation could ruin my life' (958). Despite the majority of cases resulting in the accused teachers being cleared of any wrongdoing (Commonwealth of Australia 1998), their reputations, careers, self-esteem and health are often irreparably damaged.

While the challenge of fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact is known, and the key factors that contribute to its difficulty have been identified by numerous researchers, ascertaining ways in which male primary teachers can deal with it has received far less attention. This is concerning considering researchers (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 2000) stated that a change in perspective, from deficits (challenges) to assets (supports and strategies) could have positive implications for people struggling with work related challenges. This paper will likewise shift the focus from deficits to assets by investigating the coping strategies and supports that experienced male primary teachers use to deal with the fear and uncertainty they experience in relation to physical contact.

The brief COPE scale

The brief COPE was used in this study because it explicitly distinguishes between functional and dysfunctional coping strategies, has been used previously in educational contexts (e.g. Cruickshank 2020b) and has high reliability and validity (Cooper, Katona, and Livingston 2008). The brief COPE scale (Carver 1997) was developed to assess situational and dispositional coping styles. In the brief COPE inventory (Figure 1) Carver (1997) classified coping strategies as being either problem focused, or emotion

focused. Problem focused coping is directed at the challenge itself; taking steps to remove it or reduce its impact if it cannot be avoided (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010). For example, this might include actively planning the steps to take to remove a challenge. Emotion focused coping is aimed at minimising the distress caused by the challenge. For example, making fun of the situation or reframing it to make it appear more positive. The interrelatedness of these strategies makes it more useful to think of them as complementary coping functions rather than as two distinct coping categories.

Figure 1. The brief COPE (Cooper, Katona, and Livingston 2008).

Emotion focused strategies
Acceptance (accepting the reality that it has happened/ learning to live with it)
Emotional support (getting emotional support/comfort and understanding)
Humour (making jokes about it/ making fun of the situation)
Positive reframing (trying to see it in a different light, make it seem more positive/ look for something good in it)
Religion (finding comfort in religious or spiritual beliefs/ praying or meditating)
Problem focused strategies
Active coping (concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in/ taking action to try to make it better)
Instrumental support (getting help and advice from other people/ trying to get advice or help from others about what to do)
Planning (trying to come up with a strategy about what to do/ thinking hard about what steps to take)
Dysfunctional coping strategies
Behavioral disengagement (giving up trying to deal with it/ the attempt to cope)
Denial (saying to myself "this isn't real" /refusing to believe that it has happened)
Self-distraction (turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things/ doing something to think about it less)
Self-blame (criticizing myself/ blaming myself for things that happened)
Substance use (using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better/to help me get through it)
Venting (saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape/ expressing negative feelings)

When analysing coping strategies, it is important to distinguish between functional coping strategies and dysfunctional coping strategies. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) stated that this distinction is the most important consideration when determining the success of a strategy. Functional coping includes problem focused coping and some forms of emotion focused coping. It is aimed at dealing directly with the challenge and can include strategies such as support seeking, acceptance, and positive reframing. Dysfunctional coping is aimed at escaping the challenge or related emotions and is often emotion focused because it involves an attempt to escape feelings of distress. These strategies can include avoidance and denial. Disengagement coping is generally ineffective in decreasing distress over the long term, as it does not reduce the challenge's existence or its eventual impact (Najmi and Wegner 2008). The classification of strategies in this study is primarily aimed at identifying successful, functional coping strategies that can be used by male primary teachers to help them cope with fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact. Functional problem and emotion-based strategies, along with dysfunctional coping strategies are detailed in Figure 1.

Method

Participants

This research used an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) consisting of an initial online survey followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Tasmanian primary schools teach the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2020) and cater for students from Kindergarten to grade six (ages 5-12). 175 male primary teachers from the state of Tasmania were invited to respond to the survey which contained questions in relation to physical contact. 53 (*mean age* = 37.82, *SD* = 10.44) completed the survey, which represented 30.3% of the identified population. Demographic data can be seen in Table 1 below. Interview participants (n=5) were purposively sampled from those that self-nominated at the end of the online survey (N=18) and contacted by follow-up email. They were chosen to ensure a variety of ages, schools, years of experience and geographical locations. Specifically, interview participants were 34–54 years of age, had 10–26 years of teaching experience, and taught in co-educational primary schools across northern and southern Tasmania.

Table 1. Survey participant demographic characteristics.

Age	n	Experience	n	No. of men in school	n	Principal	n	Parent	n	First Career	n
21–40	36	0–5 years	12	1	7	Male	26	Yes	34	Yes	32
41+	17	6+	41	2+	46	Female	27	No	19	No	21

Procedures

Participants were contacted through their school principals and invited to fill out the online survey. Participants were required to

provide consent before accessing the open-ended survey items and all survey responses were anonymous. The survey data collected and analysed was used to construct the guiding interview questions around the coping strategies and supports that participants used to deal with their fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact. All interview participants were interviewed for approximately 40 min. Interview participants chose, or were provided with the pseudonyms Fenton, Fred, Harry, James, and Steve. They were all given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and add clarification and additional material if required. All procedures were approved by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: H12257).

Qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions were initially coded line by line into key themes in both an inductive and deductive manner. Data were then coded axially to relate key concepts and categories to each other, and then consolidated into themes for discussion. The same process was utilised for the analysis of interview data. These themes were modified and refined through the data analysis process (Dagkas, Benn, and Jawad 2011). The findings presented below utilised excerpts from the open-ended survey responses and the verbal responses of interview participants. These data are presented together to present a more informed picture of participants' fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact. Indicative quotes have been chosen for brevity, yet other participants also gave similar responses.

Findings and discussion

Coping strategies

Participants shared numerous strategies they used to cope with the fear and uncertainty they experienced in relation to physical contact. These strategies included both the use, and avoidance of physical contact. Participant coping strategies and their functionality will now be discussed.

Challenging stereotypes

Primary teaching has traditionally been considered women's work (e.g. Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) and therefore an inappropriate job for a man. A small minority of participants stated that despite the possibility of being subjected to negative societal perceptions and gendered double standards, they would continue to make physical contact with their students, just as their female colleagues did. These participants believed that making physical contact with their students was a part of their job;

> If a child needs caring I do try to show that nurturing, and that's important. The challenge has always been the physical contact with kids, but earlier on I thought that there is a purpose in me being a bloke in an early childhood classroom and that is to show that men can be caring as well. If the female next door can put an arm around a crying kid and I can't well, I think there is a message there that is not a good one for the child to receive (Fred)

> I certainly don't want children thinking that only females can give them a hug (Harry).

These comments demonstrate that there are male primary teachers who think it is appropriate for men to hug an upset young student. The men making these comments are clearly concerned about the message avoiding physical contact sends to students about appropriate behaviour for male and female teachers, and for men and women more generally. Their belief that men should be caring and nurturing like their female colleagues is in opposition to the predominantly fear motivated statements of other participants.

Fred and Harry's comments challenged stereotypes of traditional masculine behaviour and suggest that there are alternative ways for men to interact with their students. These masculine behaviours can include being authoritarian and keeping an emotional distance from others (Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008). Providing father figures and positive male role models that challenge traditional masculinity is a commonly cited argument for increasing the number of male primary teachers (e.g. Petersen 2014). Participants such as Fred and Harry were willing to do this, yet most participants indicated that they were not comfortable with this more hands-on approach. For example; 'I have always had a basic principle to never touch a student under any circumstances' (Survey respondent 26) and 'I make sure that I have no physical contact unless it absolutely necessary' (Survey respondent 23). This reluctance could have been contributed to by societal perceptions, specifically, men who display a more caring masculinity being perceived by society as possibly gay or a paedophile (Bhana and Moosa 2016; Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2004). Challenging traditional gender stereotypes by adopting a more caring and nurturing approach appeared to be very difficult for those men who did not feel they were able to provide children with the same level of physical comfort their female colleagues could without their actions being deemed as suspicious.

Other participants in this study indicated that they were willing to make physical contact with their students for teaching demonstrations and student safety, but not hug them. These men had developed several strategies to reduce the risk of this contact being perceived as inappropriate.

> I am very conscious about making any physical contact with students. If I need to make contact to assist with a skill or examine an injury, I ensure I ask permission first and am never one on one with a student (Survey respondent 15).

These comments indicated that some participants in this study did not make any physical contact with their students unless they had obtained their permission first. This approach aligns with relevant policy guidelines (e.g. Christian Schools Tasmania 2015), and seemed reasonable in a first aid situation where a student should be informed of a teachers' intention to touch the specific body parts required to assess their injury. In other situations, such as giving a congratulatory pat on the shoulder asking permission appeared less necessary, yet this is how some participants had interpreted physical contact guidelines. Whether or not permission is required in different situations is highly subjective and likely to change from one context to the next. What is most relevant for this study is that this strategy appeared to have given some participants more confidence in their ability to deal with situations that required physical contact. This strategy could be considered active coping which is a functional coping strategy (Carver 1997) and can be defined as taking action to try and make a situation better. This approach could be considered by other men in similar situations.

Compensatory activities

Some other participants who were not comfortable hugging their students highlighted their use of 'compensatory activities' (Sargent 2000, 425) as an effective strategy for developing relationships with their students without using the same level of physical contact as their female colleagues. Compensatory activities can include low-level non-intrusive physical contact such as high fives;

> I am really into shaking hands and giving them high-fives so that kind of contact helps to develop rapport where they don't feel uncomfortable if I do put my hand on their shoulder. So, it sets a precedent of what acceptable physical contact is, and that it is quite normal for boys and girls (James)

> Sport is definitely a way that you can bond with children and develop strong relationships. When I'm on duty at lunch I will go down and kick the footy or shoot basketball and give some high fives for good shots (Steve).

James' comments indicated that he deliberately used compensatory activities when congratulating students in order to build rapport, but also to create a precedent of what acceptable physical contact looks like in his classroom. James' use of lower-level contact to build rapport with students echoed previous research such as Gosse (2011) and Sargent (2000). Sargent stated that men balanced 'the lack of mothering in their classrooms' (427) by including compensatory activities such as high fives and handshakes. Gosse similarly stated that male teachers find 'ingenious' (128) ways to nurture their students in lieu of the regular physical contact their female colleagues engaged in. These actions include increased verbal praise and high fives.

Steve and other participants made specific comments about playing sports in break times to develop stronger relationships with their students. These lunchtime activities could also be seen as compensatory behaviours, similar to those mentioned by James. Skelton (2011) stated that men who interact with their students in this way are emphasising hegemonic masculinities in order to establish themselves as 'properly male' (12) in their female dominated work environments and reduce the possibility of accusations of child sexual abuse and questions about their sexuality. The behaviours of participants such as Steve might have been working against the deconstruction of prevailing gender stereotypes that view sport as a masculine pursuit (Martino 2008), yet, participants stated that their primary intention in these situations was to build rapport with their students. Despite the potentially wider implications of their behaviour that Skelton refers to, the use of compensatory activities to develop relationships with students appeared to be a successful and functional active coping strategy (Carver 1997) for participants in this study. This strategy was of great benefit to some participants, but others voiced a preference to keep physical contact to an absolute minimum. These male primary teachers had therefore developed various non-physical strategies so that they could avoiding making physical contact with their students whenever possible.

Self-protection

The gendered double standards and societal perceptions described previously have promoted a culture of conscious self-protection amongst many of the participants in this study. Numerous participants indicated that they had developed a predominantly non-contact approach primarily because they were very fearful of being accused of making inappropriate physical contact with their students. This fear and resultant self-protection mindset have been noted by previous research on male primary teachers (e.g. Ashcraft and Sevier 2006). Participants such as Fenton described this mindset;

> The thread tying all my responses together is a fear of, being not necessarily accused but just carrying around this constant sense of if I let my guard down something could happen that is going to just ruin me. I probably didn't realise before, but it really does just colour every situation

> and everything I do at every point of the day in the classroom (Fenton).

Fenton's comments display how his perception that he has to protect himself influences every action and interaction in his working day. One of the participants in Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) study similarly described this awareness as a 'cloud' (127) that constantly hung over him. The considerable time and effort Fenton and other participants spent employing protective behaviours or avoiding situation they perceive as inherently risky would have impacted negatively on their capacity to engage with students and their academic and social needs. Strategies that utilise the assistance of other members of the school community are a vital means of both attracting and retaining male teachers, but also in improving the quality of a student's educational experiences.

Help from female colleagues and other students

One strategy adopted by male teachers in particular emphasised their ongoing concerns. Participants described how they were reduced to enlisting students and female colleagues as proxies:

> I usually ask a student's friends to comfort them if they are upset or crying. They can give them a hug, take them down to first aid or go and find a female teacher to help. I will only make physical contact if the student is unable to walk due to injury (Survey Respondent 28)

> The only strategy I perceive as adequate for male teachers is strictly no physical contact. I always refer upset or injured students to a female colleague who can give them the hug that I don't feel I can (Survey Respondent 41).

These strategies are indicative of the wider reality that some male primary teachers deal with the challenge of physical contact by avoiding it. This strategy echoed previous male primary teacher research findings (e.g. Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015) regarding the avoidance of physical contact. The strategies participants had developed looked to take advantage of what they saw as a female teachers' ability to provide physical comfort to their students. By referring upset students to their female colleagues, participants were able to ensure that students received the physical comfort they needed without having to personally provide it. The high number of female colleagues these male primary teachers worked with meant that they were readily available to step in at a moment's notice. This strategy might be dismissed as laziness or the use of dysfunctional coping strategies such as behavioural disengagement, which Carver (1997) broadly characterises as declining to even attempt to negotiate a challenge. This assessment is unlikely to find any traction among participants in this research, for they explicitly state that this deferral strategy is for self-protection. They would be more likely to agree with Carver's (1997) exploration of instrumental support, which he defined as a functional problem focused coping strategy. Deferring upset students to female colleagues might also be a successful strategy for other male primary teachers who want to comfort their students but are concerned about protecting themselves from accusations of inappropriate behaviour. It does not challenge the major issues at play but does offer an option to male teachers that at least offers some peace of mind.

Voice

Verbal strategies were mentioned by participants in this study as another way they minimised physical contact with their students. Participants described how they consciously thought about both their words and their tone in situations where physical contact could be required. Most participants who described their use of this strategy referred to situations involving potentially violent, rather than upset students. For example;

> There were two young family guys that modelled the behaviour I have now in terms of my interaction with kids. I learnt a lot about how to deal with certain situations and when to ask for backup. I learnt from them how to use my voice, how your voice can be what gets you out of a potentially violent situation (Fenton)

> If a student is misbehaving or getting aggressive, I always try to be clever with my words to get their attention before I have to put my hands on them. I always plan to try to use non-physical strategies first (James).

Observing these successful strategies modelled by more experienced male primary teachers, and subsequently having success when he incorporated them into his own approach appeared to be a key part of how Fenton coped with potentially violent situations without using physical contact. In contrast to Fenton's tone related comments, James' remarks were more to do with what he said. It appeared that James tried to divert the attention of a potentially violent student before they injured themselves or others. His preference for non-physical interventions is in line with relevant code of conduct policies (Cruickshank 2020a) that specifically stated that physical interventions should only be used as a last resort. James' statement also revealed that he intentionally planned his use of verbal strategies in advance. Carver (1997) considered planning to be a functional problem focused coping strategy. The successful use of these planned non-physical coping strategies appeared to be an important factor

in reducing participants fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact.

Humour

The use of humour is another non-physical coping strategy that teachers can employ. Numerous participants in this study talked about their use of humour as a non-physical strategy to build relationships with students, to defuse potentially risky situations, and avoid having to make physical contact with their students. Fenton stated that a lot of what he does was 'masked with a healthy dose of humour' as he had found that this was an effective way to rebuff a child seeking physical contact without hurting their feelings;

> Recently on music camp some of the kids would come up and say "can I have a hug before bed" and I was like "no go away, you smell" with a bit of a laugh because I don't want to say to them "no I don't want you to come near me because it might be misinterpreted." I use the jokes rather than just being blunt and gruff and telling them that is not appropriate (Fenton)

> I do use humour in a lot of different ways such as building relationships with students and giving some tongue in cheek input to a student argument that I think might get aggressive and require me to physically intervene (Steve).

These comments suggest that the use of humour is an important, and functional, active coping strategy (Carver 1997) for both building relationships with students and dealing with potentially difficult physical situations in a sensitive manner. This sentiment links to previous research (e.g. Skelton 2011) that noted male primary teachers often bring a heightened sense of humour to their teaching. Fenton's coping strategy for dealing with these situations clearly incorporated a strong self-preservation mentality. He had adopted this non-contact approach because he believed that it was the best way to protect himself from accusations of inappropriate physical contact, but he was very aware that his approach could affect his ability to build and maintain positive relationships with his students. The use of humour appeared to be a strong contributor to him being able to develop these positive relationships with his students without physical contact.

Steve also uses humour to build relationships and avoid physical contact. Similar to James' approach, Steve preferred to initially intervene in a student disagreement with a verbal comment whenever possible. The use of humour also appeared to be a key strategy for Steve when defusing potentially violent situations. In addition to the use of verbal strategies that Steve and other participants described, participants also talked more generally about the importance of advance planning for any potentially risky situations.

Thinking ahead

Thinking ahead might not seem like a coping strategy in the truest definition of the word, yet the number of participants that referred to it warrant its inclusion. In addition to thinking ahead in terms of setting up their classrooms to minimise teacher-student physical contact and planning to use non-physical interventions as their first option, participants also revealed that they consciously thought about how their actions could be misconstrued and actively planned to minimise potentially dangerous situations;

> I try to have a bit of foresight into how things could be construed. So be a bit proactive in looking after yourself and also the child because you don't want a child in a situation where they were doing something inappropriate or making you feel uncomfortable, probably without even realising it (Fred)

> I try and plan ahead so I can avoid those [physical contact] sorts of situations. So, if I have a child who has been misbehaving, planning ahead is a big thing from me to ensure that if I do have to be physical there is someone else there to witness how it is done. And also, how I set up my room and when I'm moving around the classroom where I'm going to stand, especially when I'm talking to the older girls. So maybe crouching next to them rather than leaning over them (James)

Fred's comments indicate that he was aware that he needed to protect both himself and his students from any potentially risky situations. This strategy aligns with what Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) term proactive coping. Proactive coping involves acting before any dangerous situations arise in order to prevent them occurring. Fred's belief that students might not even realise the inappropriateness of their actions suggested that these children might not have yet developed an understanding of the gendered double standards prevalent in society and might therefore assume that all teachers are equal and unknowingly put their male teacher in an uncomfortable situation. His comments highlight the potential risks faced by male primary teachers in relation to accusations of inappropriate behaviour.

James' comments also refer to the self-protection mindset and gendered double standards mentioned previously and indicate that he also carefully analysed how he set up his classroom and moved within it. James' forward planning was motivated in part by a belief that he needed colleagues present to witness any physical contact he made as they could then corroborate his story in

the event of an accusation. His strategies therefore relied heavily on the support of his (often female) colleagues and reinforced how important these colleagues were in helping male primary teachers cope with their fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact.

Moving to a more public location

Female colleagues were also mentioned in relation to another successful coping strategy participants used to reduce the difficulties associated with unplanned interactions with individual students in the classrooms at break times;

> I'm very conscious of a child coming into the classroom by themselves, particularly girls. In that situation I would try to minimise the amount of time they spent in here. I would either leave the room or give them some excuse about going outside so you're in front of other people. Even some of the little ones who have trouble getting their jumper off and you have to hold their shirt down for them. Generally, if I can get myself in a situation where I have a female witness on hand then I will try to do that (Fred)

> I never allow myself to remain in a room with only one child, if a child needs to remain inside because of illness I have doors open and sit in the doorway with a female teacher nearby and aware I have a child remaining in the room. If a student comes into the room at lunch and wants to talk then we will go down to the library and have a chat there. The kids think you just want to go down to the library but what you are actually doing is going down to the library because Mrs X is there and she can look over your shoulder (Survey Respondent 20).

These strategies indicate that men actively avoid situations that require them to make physical contact with a student when no witnesses are present. This finding echoed participants' statements in previous research (e.g. Ashcraft and Sevier 2006; Cruickshank 2016). While moving to a public place to converse with students may appear to be a defensive strategy born of fear, it nevertheless is also a form of active coping, which is a functional coping strategy (Carver 1997). In these situations, participants prioritised removing the student from the classroom as quickly as possible in a manner that was sensitive to the students' feelings. The avoidance of one on one situations is likely to be connected to the self-preservation mentality as no witnesses means no support or corroboration of their story in the event of an accusation. These responses again highlight how important the support of female colleagues was to participants' abilities to enact the strategies they used to cope with fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact.

Supports

Many participants in this study mentioned the support they had received within their schools. Along with the strategies discussed above, this support was a key contributor to their ability to cope with the fear and uncertainty they experienced in relation to physical contact and remain within the primary teaching profession. Due to a lack of male teaching colleagues, participant comments primarily focussed on the support they received from their female colleagues and school leaders, however, other participants made specific mention of other members of the school community, such as parents.

Female colleagues and school leaders

Numerous participants in this study stated that support from their female colleagues and school leaders was a vital aspect of their ability to cope with the fear and uncertainty they experienced in relation to physical contact. These statements echoed previous research (e.g. Cruickshank 2020b; Smith 2008) that emphasised the importance of these relationships. In addition to their important roles in the strategies discussed above, participants stated that this support included discussing concerns and seeking advice through to direct assistance when required;

> I have had some extraordinary support from female staff. I have been lucky here as I have a female colleague directly across the hallway, so I just have to open the door walk over and say "I need you to help me with this" (Fenton)

> The principal has been happy to come and take my class for short periods when I had to deal with a sensitive issue immediately, which was very helpful (James)

> I think you just need to make sure you are sharing that information with other teachers. Informing others shares that responsibility so if there is any recourse then you have other professionals to back you up (Steve)

These comments demonstrated that support from female colleagues and school leaders can come in many different forms and in many different contexts. Colleagues and leaders would likely offer support regardless of gender, yet participants in this study clearly appreciated that they could quickly access support from their female colleagues and school leaders if they required it. It is important to acknowledge that much of this support is informal and relies on goodwill, which is both a strength and a real

weakness in that it can evaporate if the good will disappears. Support from female colleagues was particularly important for situations in which participants were fearful or uncertain about making physical contact. Importantly, the participants see this support as being both personal and professional, the seeking out of which Carver (1997) characterises as functional coping strategies. Making colleagues aware of potential problems was unlikely to be a male only strategy, yet it was highly valued by participants that experienced fear and uncertainty about physical contact. This support was particularly influential given the paucity of male colleagues.

Building trust and rapport

Many participants in this study also mentioned the building of relationships with parents and students as being vital to their ability to cope with the fear and uncertainty they experienced in relation to physical contact. The importance of gaining acceptance from the parents of their students has been noted by previous research on male primary teachers (e.g. Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008). Participants were less fearful and uncertain about making physical contact with their students if they felt that parents trusted them to assess the educational and social value of doing so;

> The greatest 'weapon' a male teacher can employ is confidence and competence. Once a track record of competence is established it is no longer an issue. Parents, mums in particular, want to know that you care and that you can empathize. Some need regular reassurance (e.g. a chat at the gate), others just like to test you and once you have passed the test, you are accepted (Survey respondent 12)

> I always go out of my way to get to know parents and build a rapport (Survey respondent 45).

As participants were unable to change societal perceptions of male primary teachers themselves, the strategy many had adopted was to try to improve these perceptions within their own schools. This functional active coping strategy (Carver 1997) has been reported in previous research on male primary teachers (e.g. Foster and Newman 2005). These comments indicated that male primary teachers deliberately made the effort to build rapport with parents, and that they believed that this would make their job easier in the mid to long term. These findings suggest that the building of trust and rapport is vital to the success and persistence of male primary teachers. If parents and other stakeholders feel they know male teachers well, these men were then given greater trust and acceptance. This trust and acceptance allowed them to take a more hands on approach to teaching and reduced the risk of their reputation being adversely affected by the inappropriate behaviour of other men.

The contrast between participants' willingness to make physical contact with their students might be related to the amount of trust and acceptance they perceived to have from the parents of their students. Participants such as Fred and Harry were happy to challenge gender stereotypes and make physical contact with their students. This poses the question of why they were willing and able to ignore gendered double standards and incorporate physical contact into their teaching approaches when other men were not. This is a complex issue, but Fred and Harry do have obvious similarities. They are both older men who are well established in their present schools after many years of teaching experience. The trust and rapport they had developed within their school community over time might have contributed to them feeling that their behaviour was less scrutinised and that they could adopt a more hands on approach similar to their female colleagues. If this were indeed the case, it would be a similar situation to one noted by Foster and Newman (2005). One of their participants noted that he was gradually able to change his teaching approach as he gained the acceptance and trust of parents. This perceived trust eventually enabled him to approach physical contact in the same hands-on way his female colleagues did. Male primary teachers who have not yet built up this trust within their school community may have to use other coping strategies for dealing with negative societal perceptions and the resultant fear and uncertainty they experience surrounding physical contact.

Coping strategy functionality

When the strategies presented above were compared with the strategies summarised by the Brief COPE (Carver 1997), it appeared that participants in this study predominantly used functional coping strategies. Participant data contained evidence of both successful problem focused and emotion focused strategies. Examples of problem focused strategies used by participants included moving to a more public location and using their voice to their advantage. Emotion focused examples included the use of humour and seeking support and understanding from their colleagues.

Participant responses also provided some evidence of potentially dysfunctional coping strategies such as disengagement or avoidance. Avoidance is not a standalone strategy in the Brief COPE, but Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) do specifically refer to avoidance as a disengagement coping strategy. They stated that disengagement coping strategies are generally ineffective over the long term, as they do nothing about a challenges existence or eventual impact. Najmi and Wegner (2008) also stated that avoidance could increase thoughts about a challenge and negatively affect mood and anxiety. Fenton's comments about his fear and uncertainty regarding physical contact colouring 'every situation and everything I do at every point of the day in the classroom' indicated that Najmi and Wegner's comments might be accurate for some male primary teachers. Classifying the

subsequent avoidance of physical contact by Fenton and other participants as dysfunctional could be considered a little harsh when all the complex intricacies of the male primary teacher experience are considered. Participant data indicated that adopting a teaching approach that avoided or limited physical contact to a bare minimum was a successful coping strategy for some male primary teachers. Admittedly, as Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) stated, this strategy did not remove the fear and uncertainty participants experienced in relation to physical contact this strategy, but it positively influence their ability to cope with this challenge and persist within the profession.

Societal perceptions and gendered double standards were an influential contributor to participants' fear and uncertainty in relation to physical contact. In light of these substantial factors, participant's avoidance of physical contact can be easily understood. As participants could not individually change societal perceptions of male primary teachers as a whole, many of them had decided that their best strategy was to be the best teacher they could be in order to try and improve these perceptions within their own school communities. Strategies involving the avoidance of physical contact should not be considered participants denying the existence of the challenge, but rather acknowledging its entirety and attempting to make a positive impact as an individual. If, as indicated by many participants in this study, being the best teacher they could be involved the avoidance of physical contact; then this is what some male primary teachers will have to do. Avoidance could be classified as a dysfunctional coping strategy (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010), yet the avoidance of physical contact appeared to be a highly functional coping strategy for some participants in this study.

Limitations

Caution should be taken when viewing these findings because of the small participant numbers. Increasing participant numbers to a larger national or international cohort in future studies might allow for more supports and strategies to be better identified and explored, as well as offering more critical insights into the gender dynamics at play in male teachers' lives and how additional factors such as race and sexuality can stigmatise male teachers (Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2012) and influence their coping strategy choices. For example, previous research (e.g. King 2004) has indicated that sexuality can influence male teachers' avoidance of physical contact. Not one participant engaged with their sexuality as an issue, only perceptions of it. This is an area worthy of further research.

The male primary teacher experience is complex, and it is important to acknowledge that while male teachers can be disadvantaged by certain gender regimes in primary schools that influence how they interact with students, they can also experience advantages in primary schools, such as being more likely to be employed, promoted, recognised and appreciated (Cruickshank 2012 **[Q5]**; Smith 2008). Researchers could also consider focusing their future efforts in this area.

This research was undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Future research could also consider the effect of COVID-19 on male primary teachers and their fear and uncertainty in relation to physical contact. Suppression measures such as social distancing which were used in schools in 2020, may have actually been a relief for some men as they were designed to reduce the amount of physical contact between people, and consequently, may have also reduced the fear and uncertainty some men experienced in relation to this challenge.

Conclusion

Participant data indicated that their abilities to cope with the fear and uncertainty they experienced in relation to physical contact and persist within the profession was influenced by the coping strategies they used, and the support they received. The majority of participants in this study indicated that they would adopt a non-contact approach and continue to exhibit traditional masculine behaviours to position themselves as a 'real man' (Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008, 71), and reduce their fear of being perceived negatively and falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour. Negative societal perceptions as well as participants own perceptions of masculinity have likely contributed to this fear. Coping strategies such as the avoidance of physical contact might have allowed participants to cope with their fear and uncertainty in relation to this challenge, yet these actions might have also been educating their students about appropriate behaviour for different genders. This avoidance could have reinforced the gendered double standards discussed previously in that physical contact is permissible for women, but not for men. This approach is disappointing in light of researchers (e.g. Petersen 2014) arguing that providing positive male role models that challenge traditional masculine behaviours was a key argument for increasing the number of male teachers in primary schools. In order to start deconstructing stereotypes by adopting a more caring and nurturing approach, male primary teachers need to feel trusted and supported to make appropriate physical contact when they believe it is required to provide care and support to their students. Sargent (2000, 417) suggested that for men 'nurturing children is dangerously close to molesting them'. If more male primary teachers are to feel confident interacting with their students in the same ways their female colleagues do, the fear and uncertainty they experience surrounding physical contact and false accusations needs to be reduced. Collaboration between schools, society, and the media might help to achieve this. If this does not occur then the findings from this and other studies (e.g. Cruickshank et al. 2018) suggest that it will be very difficult for male primary teachers to challenge traditional gender stereotypes in their schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s **[Q6]**).

ORCID

Vaughan Cruickshank http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9766-6807

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