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‘Mates’: An Exploration of the Gendered Performance of Identity in Male Teachers

Patrick Campbell[1]
University of Warwick

Abstract

In light of recent developments in gender and sexual politics, the place of boys in education remains a significant area of research and debate. The position of male teachers as role models for the boys they teach is of particular importance when considering how boys learn and perform masculinity. Employing a post-structuralist feminist framework, this study asks: How and why do male educators alter their gendered performance as teachers to fit the role of a positive male role model for boys? Conversational interviews, structured around vignettes drawing from the author’s own teaching background, were conducted with five early-stage state school male teachers in England to understand their experiences with gender performance and their negotiation of harmful and progressive masculinities in their own classrooms. Through thematic analysis, three distinct configurations of the teachers’ enactments of masculinity were identified: ‘one of the lads’, ‘leader-of-the-pack’, and ‘conflict and domination’. Together, these findings reveal how teachers simultaneously challenge traditional masculine norms while reproducing them through authority, conflict, and competition.

Keywords: masculinity, teaching, performativity, education, boys

[1] Corresponding Author: Campbell, Patrick.
Email: patrick.campbell19931@gmail.com
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Observatory of Masculinities
University College Dublin, Ireland

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Introduction

At the close of the film, *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the viewer is presented with a young, enthusiastic English teacher who is dismissed from his position. The class rallies around their former mentor, reciting Whitman's (1891), 'O Captain! My Captain!'. Employing the metaphor of a captainless ship and a directionless crew, the boys swear allegiance and loyalty to their adopted leader, much to the authoritarian headmaster's disgust. We are presented with an ideal archetypal male teacher in his students' eyes. He is both 'one of the boys'—youthful and athletic—but also sits above them, leading the way down the path to manhood. Popular culture is littered with such figures. There is, however, another teacher who walks the school corridors, one of rules, regulations, authority, and discipline; he is the archetypal villain and Demon Headmaster (1982) of many a children's story. He bellows, relishes in punishment, and teaches through learning by rote and by textbook in an early boot camp in the grey realities of being a man. These figures rule with an iron fist, or with the flat end of a ruler, confirming familiar expectations of a man in the school space.

When a new male teacher first steps into the profession, this is the 'dramatis personae' with which they are presented. There is a role to be performed until that role is perfected daily; and there is a question to be asked: Who is 'Sir'? This is a question I have had to ask myself on numerous occasions, sometimes self-consciously performing a role alien to my own experience of manhood. How does one balance discipline and caregiving, or authority with a need to relate to one's students? How do you build a bond with the 'naughty' boys? All of this hinges on the performance that the teacher takes on when stepping in front of his audience.

Performance has been a long-standing metaphor for understanding student-teacher relations (Barrell, 1984; Dawe, 1984; Pineau, 1994; Prendergast, 2008), positioning the teacher, in their performance, as a 'socio-political negotiator' (Prendergast, 2008, p. 14). It is through the words, actions, and delivery of the teacher role that this study aims to interrogate the gender politics at play, not simply the gender politics between men and women, but between the multiple iterations of what it is to be a man. In light of concerns surrounding men and boys in education, this study also aims to begin to understand how teachers' performance can be used as a tool to create positive social identities.

In the wider world, there is increasing interest in the place of boys ranging from concerns regarding mental health to misogyny or the example set surrounding pornography (Williams, 2018; Sehgal and Forgey, 2025; Weale, 2026). The main question this study addresses, therefore, is the following: How and why do male educators alter their gendered

performance as teachers to fit the role of a positive male role model for boys? 'Performance' is key to my exploration, coming from the understanding that identity shapes, and is shaped by, performative actions of others when seen in context. Previous studies (Skelton, 2001, 2002; Haase, 2008, 2010) have also approached this question, but due to the ever-changing attitudes to understandings of gender, dependent on time and place, it is a question I wished to revisit in England in the early 2020s.

This interpretivist study uses a post-structuralist feminist framework to analyse the experiences of early-career male teachers from the state-school sector in England. Employing conversational interviews with these men, the study does not provide a comprehensive overview of the performance of masculinity, nor does it intend to. A study cannot be 'true in all contexts' (Haase, 2008, p. 596) and 'no two people will perform gender in the same way' (Haase *et al.*, 2010). I do not seek to create a typology from which all male teachers can choose their persona; rather, this study endeavours to unearth the behaviours and functions displayed by individual male teachers in their classrooms in real life, examining the role of performativity in their educational practice.

Understanding how masculinity plays out in the classroom can offer a starting point for educators and policymakers, particularly those interested in improving the situation that boys face in schools. The benefits and pitfalls of the examples set by male teachers can allow us an insight into how far we have come in promoting a positive model of masculinity (countering what has become known as 'toxic masculinity') but can also inform future directions for the improvement of masculine behaviour and the examples we provide our students.

Literature Review: **The Question of Boys, the Construction of Gender, and the Making of Masculinities**

Whether discussing the number of male teachers (Mills, Martino, and Lingard, 2004; Sellgren, 2016), bullying (Davison, 1996; Nofziger, 2019), 'male' and 'female' curricula (Viands, 2018; Kostas, 2019), or boys' mental health (Compton, 2018; Petter, 2019), men are central to educational discourse over the last few decades. Specifically, there is a body of work intent on 'closing the gender gap' in attainment, overcoming impressions of boys as lazy, disengaged, and underachieving (ESTYN, 2008). Some specialists advocate implementing a 'boy-friendly curriculum' (Zannielo, 2015), appealing to 'boys' interests' such as sport, video games, or violence (Reichert and Hawley, 2010). Others argue that the best way to close that gender gap is to adapt teaching to suit a 'masculine' learning style, advocating 'motor activity' (Reichert and Hawley, 2009, p. 774), or competition (Wilkins, 2012; Wilson, 2014; Roberts, 2015). Such forms of engagement have been shown to lack any real pedagogical or cognitive foundation (Covington, 1998; Mills and

Keddie, 2007; Willingham, 2009; Pinkett and Roberts, 2019), detracting from actual learning (Younger *et al.*, 2005; Pinkett and Roberts, 2019). This is not to mention the effect that 'boyish' methods can have on the attainment of girls and non-normative boys.

There is also discussion of a *man's* place within the school institution where teaching is perceived as 'feminised' (Roulston and Mills, 2000; Mills, Martino, and Lingard, 2004; *BBC News*, 2011; Sellgren, 2016; DfE, 2018; NCES, 2020). To challenge this, the notion of a career trajectory is highlighted as an incentive for a male workforce (Lingard *et al.*, 2002; Mills, Martino, and Lingard, 2004). One 2002 study of Australian primary teachers states that only one in thirteen female teachers could hope to gain a headship; one in four males made the ultimate position (Skelton, 2002). By 2016, 38% of UK primary teachers were men, but accounted for 62% of headteachers (DfE, 2016; Staufenberg, 2018), revealing a 'glass escalator' for men in education (Williams, 1992). The male teacher adopts certain roles as 'a man' in the feminised space of the school, outside the everyday duties of teaching (McDowell, 1999) from heavy lifting to coaching sports (King, 1998; Blount, 2000; Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008; O'Keefe, 2016a, 2016b), distancing themselves from their female counterparts and dividing labour along sexed lines (Connell, 2005). As Mills (2004) suggests, there is a push to reconstruct teaching as a male-friendly career in opposition to perceived caregiving connotations of the female teacher.

Additionally, the ethical question of the effect of male-oriented behaviours on students is significant. Competitiveness, challenges, and egoism may engage boys for a short amount of time, but these traits can play into the oft-cited issues of 'toxic masculinity', which are damaging to students' emotional and social development (Cooper, 2018; Camangian, 2022). Behaviours can forge the identity of the students as well as teachers, and the type of students we produce, prompting the question: What kind of boys do we want to see in the world?

Since this study was conducted in 2020-2021, the role of masculinity in society has only increased in pertinence. The increased interest in masculinity in online spaces (the manosphere) and the gradual increase in conservative approaches to issues have only increased the importance of examining gender in society (Latimore and Coyne, 2023). Scharnagl (2026), for example, argues that '[m]isogyny is becoming structurally normalized, shaping political discourse, digital environments, and institutional practices despite formal progress on gender equality' (p. 2). In particular, there is an increased interest in the vulnerability of boys to radicalisation and influence from this 'toxic masculinity', continuing to highlight how masculine identities are shaped in schools (Blower, 2025).

To fully answer this question, 'What kind of boys do we want to see in the world?', one must first ask: What kind of man can we see in the classroom? (Jones, 2007). More simply, the question is, what do men *do?* Gender performativity, or '*doing* gender', is associated with Butler's (2007) assertion that gender is 'discursively constituted by […] political system[s]' (p. 3, 47; see also Demetriou, 2001, p. 341). Similarly, Connell (2005) asserts that gender is a set of historically contingent categories that fluctuate, fragment, and remerge depending on various factors. These include societal power relations, relations of production, and sexual desire (pp. 73-74). Considering economic, cultural, and racial discontinuities, these three regimes fluctuate, privileging different gendered traits at different points. Gender can thus be understood as 'what people actually do, not […] what is expected or imagined' (Connell, 1996); it is *performative.* Butler (2006) locates this performance in a repetitive ritual in day-to-day life, which is both a 're-enactment [sic] and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established' (p. 191), in a manner that is both self-referential and self-replicating. Butler borrows Foucault's stylistics of existence (Butler, 1988, p. 521; Foucault, 1992, p. 11), a 'stylization of the body and […] the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler, 1988, p. 519; see also Butler, 1997). These acts—how we behave, dress, speak, and move—provide tools to understand the performance of identity.

As Butler (2006) shows, when faced with a gender non-conformist (e.g., drag queens and crossdressers), there is often a punitive societal backlash or 'regulatory consequence' resulting in anything from marginalisation to violence, illustrating how gender norms operate in policing the boundaries of socially acceptable gender expression. In the context of masculine performance, Connell (2005) conceptualises the production and maintenance of such normative gender hierarchies through the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity'. Here, Connell identifies four main 'configurations of [social] practice': hegemonic masculinity; subordinate masculinity (read effeminate or homosexual); complicit masculinity; and marginalised masculinity (those who, at any one time are considered outside of a particular gender regime, such as Black men or working-class men in a white middle-class gender regime) (pp. xviii, 77-80). Connell's key concern is hegemonic masculinity, a masculinity which is dominant in its particular setting and which, in contemporary Western contexts, as Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) state, 'mobilizes around physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality' (p. 121).

Within this framework, masculinities hybridise, reproduce, and reform themselves depending on the social, geographical, or historical settings,

with the hegemonic ideal representing a 'hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities' (Demetriou, 2001, p. 337). Modes of behaviour may dominate in certain contexts, but in other settings an alternative form of masculinity may dominate. One can also see the differences that occur *between* masculinities as a source of power. Undermining, questioning, or sidelining subordinate masculinities can also serve as a means of control, much like the sidelining of women. Francis and Skelton (2001) argue that maintaining authority in a space populated by other males relies on the consistent display of hegemonic power. In school, this is usually seen through discipline, aggression, and force (Willis, 1977; Benyon, 1989; Hammersley, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Haywood, 1996). Conversely, calls for a disruptive performativity of masculinity are found across many examples of teacher-oriented, non-academic literature (*The Guardian*, 2008; Clark, 2014; MAEC, 2016; Romero, 2018), such as the notion of 'tender masculinity' (Loire, 2018; Pinkett and Roberts, 2019), which, challenging culturally dominant ideas of masculinity, opens up to emotions and intimacy.

Qualitative research examining teachers' subjectivities and navigation of gender dynamics suggests that male teachers' experiences are impacted by the ways teaching is perceived as feminised (Connell, 1985; Haase, 2010), meaning a teacher's 'masculinity [is] continuously in doubt' (O'Keefe, 2016b, p. 6). Men, therefore, may reject 'softer' stylistics of emotion and become a 'disciplinarian' based in fear (Benyon, 1989; Skelton, 2001, p. 126), standing at odds with the female teacher (Noddings, 2001; Jones, 2007; Haase, 2010, p. 179). Haase (2010) argues that students see men as unfamiliar and 'fearfully powerful' (p. 182), as men defensively create personas that reject 'softness' in favour of 'tougher' stylistics to avoid the punitive measures placed on subordinate men. As Haase (2008) states, such teacher performance not only creates 'the self [but also] the social system [and] those boys and girls whom they are socialising' (p. 599). A range of educational and critical social scholarship explores methods of constructing the identities of students, with increasing levels of intentionality on the part of the teacher (Singh, Rizvi, and Shrestha, 2007, p. 197; Deleuze and Guattari, 2008; Youdell and Armstrong, 2011). Bourdieu's (1977) concept of 'habitus', which shows how stylistics of existence are learnt through 'mimesis', helps to illuminate the unconscious dimensions of this construction: we imitate the habits of a common social group, and habits recognised by members of the same social group are ingrained in the body of the perceiving subject. A male student might literally recognise the maleness of a teacher and thus attempt to mimic the stylistics which they perceive in that teacher.

Other research employs a 'choreography of schooling' (Eggermont, 2001) to describe how teachers organise the classroom and the actions and interactions of students' bodies within this socialising space. In the

standardisation, improvisation, and ritualisation of classroom practice, choreography engages with practices that structure identities and create meaning for those within (McLaren, 1993; Eggermont, 2001; Youdell and Armstrong, 2011). The positioning, regulating, and even freeing of students' bodies by teachers are found to contain meaning within the power structures of the classroom. Drawing on Rancière's (2010) metaphor of a policeman patrolling the scene of a crime to illustrate how power choreographs social order, we can understand the teacher as similarly choreographing the classroom. Just as the policeman 'figures' space, defining what the subject *does* and *perceives*—'Move along! There's nothing to see here!' (Rancière, 2010, p. 37)—and what stylistics and attitudes can be seen in the world or 'what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it' by the subject (p. 37), a teacher displays or censors certain topics and behaviours which declares to the student what is possible to them. From the teacher's choreography of the space, which is itself regulated by hegemonic masculine norms, it is established what kind of man one can be.

Considering the classroom as a site in which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced, then, one can identify a key aspect of masculinity which is negotiated by this teacher-policeman: sex. The classroom often serves as a space where heteronormative beliefs about gender and sexuality are repeated and bolstered (Gansen, 2017) through the performances and relationships of men. Male teachers have been noted to embody a 'wing-man' to the boys or engage in a teasing, 'unharmful' desexualised flirting with girls, to the point that (hetero)sexuality forms a key basis for the development of the teacher-student relationship (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Francis and Skelton, 2001; Skelton, 2001). Often, in the attempt to create authentic interpersonal relationships with students, we see a turn towards disclosing intimate information, such as personal relationships or weekend activities. This 'self-disclosure' at best toes the line of respect and credibility from the student (Wang *et al.*, 2015), and at worst can cast the teacher as a predatory, controlling presence (Sears, 1992; Silin, 1997; Haase, 2010). On the other hand, self-disclosure has been noted to improve student engagement and teacher-student relationships, through the trust placed in the relationship and the authenticity brought with divulging a level of personal information (Rouse and Bradley, 1989; Rigsbee, 2010).

While some scholarship advances a typology of approaches which define masculinities in the classroom, varying from 'Professionals' (disciplinarians) to 'Collectivists' ('pally' teachers) (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Skelton, 2001), other scholarship rejects any attempt to typify the subjectivities of all male teachers in favour of exploring the individual narratives provided by the subjects available to them (Haase, 2008, 2010). This work engages with contemporary gender, feminist, and queer theory that argues that gender lies in the performance of the individual

within a certain paradigm, more focused on what one does than what one is, rejecting fixity and established norms of a gender. The stylistics of existence, or what one does as one's gender in bodily and speech acts, form the gender that one is through their repetitive performance. This rejection of fixity renders gender identity as fluid, malleable, and contingent on social and cultural factors, which creates multiple masculinities and femininities in multiple spaces. Nevertheless, Connell (2005) argues that these multiple masculinities can be organised into various configurations of practice, depending on which iteration is hegemonic or subordinate in a particular space. Taken together, the literature reviewed above demonstrates that through the stylistics adopted, the performance of the teacher has a real-world impact on the identity formation of the student; the teacher choreographs his own space to police and limit the potentialities in his students. It is through the tools of stylistics of existence, configurations of practice, and choreography of potentiality that I will proceed in analysing the actions and experiences of male teachers in practice and attempt to answer the question: What kind of men can we see in the classroom?

Methods

To understand performativity in practice, I conducted a set of conversational interviews drawing on vignettes as a starting point. Interviewees were recruited through convenience sampling from personal contacts, with the recruitment criteria being male-identifying secondary-school teachers working in the English state-school system. The study involved five individuals in their twenties from varied personal, educational, and professional backgrounds (see Table 1). Although all interviewees were of a similar age and shared a knowledge of myself and sometimes of each other (Simon and Paul attended the same school; Bradley, Adam and Declan, met during their Post-graduate Certificate in Education and worked at the same school), each participant presented a wide range of experiences and life histories in order to attain maximum variation among responses (Patton, 1990).

Interviewee	**Educational Setting**	**Teaching Subject**	**Background**
Simon	Relatively deprived rural school, East Midlands	Maths, Key Stages 3 and 4	East Midlands, Middle Class, Rural, Comprehensive CofE School (same school as Paul)
Paul	Range of Schools in Birmingham and Yorkshire	Maths, Key Stages 3 and 4 Also helped with sports teams	East Midlands, Middle Class, Comprehensive CofE School (same school as Simon)

Bradley	Relatively deprived, urban school, West Midlands	Modern Foreign Languages, Key Stages 2, 3, 4, 5	West Midlands, Urban, Comprehensive School
Declan	Relatively deprived, urban school, West Midlands	Science (specialised in Biology), Key Stages 3 and 4 Also coached rugby	Northern Ireland, Rural, Comprehensive School
Adam	Rural school, West Midlands	Head of Geography	West Midlands, Urban Private School

Table 1: Interviewees

Interviewees were provided with comprehensive information about the study and gave informed consent prior to participating in the interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with all potentially identifying information anonymised, including anything that could potentially identify an interviewee's student, colleague, or workplace, and each interviewee assigned a pseudonym. Data was managed in accordance with the University of Warwick's guidelines, from which ethical approval for the study was obtained. Ethical considerations included ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, as well as ensuring that participation was voluntary and that interviewees could withdraw from the study at any point. Care was also taken in the storage, handling, and reporting of interview data to minimise the risk of identification and to ensure that participants' accounts were represented accurately and respectfully.

Interviews were conducted between Autumn 2020 and Spring 2021. Each interview took a conversational form (Taylor, 1989; Brinkmann, 2013), lasted roughly 90 minutes, and was formed around vignettes (short narratives or descriptions of scenarios for the interviewees to respond to, see Appendix). Because of my own status as a teacher at the same career stage as many of the interviewees, these scenarios were drawn from my own experiences, anonymised, and designed to elicit open-ended responses, while allowing for a relatability between myself and the interviewee. This also maximised the realism of the response (Neff, 1979), providing an accurate depiction of reality, as 'the more hypothetical vignettes appear, the less likely reactions will correspond to actual behaviour' (Hughes and Huby, 2004, p. 41).

Employing a thematic analytical approach, responses were coded for the stylistics of existence mentioned, the configurations of practices at play, and the ways in which choreographies shaped the student subjects, and

from this were organised into various themes which illustrated the variation of masculinities at play amongst the interviewees.

Findings: Ecosystems of Masculinity

Throughout the interviews, an ecological metaphor became apparent. One interviewee, Simon, referred to the school as an 'ecosystem', which has useful implications for exploring the gendered relationships found in the classroom. Relationships were a constant referral point for all interviewees in their practice, but the often static, hierarchical, or linear understanding of a teacher-student relationship does not allow for the myriad connections that can be found. By envisioning an ecosystem, the school space opens up to many more possibilities. It differentiates between individual students and teachers, remains attentive to their differing relationships to schooling and to each other, and negotiates gendered, socio-economic, and environmental factors, remaining in total flux (Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Taking Simon's use of the ecological metaphor as a starting point then, analysis of the interview responses identified three main 'ecological relationships', variations of Connell's (2005) 'configurations', within the stylistics of these teachers' performances: 1) 'one of the lads'; 2) 'leader-of-the-pack'; 3) 'conflict and domination'. These are not viewed as fixed roles used by male teachers to engage with boys; neither are they seen to be a scripted set of techniques or actions. Throughout interviewees' accounts, the same configurations manifest in various ways, engaging or refuting hegemonic masculinity at different times.

Relationship 1: One of the Lads

All interviewees reflected at least an attempt or wish to be a friendly teacher or a peer amongst equals. There was often a push for 'relatability' when forging relationships, something to let students know the teacher was 'just like them'. This first manifested in the stylistic choice of how to address students. When asked how he *named* his male students, Declan stated that he called them 'lad' because this is what he would call friends outside of school. He wished to afford his male students that same respect that would be given to his peers socially. When asked if the word 'lad' added to his teaching persona, he replied:

> I'd say it does actually, […] I think that by addressing them as 'lad', you can break that formal barrier, you can make them more relatable, normal. Calling someone lad isn't really a very formal term, so when they hear that, they think that I'm not a formal individual; I'm personal, comfortable, laid back.

Declan aspired to be a figure to whom the boys could relate and find commonalities. Similarly, Adam tried to form a bond that reflected his male *friendships* through naming. Having previously used the term as an easy way to build rapport, Adam now rejected the term 'mate':

> I was always […] under the impression that relationships were the most important thing in behaviour management. If you have a good relationship, you have a good kid. So, I'd often be quite nice, very 'matey', but now I've come away from that. I think I'm approachable, but I demand respect.

Nevertheless, Adam called his students by their surname because 'with my male friends that's how we refer to each other as well'. Here, there is a drive to democratise the relationship between teacher and student, flatten the hierarchies of the classroom, and build a relationship based on a notion of mutual familiarity.

Furthermore, some interviewees saw themselves at the intersections of other factors which complicated the performance of the male-male relationship, such as geography and class. After spending some time teaching near Birmingham, Paul had relocated to Yorkshire. When discussing the way he named the boys in his class, Paul, like Declan, used the word 'lad'. He suggested, however, that the word did not come naturally to him; he believed it was a method to 'build attachment' and make the 'kids think they're winning you over', adapted to the background of the students:

> I don't think I did that actually until I came over here. I can't remember what I said in Shropshire. It's difficult to think about what you can say as a term of endearment. I think as a male there's a lot less you can get away with.

To find a way of referring to the students which avoided falling into the pitfalls of impropriety (Haase, 2008, 2010), Paul adopted local terminology (Yorkshire) in order to forge that link with the boys (Gregory, 2020). Not only did the use of the word 'lad' create an affinity with the local culture of the school (Northern, working-class), but it also created an affinity with the boys of the class *as boys.* When faced with the follow-up question, 'What do you think calling them "lad" signifies to them?', Paul responded:

> I think almost a, maybe a father figure, or […] I think I come across as a big brother. Obviously, I've got [a] big brother, so maybe that's how I subconsciously come across.

Paul was very keen to backtrack on the 'fatherly' response and resorted to a more horizontal understanding; being a big brother seems much more

relatable and denies the authoritarian teacher archetype. In calling them 'lad', Paul strove to approach his students on equal footing.

Adam also discussed the class-based aspects of his relationships with the boys he taught, and how he adapted his behaviour in the classroom to democratise the relationships in a (for him) othered class setting. Comparing his own private education to this more statistically working-class academy, Adam explained:

> At [School X] in general, they want to know you personally, they want to know how old you are, where you were brought up, what school you went to, have you got a boyfriend, have you got a girlfriend, which teachers do you like? It wasn't really a thing at [my own school] […] you're a teacher. You're there to teach […] They might want to know what hobbies you've got, or what sports you support […] That goes down to [Y] families hav[ing] more support networks, [being] more stable. At [X] you've got kids where the teacher is the most stable thing. You want to know them as much as possible.

In addition to viewing his role as providing stability where the parent or home dynamic does not, Adam also endeavoured to create a more horizontal rapport with the students. There was an element of self-disclosure with the students at his more working-class school, and he conceded that in order to build that relationship, he had to alter his stylistics to give away a little bit more of his personality.

Bradley had a different technique for democratising classroom hierarchies, referring to the bodily stylistic of 'dipping-in'. Although ungendered, this act helped to reaffirm that horizontal relationship between teacher and student. When circulating the room, Bradley took time to physically drop into different conversations. This was primarily to ensure that work was continuing and that students were staying on task. If we take on the notion of the classroom's choreography, however, this 'dipping-in' conveys a different meaning. The 'dipping-in' allows the teacher to take part in students' conversations and take a moment to engage with the students on a more personal basis, rather than maintaining that fixed teacher/student boundary. Bradley discussed how important it is to find ways of relating to students:

> I can relate to them, and I get what they enjoy, and I understand the way they talk to each other […] I pick up on things and use that to my advantage, you know, making jokes or banter or taking the mick out of someone […] I learnt a new piece of slang or some sort of new colloquialism, and I'll use that; they will either find it funny, because they'll think I'm ancient using their word, or they'll be like, 'I rate that because Sir's talking like us'.

'Dipping-in' is a tool which allows for the creation of this relationship; a relationship of 'like us'. 'Dipping-in' also allowed for a mediation of the need for professionalism and a more friendly teaching approach. One could also read the notion of 'dipping-in' in more of a metaphorical sense. Not only was Bradley physically 'dipping' to the level of the student to form a closer relationship, he was also dipping into another persona, however briefly, moving from the space he occupied as teacher, to one that looked more like his authentic self. The choreography of the classroom is changed by such a stylistic choice just for a moment, and with it, so is the meaning held in the relationship between student and teacher (Youdell and Armstrong, 2011).

Relationship 2: Leader-of-the-pack

As the interviewees made clear, authority is still needed for respect to be built and for learning to occur. At the end of the day, the teacher is not 'mates' with the students, and therefore a new relationship must manifest. This could very easily take the form of a traditional, hegemonic masculinity of shouting and domination. However, this was not seen as ideal by the interviewees, necessitating a different garnering of respect. In the place of the democratic impulse to 'dip-in', a second ecological relationship emerged which introduced a hierarchy within the classroom while avoiding the commonly established dynamic in which a male teacher's authority is contingent on students' fear (Haase, 2010). This is best described as a 'leader-of-the-pack' mentality where there is a recognition by the boys of the common manhood (Davies, 2006) of the teacher, but instead of seeing the teacher as a friend, the boys look up to his superiority or expertise as a *man*.

While Declan used sport as a way of finding a commonality with his students and to 'seem like a real person in their eyes', his relationship with sport went further in cementing his position as a 'leader-of-the-pack', developing a reputation within the school as a coach to the rugby team:

> I've had some students come up to me at the end of class to talk about rugby, or they'll play rugby, something like that. Maybe to show off, but not show off to the class. After class most people are gone. It's to show me that they're playing it as well. Maybe they want me to be proud of them. Maybe to just make conversation. They just want to show that they do it too.

In Declan's experience, many boys tended to perform masculine bravado only when presented with an audience of their peers, showing off for the benefit of the other students ('they're usually not as boisterous when you try and talk to them outside of the classroom because there's no one to show off to'). In this account, however, the boys come to the teacher to

show off their own athletic prowess in private. This may have also been to show off their own impression of manliness, seeing Declan's personal athleticism as an exemplar of how to succeed as a man generally. Declan viewed the boys' need for his pride and recognition as something central to the way he built relationships with the boys.

However, Declan struggled with becoming the 'leader-of-the-pack' that boys could engage with as a caregiver or pastoral teacher. He was perceived as an exemplar of a traditional, athletic man, and succeeded in this regard, but when asked if a student had ever seen him as a person to confide in, Declan stated that he had never been approached in that way. This was his 'biggest worry' when approaching the pastoral aspects of his job and had caused him to explicitly seek advice from senior staff to improve his practice. Despite attempts and wishes to forge relationships with students, they seemed to perceive Declan as akin to Haase's (2010) description of the 'fearfully powerful' male teacher. As Declan described, a pastoral lead in his school attributed this to his presentation of a traditional masculinity:

> She said they probably see me as a *strong* male, they're keen to show me the rugby pictures on a Saturday, but they don't want to let me know they're struggling with something.

Declan straddled the line between the positive leader to be aspired to on the one hand, and the traditional, strong and silent male on the other; he was caught between upholding and defying unhealthy, conventional iterations of masculinity despite the example he wished to set. Even with his intentions and attempts in class to counter traditional masculinity, in practice his bodily stylistics (Butler, 1988) as an athletic, traditionally masculine figure rendered him as off limits for a feminised, care-giving role. Bodily stylistics here are seen to obstruct efforts to provide an alternative iteration of masculine behaviour.

Adam experienced a very different manifestation of the 'leader-of-the-pack' relationship with his students in his early experiences teaching sex education. When asked how he approached the subject of contraception with boys, he recounted both using humour and acting as 'expert':

> At that time it was humour. […] Humour, responsibility on the boys. We were putting condoms on plastic penises, or whatever, and one lad said he knew how to do it, so I gave it to him. I put it onto him, and then he did it wrong, and we had a proper conversation. So maybe I'd show them up first to show that they don't know, then I'd do it properly. I was the expert, if that's the right word, for putting condoms on. […]

> We should be educating them to be as safe or as knowledgeable as possible. Being slightly more open about personal experiences, having that knowledge or sharing that knowledge isn't a bad thing.

The dynamic that develops here is an interesting one as it stands at odds with much of what is expected of teaching when it comes to sex. Bradley and Paul specifically said they did not use humour in their classroom when it came to sex education, or sexuality at all (Bradley: 'It isn't funny. We don't make jokes and we don't laugh at each other. […] it's not going to be totally scientific, but also, to a degree it's going to be serious)'. Furthermore, all interviewees, including Adam, claimed that they would not tolerate any discussion of their own private or sexual lives; to inquire about 'adult' behaviours of the teacher was a firm red line that could not be crossed, with Bradley even joking that he had never consumed alcohol to diffuse questions about his social life and retain a level of propriety in front of students. Yet here, Adam removes that barrier to admit, as the 'expert', that he, the teacher, has some sexual knowledge, destabilising the traditional hierarchical separation of teacher and student by disclosing private information.

The use of humour as a tool by Adam is of particular note. Firstly, it was seemingly utilised to display the 'pally' iteration of masculinity and a new relationship. The visual vocabulary of a group of men engaging in sexual humour is a familiar one, imbued with the bravado of students 'trying to show off' for each other. It seems at first that this interaction could fall into the previous category of classroom democratisation, using humour as a tool of fraternisation with the boys, consolidating a heterosexualised affinity with the students along gender lines. Here, however, the use of humour creates a vertical distance between student and teacher. The humour was at the expense of the student, giving Adam himself an opportunity to 'show up' one of the boys, establishing himself as the hegemon of the classroom space, whilst also imparting some form of masculine knowledge. This was a teaching opportunity but similarly served to consolidate the position of Adam as an 'expert' in the field. In this most masculine and heterosexualised of fields—reproductive (or rather preventing reproductive) sex—to be the subject-specialist is not simply a marker of knowledge, but serves as a marker of sexualised, virile masculinity (as Connell states, gendered politics in the last instance resides in the reproductive arena [2005, p. 71]). For the teacher to take on the role of 'subject specialist' in sex, he finds himself adopting the mantle of the epitome of 'male' in the classroom setting, whilst in their lack of sexual knowledge, the boys are incomplete in their masculinity.

This hegemony is not necessarily the violent, competitive masculinity as referred to by Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997). Rather, it utilises a hierarchy based on the passage of knowledge of how to be or perform masculinity from one generation to the next. It also serves, however, to

reconfigure the identities within the room. Adam retained his place as a member of the common collective of males, and yet the distance created by the humour and his expertise allowed him to be a 'man-amongst-boys'. In a similar vein to the 'rugby boy' seeking Declan's validation, certain boys went on to ask, 'Is this right sir?', seeking advice or improvement; Adam's developed masculinity was something to aspire to within this all-male setting.

Adam's account also displays a certain discomfort around performing the role of the leader. (Similarly, in response to whether he had taught sex education, Paul responded, 'I haven't…thank God'). Adam's hesitation to commit to the title of sexual 'expert' was apparent in our interview, as it seems to defy all expectations of teacher propriety. This is especially true as it admits to the students that their teacher engages in sex. The discomfort of this situation can be located in its navigation of safeguarding concerns of exposing children to sexual material or knowledge beyond their age group (DfE, 2026). However, Adam justified this interaction by maximising its educational purpose in ensuring students are 'as safe or as knowledgeable as possible', even if this required him to be 'slightly more open about personal experiences'. The role of the teacher, and particularly the male teacher in Adam's case, therefore becomes increasingly to teach healthy and correct attitudes to sexual activity.

A practice such as this, which encourages sexual responsibility in boys, seems a far cry from the negatively perceived hegemonic masculinity that Connell (2005) explores, and is expanded by Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997). It is very easy to see this as a positive phenomenon, shifting what we can come to expect from boys as they grow up. Despite this, we must remember that Connell does not seek to produce a typology of *being* when it comes to their configurations of practice. It is the position that masculinity holds in terms of power within the gender matrix, which Adam did inhabit, albeit in a very positive way. Adam did not display violent, asocial, or risk-taking behaviour, but the example he set is one that can certainly be seen as hegemonic, at least in the physical space of his own classroom.

All interviewees discussed this 'new hegemony', where men actively performed 'politically correct' versions of masculinity in spaces imbued with 'twenty-first century' notions of positive role models, challenges to 'toxic masculinity' and progressive politics. This could be seen as a simple redrawing of its boundaries; it reframes the parameters in which masculinity can exist and refixes the notion of what it is to be a man. Paul and Declan both thought it was important for students to see teachers as alternatives to hegemonic monoliths, while Simon and Paul self-consciously promoted themselves as having hobbies not traditionally considered masculine. Bradley extended this idea even further. When

asked whether being a male role model was an integral part of the male teaching profession, he stated:

> I think all teachers have a responsibility to teach kids how to act, how to speak […] but I certainly feel a pressure as a male (who considers himself to have quite good values and standards and ethics) to impart that on my male students as well […] I'm trying to, as I've experienced most of my life, trying to diminish toxic masculinity for these boys who are growing up.

Bradley described focusing on addressing such 'toxic' behaviour, seeing it as his duty to address both misogyny and lack of academic drive among the boys he taught.

For many of the interviewees, this progressive hegemony was manifested in a single phrase: 'We don't do that'. This phrase echoes the notion of the 'choreography' of schooling that seeks to standardise, improvise, and ritualise classroom practice through the policing of the actions and bodies of students by teachers (McLaren, 1993; Eggermont, 2001; Youdell and Armstrong, 2011). Specifically, here we see men using the phrase 'we don't do that' as a way of choreographing the possibilities of behaviour from the boys in their care.

In response to a vignette describing a classroom situation containing issues surrounding misogyny, consent, agency, and perceptions of masculinity in relation to sex (see Appendix, Vignette 2), each teacher described framing their approach to discipline in such a case through the lens of reaffirming a progressive yet hegemonic masculine identity, explicitly displaying and explaining the 'correct' way a man should respond in that situation. In the words of Declan and Bradley, such misogynistic behaviour is not something that 'real men' do; the student is told '*we* don't do that'.

The phrase 'we don't do that' is interesting on two levels. Firstly, there is a sense of solidarity, uniting the man and the boy. The 'we', which was only ever implied in Declan's shared interest in rugby or in Adam's demonstration of the condom, is made explicit in the phrase. The boy is called into masculinity by the phrase and invited to look upon the teacher as a 'fellow male'. This is not, however, horizontal; it is implied in the phrase that the boy should ultimately aspire to be the kind of man that the teacher decides. The refiguring of masculinity to a more positive identity is something which ultimately works to address the issues raised surrounding boys in education and produce boys with a more progressive notion of their gender.

At the same time, however, the phrase 'we don't do that' implies a singularity in masculinity; it is exclusive. There is ultimately one way to be

a man, and although not negative, violent, or egoistic, the progressive hegemony functions in the same way as any other hegemonic masculinity in any other context. In its singularity, the progressive hegemony is nevertheless fixed and hegemonic; there is a singular masculinity to aspire to. The 'leader-of-the-pack' performance, however it manifests, is simply a refiguring of hegemony in a progressive light. Rather than enforcing itself upon the perceiving subject, it calls upon the student to aspire to it, establishing the teacher as worthy of Bourdieu's (1977) 'mimesis'. Nevertheless, much like Connell's (2005) original understanding of hegemonic masculinity, it is singular, fixed and exclusory, all aspects of gendered roles which Connell and Butler (2006) would argue are at the root of the issues with sexual politics they wish to address. The progressive hegemony which can come from the 'man amongst the boys' mentality is hegemony nevertheless, and monolithic masculinity has not been deconstructed; its parameters have simply been redrawn.

Relationship 3: Conflict and Domination

From the turn to progressive hegemony in these male teachers' classrooms, we can see that the traditional notions of masculinity were rejected, and despite the fixity of the new masculine identities set in place, the relationships between teacher and student were imbued with a respect and positivity found in the commonality between man and boy. Nonetheless, a third relationship also appeared in the interviews: conflict and domination. Although sometimes altered, this relationship mirrors more traditional tropes of masculinity, where the masculinities vie for domination and the weakness of one male serves as another's strength. Rejecting the aforementioned progressive hegemony, traditional hegemonic patterns of domination and conflict emerged for the interviewees, especially in times of crisis. In the context of Connell's (2005) configurations of practice, we see a performance of masculinity which adheres to, and also bolsters, traditional hegemonic masculine behaviour (Skelton, 1991; Allan, 1993).

One such moment of crisis, and a common one, was bad behaviour. For the most part, teachers found that male students misbehaved in order to assert their masculinity in relation to other students and would often back down when faced with the teacher in private; the 'natural hierarchy' prevailed. As Declan stated:

> If you do tell a kid to get out, they're usually not as boisterous when you try and talk to them outside of the classroom because there's no one to show off to. I wouldn't shout at them outside the classroom. You just tell them off. They're usually a bit more settled then.

While replicating the traditional, linear relationship where the teacher's authority is clearly exhibited and respected by the student, this also

displays a conventional understanding of a masculine approach to discipline: for interviewees, 'telling-off' was often combined with bodily stylistics which assert traditional masculinity (Bradley put his arm over the entrance to the classroom; Declan exaggerated his natural size; Adam adopted a wide stance), emphasising the role of domination in the teacher's practice.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this mode of discipline was often carried out when disciplining boys. As Paul stated:

> With boys you get a certain type of character that are more likely to push boundaries they know are there, often as a show of bravado for their mates in the class. You're less likely to get that with girls.

It was boys who tested the boundaries of the authority of their male teacher, and it seems to be boys who bore the brunt of the traditional discipline brought about by the emphasis of the teacher's superior masculinity. In Connell's (2005) terms, these dominating stylistics serve to render the teacher as hegemon and the boy as subordinate.

For some students, however, the relationship exhibited in this conventional masculine interaction did not always result in a simple recognition of the teacher's authority. When asked to comment on a vignette surrounding an incident where a student had attempted to physically intimidate myself as teacher, using height as a weapon (see Appendix, Vignette 3), Adam recalled almost identical instances with older boys:

> This year I had a difficult relationship with one Year 11, and I stood outside with him. Being a Year 11 boy, we were about the same size, the same stature. I made sure I was standing shoulders upright, legs apart, almost like a strong pose, so that I didn't want him to feel like I was being intimidated. He was looking angry, staring at me, staring me out; I was like, 'This definitely isn't going to happen'. [...]
>
> I do find now, if I'm telling a student off, I will stand, and I will always try to let the student know that I am taller, I am bigger, I am looking down on them. If I can. I always force them to give me eye contact. I'm not going to talk to you until you look at me in the eyes, so I know that I've got your focus. I'm demanding, I'm not going to allow them to shrug it off. […] I have had kids who won't come back into the room, because they won't look me in the eyes. I can't have that proper conversation with you, so you can't come back in.

While the scenes described by Adam display many aspects of the performance at play, dialogue is lacking from this account; this is a

description of pure choreography; the stylistics of the body are a tool of enacting masculinity. Adam was aware of the importance of physicality in asserting his authority. When his height was lacking compared to a student, he exaggerated his stature in order to balance out the standoff.

Ultimately, Adam's aim in these scenarios was to have students recognise his authority, both as a man and as a teacher. When that authority was not recognised, here demonstrated by looking the teacher in the eyes, then the confrontation remained. Adam still dominated the room and the situation and actively sidelined the confrontational masculinity coming from the student. Adam's hegemonic position would be maintained at all costs, here through the traditional mode of domination.

Declan described a student engaging in such conflict in a different way—by ignoring the teacher completely. Declan referred to a Year 10 student, who, while meeting Declan's height and stature, 'wouldn't try to match [Declan's stature and authority], but he'd just ignore it'. In Declan's eyes, 'they don't want to be seen submitting to my authority' (a phrase which may be read to betray Declan's overall view of his position), and if that authority could not be contested through the student's bodily masculinity, then it seems refusal was the tool used to counter the teacher's authoritarian masculinity. As Dermott (2011) argues, a teacher's military-style or authoritarian masculinity breeds a 'protest masculinity' in the student. This is mirrored in Adam and Declan's experiences, where traditional masculinity was mobilised by the teacher and thus both student and teacher vied for a hegemonic position in relation to the other.

This form of masculine relationship does not need to take on the conventional form of using the visual language of violence or bodily conflict, however. As they described in their interviews, neither Paul nor Simon believed themselves to be particularly masculine and both tended to distance themselves from the physicality of the masculinity portrayed by Adam and Declan. Nevertheless, both teachers also engaged in a pattern of domination of the student in their classroom behaviour, but this time through humour, echoing Hammersley's (1990) assertion that humour can be used to cement the teacher as a hegemon in relation to the subordinate student.

When discussing disciplinary techniques, Simon stated that his last resort was to shout, which he used to 'genuinely terrify people' in his classroom, obviously betraying the expected mode of domination. More often, Simon stylistically adopted humour into his persona, but a humour that served the same function:

> In the intermediate time I find that the best approach in my classes and in my teaching style is making the people who are messing around feel stupid. And not by belittling them in terms of their

> mathematical knowledge, but just [to] have a laugh at their expense, then we move on.

Here, humour is used to assert the clear definition once again between teacher and student. It allows the teacher to assert his authority over the child in question. Paul literally stated that to 'give [the student] a rib in front of their mates […] highlight[s] the difference in stature', drawing parallels between his humoured authority and the physical authority exerted by teachers such as Declan. Furthermore, in both Simon and Paul's scenarios, it is the teacher's time to utilise the rest of the class as an audience in order to exert bravado. Both drew on the others in the room, including 'their mates' as a tool to solidify the hierarchies of masculine behaviour; they relied on the recognition of the class to concretise the student's status of subordinate in relation to the teacher. It is once again important to note that while Simon did concede that this did sometimes occur with misbehaving girls in the class ('that's not to say I don't tease the girls a bit, I would tease everyone who is messing around in my lessons'), this method of discipline through belittling humour tended to apply to the relationship between the teacher and the boys.

With Bradley, this configuration of domination took another form again. When reflecting on residential trips where students and teachers build relationships outside of the school environment, Bradley recounted how seeing a student who normally presents as 'tough' at school 'shaking profusely with fear' when engaging in a trapeze activity impacted his perception of the power dynamic between himself and the student:

> So now, I remember that, 'Actually, you might mouth off to me, but I've seen you when you're absolutely petrified, and I've coaxed you down with comforting and reassuring words, so you don't have power over me anymore' [...] But I always said to people, 'I've got that'. I've never actually taught him since Year 7, so I've never needed to […]
>
> That sounds really sinister, I don't think I would say, 'Remember Sam, when you were really, really scared and I watched you and I helped you get down and I was really nice to you?', but if was having to have a more sincere conversation with him or some sort of reconciliation I would say, 'I've seen your more vulnerable side', or 'I was really kind to you at that point, why can't you have that mutual respect for other members of staff?'

In this account, the mode of domination and conflict once again makes itself known as a tool for dealing with a child who displays 'bad behaviour', while drawing attention to the performativity at play in a classroom. The student, Sam, despite his bravado when surrounded by friends, is established as subordinate to the hegemony of the teacher.

Bradley did not believe he presented as a masculine teacher, at least visually ('I don't think it's [the way I look] typically masculine),[2] and viewed himself as providing an alternative form of masculinity to his students in an attempt 'to […] diminish toxic masculinity for these boys who are growing up'. Concurrently, however, Bradley utilised the values of traditional masculinity to reaffirm the hierarchy of teacher and student. Stylistics signifying bravery in the face of danger was his go-to tool in diminishing Sam's own bravado, with Bradley utilising his being 'absolutely petrified' as a source of his power over the student. Although not specifically stated, Sam was envisaged as being less-than in terms of his masculinity by displaying this vulnerability. Bradley did not even have to exert traditional masculine domination to reaffirm the hierarchy, unlike Declan and Adam's physicality or Simon's shouting. In fact, his 'coaxing' with 'comforting words' could be read as maternal in the situation. Nevertheless, Bradley's hegemonic position was reassured simply due to Sam's vulnerability; Sam's fear established himself as a subordinate Other to Bradley's natural hegemonically masculine position as teacher.

One should note the discomfort that Bradley felt in relation to this situation. He reluctantly accepted that there is a power play at work in this weaponising of Sam's fear, noting that it seemed 'sinister'. His assertion that the need to use this weapon would probably never manifest also reflects the potentially unethical use of this scenario in practice. Nevertheless, the knowledge that he *could* use the residential trip acted as a confirmation, even if only to himself, of his authority over other boisterous boys who may attempt to confront his own masculinity.

It is notable that, although all interviewees claimed to have a keen understanding of the 'politically correct' attitude to masculinity, when faced with the lived experience of dealing with certain students, they resorted to traditional iterations of masculinity. Reading contemporary literature and research aimed at teachers would have one believe that the situation of men and boys in the classroom was improving. The #MeToo movement, advances in queer politics and the revision of mental health would suggest that the popular zeitgeist is moving towards a world where gender and sexuality politics are progressing. At the time of these interviews, in the world of education, this had filtered into a plethora of CPD materials which advocated for positive iterations of masculinity

[2] Many of the interviewees reflected an idea of masculinity that lies in the physical body, echoing Butler's (1988) stylistics of existence which lie in 'bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds' (p. 519). For Declan, the body was the obvious and ultimate site of masculinity. He compared his 'quite big', rugby-playing Year 6 teacher with another who 'was small, [with] glasses, softly spoken'. From throwaway comments and reflections on masculinity and teaching practice, it became clear that when the interviewees asserted their authority, traditional bodily machismo abounded. Such actions included: shouting (Simon), monopolising on natural size (Declan), pushing back shoulders (Paul), adopting a broad stance (Adam), or crossing arms (Bradley).

(Loire, 2018; Pinkett and Roberts, 2019). Ultimately, the reversion to this third, arguably harmful configuration of masculine behaviour based on competitiveness and domination betrays the fact that, at least in these small contexts, negative masculine behaviour remained pervasive in certain relationships found in the classroom. I do not doubt the intention of many of the men I interviewed to set a positive example for boys, as has been shown in the first two ecological relationships, but as Adam suggested, it may be that these relationships were performed in part because they were expected within the institution.

Conclusion

In the face of rising interest in the place that men and boys hold in the priorities of educators and policy makers, this study's aim is to explore the realm of masculinity as played out in the performance of masculinity by male teachers. More specifically, the study works under the assumption, posited by Haase (2008), that the performance of the teacher is something which helps to mould and socialise students. The teacher (and specifically the male teacher), then, is an early factor in shaping the men entering the world at the age of eighteen, whether through direct 'mimesis' (Bourdieu, 1977), active policing of behaviour, or the normalisation of certain behaviours through repeated performance. In short, in considering the question of 'what kind of boys do we want to see in the world?', this study asks: What kind of men can we see in the classroom? (Jones, 2007).

This research follows the work of Skelton (2001) and Haase (2008, 2010) in exploring just some of the lived experiences of teachers as they occur in a singular context, embedded within the broader, complex field of masculinities. The study thus focuses on the experiences of five male teachers within the English state school system. Rather than providing a comprehensive typology of behaviours, this study identifies modes of masculine behaviour as enacted by these teachers to critically analyse certain performances that *can* happen. More research is of course needed, and will always be needed, to further map the terrain of teacher behaviours. Future research could adopt more immersive methods, such as participant observation, in order to delve deeper into the gendered performance of teachers. Due to the scope of this research, personal constraints, and limitations brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study relied solely on vignette-based interviews focusing on teachers' reflections and own understandings of their practice. This may mean that their responses provided a narrow example of their teaching experience in total.

A significant limitation of this study is the lack of diversity among interviewees, who are white, straight, cisgender men from predominantly middle-class backgrounds. The study therefore excludes the perspectives

of those from minoritised groups, whose experiences of teaching and masculinity are influenced by converging experiences of oppression and identity in relation to race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and other dimensions. Further study, with a wider range of respondents, could provide crucial insight into how masculinities intersect with these lived experiences in educational contexts.

Returning to the question, 'What kind of men can we see in the classroom?', these interviews revealed a new iteration of male teacher, although one which contains echoes of a more familiar guise of man. All five interviewees advocated for a positive change to the example set to boys, and condoned providing alternatives to the asocial, competitive, and even violent masculinity which has come to be labelled as 'toxic' in the popular imagination (Camangian, 2022). They celebrated difference, challenged harmful social and sexual behaviours, and saw themselves as being in the unique position of being a role model—not simply as a teacher but also as a man. These ideas were firmly held by all interviewees and were a conscious aspect of the self-fashioning of their own teacher personas.

Taking on Connell's (2005) notion of multiple masculinities through their configurations, the responses reflected three different 'ecological relationships' through the description of the stylistics used by each interviewee. Firstly, teachers aimed to engage with students on a horizontal level, a relationship of 'like us' where interactions replicated that of male friendship. In this relationship, students were treated with 'pally' respect and were drawn into a 'matelike' relationship with the teacher.

Secondly, in order to challenge negative behaviours and set a clearer example for students, the teachers established themselves as 'leader-of-the-pack' among the boys. This iteration of masculine behaviour positioned the teacher as someone to aspire to, a role model who, by 'mimesis', normalisation, or explicit policing, served as a prototype for the future men in his class. However, such a relationship, summarised in the phrase 'we don't do that', also holds a potential for re-essentialising gender by creating a new, fixed, and singular form of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, through many of their stylistics and performances, the interviewees can be seen as intending to challenge and defy traditional masculine behaviours in order to guide and reform their students.

Yet the third relationship shown here problematises the teachers' rejection of traditional, 'toxic' masculinity. Whether through bodily domination, humour, or utilisation of power dynamics, the interviewees were each seen to resort to traditional masculinity when faced with 'difficult' students or bad behaviour. Competition, that key aspect of traditional hegemony,

returned in the testimonies of all interviewees, and conflict between man and boy became apparent. For example, older boys, whose bodies matched or surpassed the embodied masculinity of their teachers, sometimes enacted the outright rejection of the teachers' authority. The classroom thus became a space for the battle between competing, traditional iterations of masculine stylistics.

Moving forward into educational practice, then, this research paves the way for a deeper understanding of how gender roles still seem to structure this practice. This work has a liberatory intention: the improvement of the lives of not only boys, but wider society, which is still organised by hierarchical and violent systems of oppression produced by patriarchal and heteronormative understandings of gender. From the findings, it is clear that although there are many positives in the way masculinity plays out in the English classroom, familiar faces of authority and discipline can still be seen. To follow with Jones's (2007) questioning, the boys we are creating are often ones who ultimately turn to a violent or conflict-driven iteration of manhood, in part because that is what they see from their teachers; when all else fails, shout. Since 2020, the question of boys has not disappeared, but has perhaps intensified, with increasing recognition of the impact of the manosphere and misogynist ideologies on young boys, and how these influences come to bear in school settings (Almanssori, 2025; Roberts *et al.*, 2026). There remains a strong and vital interest in answering the question, 'What kind of boys do we wish to see in the world?', but the findings of this study suggest that this question must also prompt us to consider the kind of world that we, as teachers, reflect.

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ORCID iD

Patrick Campbell https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8098-692X

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Appendix

Sample Vignettes Used in Interviews

Vignette 1

When I first started PGCE, I realised I hadn't really spoken to a child since I was one. That was my first realisation; 'I don't know how to talk to children', and so my mentor said, 'Go and observe, see how other members of the department speak to kids'. And all of them said, 'You alright love?', 'Are you alright sweetheart?'. And my thought was, 'I cannot do that'. It is so weird for a male teacher to do that, it's just not appropriate so I had to go and observe other male teachers in order to model my persona on them. I found myself starting to call people 'mate', especially with some of the boys. 'Come on mate let's do this, let's try this together'. I was being this very 'pally' and overly 'blokey' person. Is that something that you relate to, especially with the boys you teach?

Vignette 2

During a lesson where students were watching a movie, I noticed a note being passed from one of the louder boys to one of the 'pretty' girls. I took the note, which stated that another boy in the class (a quieter, nerdier boy) had been bragging about engaging in sexual activity with the girl. The louder boy and the girl are now in a relationship, and this seemed to be his idea of flirting, as well as a way of showing off for other boys in the room, him being the ringleader of the 'cool boys' in his year group. In response, other than the initial, expected disciplinary action, I also had an in-depth conversation explaining why this behaviour towards a

woman was not the 'done thing'. How would you have dealt with the situation?

Vignette 3

Once, when teaching a newer Year 7 class that had proven to be difficult part way through the year, I had a student who was being particularly rowdy. Not overly naughty, just making stupid comments to impress his friends. I took him to one side to tell him how he was just looking like an idiot, but even as a year 7 he was towering over me. I suppose that's part of the reason why he was so confident to try and overpower me in the classroom. I really had to square up and assert myself to even attempt to match his natural height. It was very different to when a year 10 of the same height tried to dominate me, much more innocent, but still I had to be really aware of my stature.

Vignette 4

That same year 7 student it turned out the next year was gay. There was a turn in his behaviour when he found out I was too. He certainly didn't stop being mischievous, but he seemed to respect me a lot more. I know other teachers in the same position who have come out and all of a sudden kids realise that they can see you as someone real. Do you think there's a benefit of disclosing certain behaviours?

Vignette 5

I remember having a student who really played off pissing male teachers off. He really tried to push your buttons and overpower you in class. I remember having to have a meeting with him, his form tutor, and his head of year, and automatically there was a good-cop-bad-cop situation going on. The head of year became this angry, loud figure and bore down on him, mainly to make sure that I didn't have to be the scary one. Sometimes though, I think that if I'd had the opportunity to be the scary one, his respect would come even easier. Do you feel that you've had to adopt your behaviour that way in the moment? And how does that compare to the behaviour of colleagues at the same time?