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My ideal teacher is...: Teacher gender preferences in Year One and Year Six children

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Abstract

This study investigates whether or not primary-age pupils have a preference when it comes to the gender of their class teacher, and, if there is a preference, whether or not it is for a teacher of the same gender as themselves. It begins by critically analysing the prevailing literature regarding gender preferences, before reporting upon a small-scale research study conducted with Year One and Year Six children in a Cambridgeshire primary school. Through analysing sample drawings and one-on-one interviews, it delves into the reasons behind any pupil preferences and compares the results across the two year groups. The findings reveal the substantial influence of stereotyping over younger children, resulting in the Year One children's preferences being predominantly led by own sex bias. While the Year Six children are principally led by their past experiences and raise an important distinction; seeing the qualities of a teacher first, before the teacher's gender.

My ideal teacher is....: Teacher gender preferences in Year One and Year Six children

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If you are of a Christian persuasion then humankind began with Adam and Eve; the original definitions of man and woman. They are described as explicitly different and this difference is defined solely by their sex. Regardless of your beliefs, Christianity has had a profound impact on the belief system of many Western societies, and as such is just one example of the deep-rooted belief that men and women are innately different.

This perceived difference attracts a great degree of focus in educational research; largely looking at the differentiated achievement between boys and girls, and whether this is down to different learning styles between the genders. A predominant aspect of this has been whether children prefer a male or female teacher.

This research paper examines the difference, if any, in teacher gender preference between Year One and Year Six children, and the reasons behind these preferences. The research consists of a small scale project, involving drawings by, and interviews with, a sample of children from each year group. I will begin by analysing the relevant prevailing literature on the subject.

Background

This subject breaks down into two initial issues. Firstly, do primary age children view men and women as significantly different and does this result in a preference? Secondly, if this is true, then do primary age children consider the gender of their teacher to be relevant to their ability to teach?

Do primary age children see men and women as significantly different?

Sable and Aelterman (2007) summarise the two dominant theories of gender differences; essentialism and constructionism. The essentialist perspective states that men and women are born

with biological predispositions towards certain, commonly considered stereotypical, characteristics. This biological view was contested by socialisation models, leading to the constructionist perspective. This states that gender roles are shaped by society as we grow. The important distinction that Sable and Aelterman make - that should be considered throughout this paper – is that there are not two polar opposites, masculinity and femininity, but rather gender is one of many influential variables such as culture, sexuality, religion and class, that go towards forming a range of masculinities and femininities.

This spectrum is not routinely considered in gender research, as children are often given just two options when discussing characteristics; masculine or feminine. A prime example of these dichotomous judgements are in Reis and Wright's (1982) research, whereby they set out to discover whether children's knowledge of sex roles increases with age from three to five years. Their method was to read out a trait and then ask the child to point to either the silhouette of the man or the woman. This research showed definitive knowledge of sex roles in young children, but the method guided them to an extreme opinion. It did not allow the option of gender neutrality, let alone differing degrees of masculinity or femininity.

Skelton and Francis (2003) see the social construction of gender beginning from an early age, starting with the family and progressing to include teachers, media and popular culture. Regardless of any attempts in primary classrooms to gender neutralise the environment, these socially developed gender differences persist.

Pellegrini, Blatchford, Kato and Baines' (2004) research into play in the primary playground highlights the snowballing nature of social stereotyping. They found that at the beginning of Year One, boys' and girls' activities differed minimally; boys played slightly more ball games, while girls played slightly more word-based games. By the end of the year however, this difference was greatly increased. Most boys played ball games, while most girls played word-based games; moreover, children were reluctant to infringe upon the activity of the opposite gender. This is caused by a few, more obviously stereotypical children, influencing the others. The other children see the stereotypical activities and, as they are aware from their own socialisation that they are associated to their gender, join in accordingly. This results in children with very pronounced views of the differences between men and women, as governed by the snowballing of gender stereotyping.

Does this result in a preference?

Seemingly undisputed by the literature, stereotyping results in a same gender preference, with studies showing primary children to play in predominantly same-sex peer groups (Dunn & Morgan, 1987; Blatchford, 1994; Pellegrini et al, 2004). Most put this down to the children's acceptance of the stereotypes and their subsequent inclination to associate with their own sex. The implication for this paper's research would be that children will prefer a teacher of the same gender due to the influence of stereotyping.

Powlishta (1995) however, presents another, more rudimentary reason for same gender preferences. She asked KS2 (Key Stage 2 comprises Years Three through Six) children to consider a selection of characteristics and rate them on a scale from positive to negative, and masculine to feminine. Powlishta found that bias towards one's own group was the prevalent cause of ascribing masculinity or femininity to a particular trait. Both genders produced similar ratings regarding the trait's positivity or negativity, yet they then ascribed the more positive traits to their own gender, to an extent regardless of stereotyping. That is not to say stereotyping was not a factor. As Powlishta avoids dichotomous judgements through use of a scale, one can see that stereotypes affect the degree to which a trait was labelled as masculine or feminine. This shows an obvious bias towards one's own group, in this case gender, yet still an underlying influence of stereotyping on their decisions.

It has been established - regardless of whether the cause is biology, socialisation or own group bias - that children do see distinct differences between boys and girls; and regarding their peers at least, have a strong preference for their own gender. The next issue then, is whether they have a preference in the gender of their teacher.

Do primary children consider the gender of their teacher relevant to their ability to teach?

The short answer appears to be, no.

Yet government policies have been aimed at increasing the number of male teachers in primary school. (It is worth noting, that while this paper is about gender matching in general, the nature of primary school teaching has resulted in the literature addressing the small number of male teachers -

therefore any discourse on this subject will be from that angle.) The TDA's 2010 Gender Equality Scheme has the target for male recruitment at 19% and has designated personnel targeting promotion at men. A national newspaper article on the subject notes taster courses, especially for men, as one scheme aimed at enhancing the appeal of what is considered a stereotypically feminine career choice (Lipsett, 2009, March 23rd). The government is therefore not working from the view point of *do* children prefer a teacher of the same gender, but rather from the idea that children *should* have a teacher of the same gender; why is this the case?

Boys' underachievement at school has been a policy hot topic for much of the past decade, and the government approach to dealing with this has been a call for more male teachers in primary education. The reasoning behind this has been surmised as two-fold (Francis, Skelton, Carrington, Hutchings, Read & Hall, 2008). Firstly, pupils will learn more if there is a match of characteristics between pupil and teacher by way of gender, and secondly, male teachers provide role models for boys to aspire to.

The idea that you can match a pupil to their ideal teacher based on gender is desperately simplistic. As previously stated, boys and girls are more complex than two homogenous groups (Powlishta, 1995; Sable & Aelterman, 2007; Francis et al, 2008). It is possible to have a male pupil who has nothing in common with a male teacher, and a female pupil who has nothing in common with a female teacher. To appoint someone as a teacher for sole purpose of gender matching would be unprofessional. A better reason would be for their skills as a teacher.

The concept of drafting in a male teacher to act as a 'role model' to young boys is not based on empirical evidence, but rather misguided common sense (Ashley, 2002). The mere fact that a teacher is male does not make them a good role model. If they are lacking in other positive characteristics then they may make the situation worse. A male teacher may reinforce the male stereotypes that the concept of gender balancing the workforce is trying to refute (Myhill & Jones, 2006; Francis et al, 2008). If the teacher was appointed as a masculine role model, they may bear the traits of a male at the more stereotypical end of the masculinity range, thereby skewing the children's perception of what it means to be male. Another issue is that this clamour for male teachers does not go unnoticed by male teachers; subsequently they may be inclined to exaggerate

their masculinity to fill the role that policy has ascribed them, and again skew the children's perceptions.

Moving beyond the theoretical and policy based discussions, the focus comes back to *do* children prefer a teacher of the same sex as themselves?

An argument, specific to younger children, is the notion of the primary teacher as a carer (Ashley, 2002). The argument is that young children require not only teaching, but also pastoral care, and they will form attachments to their teacher as a 'surrogate' parent. With this sort of care traditionally seen as a female role, the common sense idea is that primary teaching is for women. Ashley asked boys in KS2 their preferences when it came to emotional support and the results showed a very definite hierarchy. At the top came their mother, and the interviews showed she was their principal carer at home. Just behind came a 'friend the same age' - which I will discuss momentarily - and almost at the same level was their father. The fathers were given a slightly lower billing due mainly to availability, although for children for whom their father was the principal carer, they came top, reflecting that gender is not the issue. Significantly further down, came both male and female teachers with little separating their ratings. The interviews revealed that when the children needed support, if their principal carer was unavailable, they would turn to a friend rather than their teacher. It was the general consensus that teachers provided important secondary support, a safety net to turn to if necessary. But, most tellingly, it did not matter whether the teacher was male or female, as long as they listened. So again, Ashley has shown it comes down to the teacher's qualities rather than gender.

Looking at gender preference due to character traits, there is overwhelming evidence against this notion. Research shows that children consider it to be the qualities of the teacher that makes them preferable, not their gender (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber & Brewer, 1995; Ashley, 2002; Francis et al, 2008, 2009). The primary school children questioned saw their teachers as a teacher first, then a man or a woman. It is worth noting however that when a similar question has been posed to early secondary school aged children, such as in Lahelma's 2000 study, the overall result has been the same – with gender on average being seen as irrelevant – but that there is a substantial view that female teachers are fairer and male teachers are stricter and harsher towards boys (Myhill & Jones, 2006). Myhill and Jones see this as a possible reconstruction of social stereotypes. The exaggerated

strictness of male teachers in secondary school ties in with the notion of male teachers trying to fill the masculine role that their employment can often suggest; while their lack of strictness in primary schools relates to them fighting the idea that primary teaching is a feminine role, by demonstrating the more pastoral qualities traditionally ascribed to the job (Myhill & Jones, 2006; Francis et al, 2008).

The researchers here only went as young as Year Three, at which age they state that gender does not matter. I intend to look at the opinions of children in Year One to see if being those few years younger makes any difference. Reis and Wright (1982) observed that children conform to a stereotypical understanding of gender, and Francis et al (2008) report that children in KS2 have knowledge of stereotyping as a concept, rather than just adhering to it. I therefore will look to determine if children in Year One conform to stereotyping and prefer same gender teachers, or whether they understand that stereotypes are not facts, and judge their teachers based on their qualities rather than their gender. I will anchor this research by conducting the same interviews with a sample of Year Six pupils. This will allow comparison of their perspectives on teacher gender and establish if, and why, they differ with age.

Research method

Due to practical limitations, this will be a small-scale research project. A disadvantage of this is the reliability of results due to the small sample size and the analysis of only one school. A small sample means that any anomalies can have a large affect on overall findings, while looking at only one school means that if it is in any way atypical of the nation as a whole, I will have no way of knowing and no way of judging its impact upon my results. Therefore, a solely quantitative approach would be unwise. Quantitative research provides a broad representation of your population and allows you to infer judgements to the whole, based on your research of the few – but with a small sample it is unreliable. I will include a quantitative element however, as it allows recognition of patterns and acknowledgement of statistical significance. I will not refer to my results in terms of percentages, as this would be misleading with a small sample, instead I will always refer to the real numbers (Drever, 2003). Alongside this simple quantitative data, I will

provide qualitative evidence from interviews. Mixing methods in this way allows me to add depth to my data and the different methods will corroborate the other's findings (Mason, 2006).

My method is to take a random sample of six children from each of one Year One class and one Year Six class. These samples will consist of three boys and three girls, one of each born in each third of the yearly academic intake – this is mainly for the benefit of the Year One's, where the difference of a few months in age may affect their outlook.

Drawings

I asked each child to imagine their ideal school, and in that school to imagine their ideal teacher. I asked them to draw their ideal teacher and write a little about them. Note the choice of language in this task; I have made sure not to use any he/she language to avoid leading the children, which would result in a bias in the results. I also made it clear that they are not to draw any of their current or past teachers, that this is not a real teacher. The purpose of this activity is to see whether they will draw a male or a female teacher, without any leading language in the question and being utterly unaware of the task's overriding purpose. This task will provide me with quantitative data showing a preference for either a male or female teacher.

There are possible areas of bias however, as noted by Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey and Flichtbeil (2006). Girl's motor skills are known to develop faster with motor skills generally developing rapidly across both genders during the primary years. This difference of ability in girls and/or older children may result in bias, as those less able cannot fully express their ideas. The same is true of their writing skills, as those less able may be unable to express their opinions through their words either. These areas should be covered by the interviews however, which will go into greater detail orally.

Mason (2006) discusses opportunistic research, which is not something you can plan for, but should not be overlooked if it can provide valid information. This situation arose with this study, in that I had initially planned for only the sample children to draw their ideal teacher, but the opportunity arose to involve the whole class. This provided me with a larger sample of drawings to analyse

which allowed for more reliable statistics; conversely this was not possible with the Year Six children so I do not have the same data to make a comparison.

Interviews

Next I conducted a semi-structured interview with each child individually. I have chosen a semi-structured basis, as a structured interview does not allow you to explore the reasoning behind interesting responses and an unstructured interview does not allow for consistency across each interview, so as to compare them effectively (Thomas, 2009). I began the interview by asking them to tell me about their drawing – this allowed them a chance to relax into the process, by talking freely about their own work (Drever, 2003). I then followed with a closed question - do you prefer a male or a female teacher – which focused them on the subject of the interview and provide a structured comparison of answers between the samples. Following this, were more open questions to allow them to express their opinions and the reasons behind them in as much or as little detail as they pleased – for a copy of the interview questions, see Appendix 1.

I considered interviewing the children in their class and gender groups but, as Myhill and Jones (2006) found in their pilot study, this creates an artificial need to conform to stereotypical opinions. Drever (2003) advocates group interviews with younger children, so that they feel more comfortable. This is appropriate for an outside agent coming in to conduct the research, to build up a rapport with the child first (Punch, 2002). However in this instance, I have been the children's teacher for over a month so they are comfortable in my presence. The Year Six children, although older so needing less reassurance, have not been taught by me, and I will therefore spend an afternoon in their classroom prior to the interviews so that they know who I am.

Myhill and Jones (2006) consider group interviews to allow more discussion and draw out ideas, but I feel that this may result in one child monopolising the conversation, or worse, influencing the opinion of the other children. Therefore I chose to conduct them individually, and their semi-structured style allowed me to draw out answers through discussion, as long as I was vigilant against leading the child by my questioning (Drever, 2003).

Ethical considerations

As trainee teachers, we have been provided with an Ethics Checklist by our Faculty of Education, formed inline with the BERA's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004). For a copy of the Ethics Checklist, see Appendix 2.

Consent

I initially sought the approval for my research project from the Faculty of Education, my mentor and the headteacher at the school. A letter was then sent out to all parents of children involved in the study. It outlined what activities the children would be involved in and what I would use the information they provided for. It also invited them to ask me any questions they had about my research and informed them of their right, and importantly their child's right, to withdraw from participation at any time. For a copy of the letter(s), see Appendix 3.

Anonymity

I assured the children and parents that I would be the only person to listen to the audio recordings and that within the paper all names would be replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity. This is not just important ethically, but it should help the children to relax as they know that there will be no repercussions resulting from their answers.

Well being

Taking part in this study has not been detrimental to the children's education or health, both physical and emotional. Of equal importance, I have tried to make the whole process as enjoyable as possible for the children, as without them and their perspectives, this research would be irrelevant.

Findings: the drawings

I will begin by analysing the children's choice to draw either a male or a female for their ideal teacher and I will then move on to analyse the interviews, which will hopefully corroborate the results gleaned from the drawings. For example drawings, see Appendix 4.

As mentioned, I had the opportunity to have the entire Year One class draw their ideal teachers and the results of their unsolicited gender choices are represented in Figure 1. Due to practicalities, I was unable to request drawings from the entire Year Six class. The drawings from my Year Six sample are represented in Figure 2.

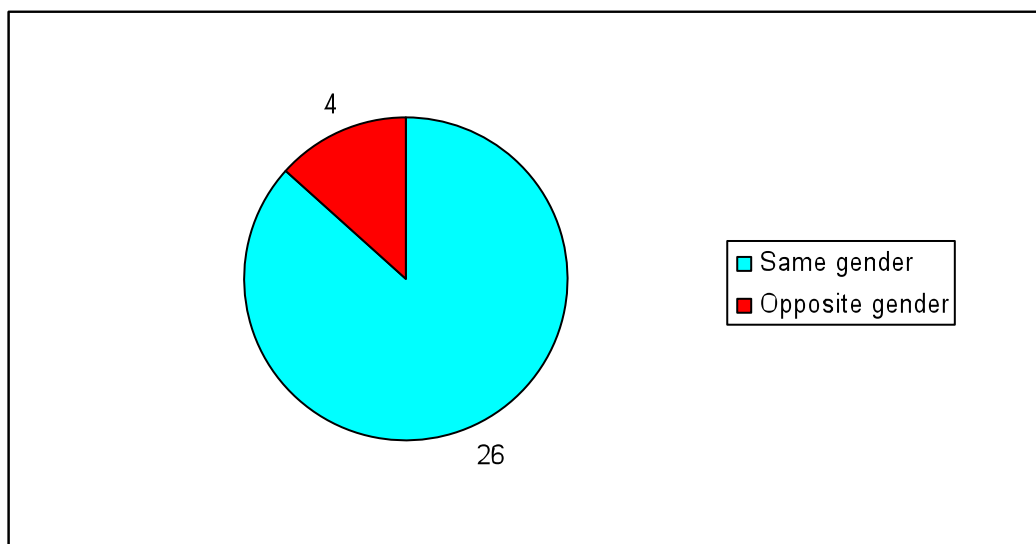


Figure 1: Pie chart representing the gender choice of 30 Year One children in their ideal teacher drawings

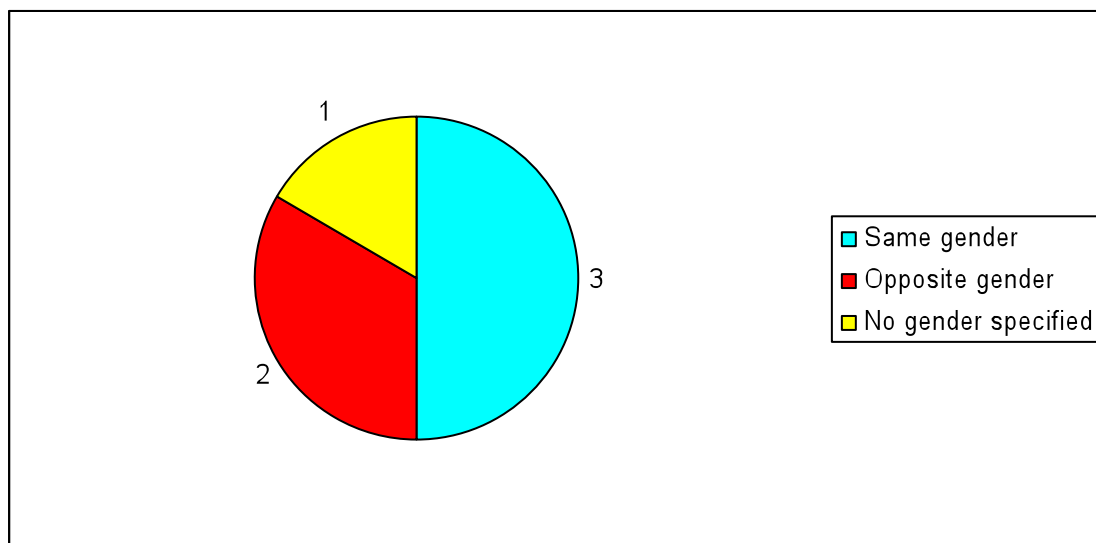


Figure 2: Pie chart representing the gender choice of 6 Year Six children in their ideal teacher drawings

In the Year One class, the majority of the children drew a teacher of the same gender as themselves. Whereas in the Year Six class, half the children drew a teacher of the same gender, while two drew the opposite and one did not specify. On its own, the data presented from the Year One class is of greater interest than the Year Six data. This is because, due to opportunity, it was taken from a large enough sample to infer these choices to Year Ones in general. However, the simple statistics are not enough to understand why the children chose a teacher of the same gender, so I will look into them in greater depth.

Year One

Of the thirty Year One children, only four drew a teacher of the opposite gender. From informal discussions with the children and from the descriptions they wrote alongside their drawings, I am able to understand their choices.

One boy, Ben, told me he drew his mother, and another boy, Ethan, told me he drew his sister. Considering the younger age of the children, these drawings tie in with Ashley's (2002) theories on the principal carer. When asked who he had drawn, Ben answered "my mummy. She is beautiful". There was overt adoration in his voice as he said this, showing a strong attachment. Ashley's study showed that mothers, being the principal carer in most cases, are the preference for emotional support, with teachers significantly further down the list. Ben's drawing shows that given the choice of teacher, he chose his principal carer, which does not provide information about his teacher gender preference, as he is not choosing a generic female teacher, he is choosing his mother. This simply validates Ashley's theory that children do not form an overriding emotional attachment to their teachers. Coincidentally, Ben is one of the least mature children in the class, which may explain why he chose his principal carer over an imaginary teacher of his own creation.

Similarly with Ethan's drawing of his sister, he wrote "my sister is kind". Granted, in Ashley's research, older siblings came below teachers in the emotional support preferences, but that was on average, and in Ethan's case it is fair to assume that his older sister is a big part of his home life, and as such would have a higher place in his preference list.

Billy drew a female teacher with a Henry Hoover, which to an outside agent may have been insignificant, but with my knowledge of the class I am aware of his obsession with Henry and that he draws them constantly. Therefore his drawing started with the Henry and he added the teacher as a secondary feature, to use it. While this does not show any gender preference in a teacher, it may however highlight another occupational stereotype, as he chose to draw a female doing the cleaning rather than a man – but that would be an issue for another paper!

This leaves Ian, who was the only child to draw a teacher of the opposite gender for no other reason than that is his preference. It is of interest then that Ian is the highest achieving child in the class, and that he would not be out of place in the year above. Referring back to Francis et al's (2008) notion that children in KS2 have an understanding of what a stereotype actually is, it may be possible that Ian does not hold the stereotypical preference for his own gender because he is mature enough to know that male and females are not defined by their stereotypes.

The fact that the four children who drew a teacher of the opposite gender are all boys can only be seen as coincidental at this stage. In both the attachment cases and Billy's case with the Henry, the reasons behind their choices were not motivated by anything that could be considered gender related. Ian's case maybe, but you cannot infer anything from one example.

Year Six

The research process was slightly different for the Year Sixes. The Year Ones drew their pictures as a class, and then I took them out of lessons the next day to conduct the interviews; due to practical constraints, I took the Year Sixes out of lessons one at a time to first draw their pictures and then conduct the interview straight afterwards. Due to the combined nature of their drawings and interviews, and the small sample size, I will discuss the reasons behind their drawings when analysing their interviews in the subsequent section.

Findings: the interview

Year One

Interviewing younger primary children could have resulted in preferences led by the children's need for pastoral care, just as Ashley considered (2002). The theory being that the children may look for a daytime substitute for their principal carer, who research has shown to be mainly their mother. Consequently, they would favour a female teacher, regardless of their own gender. This has not been the case as pastoral attachment has not been a factor in any of the interviews.

"We normally have a girl teacher and I'm actually used to girl teachers"

My fear before undertaking this research was that the children had not had a male teacher before I arrived at the school, and that this may create a bias in their preferences if they based them on their own experiences. Basing their preferences on their past experience of teachers has been the case when KS2 primary children were questioned in both Myhill and Jones (2006) and Francis et al's (2008) research. None of the children based their decisions upon their current or past teachers, apart from one notable exception. Helen – responsible for the above quote – gave this as her reason for

preferring a female teacher. When asked to elaborate, she did not reach for the stereotypical answers put forward by the other children, but simply said she did not know why else.

I do not believe it is a coincidence that she is one of the higher achieving and more mature children in the class, much like Ian is. This fits with the findings highlighted in the literature stating that the older children in primary schools are aware of stereotypes and do not base their decisions on these reasons (Francis et al, 2008).

“My grandad was a teacher and he knew about wood”

While the majority of children did not refer to their past teachers as influences, two children did refer to their relatives as influences. Ryan based his opinion that men are good at explaining on the above quote about his grandad, while Adam based his view that male teachers can do anything on the fact that his father is a teacher. It may mean that younger children having not been in the school environment for very long, base their preferences on relatives rather than past teachers. But, while it may be coincidental, it is interesting to note that these influences were from males in their families. This may show a gender preference in the relatives that they learn from in a ‘teacher-esque’ role, which would link into the next observation that formed the bulk of the reasoning behind the children’s preferences.

“I would like a woman... umm... I’m a woman”

This quote is from Mandy, and her decision-making was based upon her very clear notion of girls and boys, with girls being better. John and Adam had similarly strong opinions, with boys coming out on top. This view was less explicit in the other three interviews but it was still obviously a firm part of their decision-making process – aside from Helen.

My overall observation was that they saw the teacher in two somewhat contradictory yet simultaneous lights. On the one hand, teachers were seen as a different entity to their peers and that “they know everything” (Ginny, Y1). While on the other hand, they were judged as just another boy or girl. Therefore the children made their preference for their own gender known. This differs from the consensus in the literature about KS2 children, where it is agreed that the children see the teacher first and then the gender, so judge their teachers based on their skills as a teacher. I consider

this distinction to be blurred in the Year One children; they prefer a teacher of the same gender due to stereotypical gender biases, and at the same time they want a knowledgeable teacher. This resulted in the interviews with answers showing a strong preference for their own gender, but a difficulty to adequately explain why that would make them good teachers, other than to state gender stereotypes.

Year Six

Due to the very small sample size, it is difficult to pass judgement based solely on their preference for either the same or the opposite gender in their ideal teacher. However the reasoning behind their choices are still of interest when compared to the Year One children and the established literature.

“It seems boys like male, girls like female... maybe because they are both the same?”

This response from Ollie was typical of the attitude of all the Year Six children in the sample. They were aware of the gender stereotypes, however, while still believing them for the most part when discussing the different attributes of male and female teachers; they were continually questioning them in their choice of language. Phrases such as ‘maybe’, ‘it seems’ and ‘it might be’ were interspersed between all their suggestions.

This may come down to a fundamental failing in my interview questions. For example, my question “what do you think male teachers are better at than female teachers?” leads them into providing an answer, regardless of whether they have any strong opinions about the abilities of each gender or not. While I should have made my questions less leading, I still feel that although they demonstrated they are aware that stereotypes are not binding, the children’s opinions were partially formed by them anyway, possibly as a result of the continual bombardment of gender stereotypes we all receive since birth (Skelton and Francis, 2003).

“It is more about the character”

This response from Callum ties in with the majority of the prevailing literature (Ehrenberg et al, 1995; Ashley, 2002; Francis et al, 2008, 2009). He chose not to draw a specific gender of teacher

and when questioned cited the teacher's character as the main focus for judgement, not their gender. That was not the majority view of the sample though.

"Some of my favourite teachers have been men"

This quote is from Rona, who, along with the rest of the sample, continually referred to her current and past teachers when making judgements about what teachers were good at. For example, Henry referred back to an old male teacher "raising his voice, but in a good way" as why he thought male teachers would be good at that in general.

This is where the Year Sixes differ greatly from the Year Ones. The Year Ones' preferences were based mainly on own sex bias, resulting in the majority of children choosing the same gender of ideal teacher as their own. The Year Sixes on the other hand have based their preferences on their past teachers, the majority of them choosing a male teacher. This data is therefore misleading in the pie chart without the qualitative analysis to back it up. In another sample, the children could all have had different favourite teachers in the past, which may have coincidentally resulted in them all choosing an ideal teacher of the same gender as themselves. In the pie chart this would present as own gender bias rather than preference based on experience, and would be grossly misread. From the qualitative interview responses though, there is clearly a distinction between the reasoning behind teacher gender preferences between Year Ones and Year Sixes.

For example interview transcripts, see Appendix 5.

Methodology analysis

I have noted issues with my research throughout my analysis, and will address any further issues here.

An area of concern that was apparent from the start was the size and bias of my sample. Practicalities meant that I have only been able to draw my sample from one school, meaning it cannot be seen as representative of children nationwide. Due to the time consuming nature of the interviews I was also only able to sample six children from each year group. This issue was marginally alleviated by the opportunity to obtain drawings from all of the Year One class, which

turned out to be very interesting to see statistically. Of course, this also highlighted the insignificance of any statistical inference from the more limited sample of Year Six children.

Considering Myhill and Jones' (2006) findings that children in same gender groups may feel the artificial need to conform to gender stereotypes, a child may have drawn a teacher of the same gender as themselves, under the misguided notion that this was what was expected of them by their peers. If this has occurred it adds an element of unreliability to my findings.

An unforeseen issue related to the children reading the letter sent to their parents, outlining my research. The drawing task in particular was meant to be completed without any knowledge that the gender of the teacher was being examined. This may have led them to draw what they thought was expected of them, rather than their genuine ideal. As stated in the literature review, children have a very strong notion of society's gender stereotypes, and I wanted to avoid giving them a reason to try to conform to them (Skelton & Francis, 2003).

My main failing however, was with the leading nature of my drawing task and the interview questions. Callum (Y6) highlighted the problem with the drawing task, in that he was instructed to draw his ideal teacher, which gave him an implicit dichotomous choice between drawing a man or a woman; yet he had no gender preference in his ideal teacher. It is difficult to tell how many more children did not have a gender preference, but were forced to pick one by the nature of the activity. This could have been avoided by the use of a pilot study – as suggested by Drever (2003) and implemented by Francis et al (2009) – to test the drawing task and the interview questions and flag up any problems. Sadly, again due to time constraints, this was not possible.

That is not to say the entire process has been unproductive, as I feel the responses received from the interviews have been shown to outline the different approaches taken between Year One children and Year Six children when it comes to gender preference in their ideal teacher. Namely, that Year One children are predominantly led by own sex bias; whereas Year Six children are principally led by their past experiences.

Implications for my professional development

As a trainee teacher, the scope of this paper has been as much about broadening my knowledge of pupil perspectives, as it has been about the research. Bearing that in mind, while the research findings may be statistically unreliable, the process has had a positive impact on my development as a teacher.

The interview process has re-affirmed in me the concept of giving children time to think before moving on (Rowe, 1974; Torrance, 2001). I have been guilty of speaking too soon in the past, but during the interviews I made a conscious effort to give the children those extra seconds to formulate their ideas and it proved successful, gathering more in-depth answers than I believe I would otherwise have obtained. Analysing their answers for tone of voice and not just content, has shown me how much of an impact tone of voice can have. It emphasises to me that if I am inferring that much from their tone, then when I teach a class they will be doing the same to me. I will therefore be conscious to not only use my words to convey enthusiasm, emotion or seriousness, but also my tone of voice. Being male, the literature reviewed has held an extra significance for me, as I head into a female dominated profession.

The idea of increasing the number of men in primary school is not based upon pandering to children's preferences. While some children may like to have a male teacher, it has not been shown to improve academic achievement (Ehrenberg et al, 1995; Lahelma, 2000; Holmlund & Sund, 2008). The main reason to increase the number of men in primary teaching is the same reason to increase the number of teachers from different ethnic groups, religions and socioeconomic groups; to provide a representation of the diverse nature of society (Francis et al, 2008). It is important though to remember that the standard of teaching overrides any inherent diversity. If you are a headteacher seeking to fill a teaching post, it does not matter if the candidate ticks multiple boxes on a minority checklist, if they are a sub-standard teacher then they are not right for the job. To this end I must not see myself as special being a man in primary teaching, I am judged in exactly the same way as female teachers; on the quality of my teaching.

I, and all other male teachers, must also avoid putting too much emphasis on the notion of myself as a role model to young boys (Myhill & Jones, 2006; Francis et al, 2008). There is the danger of

trying too hard to be a masculine role model, and instead simply reinforcing the stereotype of what a man is meant to be. As Sable and Aelterman (2007) note, there is not one type of man or woman. There is a spectrum of masculinity and femininity and children should be shown this array through teachers simply being themselves. As my research has shown, Year One children are still heavily influenced by stereotypes, therefore little things that I am already doing should be continued so as to help break these stereotypes. For example, I own a pink shirt which I wear into school and I have helped run a cookery club at a previous school. These things, while fairly innocuous to me, are prime stereotypes of feminine behaviour. So hopefully, if I am seen to be engaging in these things, then it may go some way towards breaking those stereotypes in my pupils' minds.

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Appendix 1 - Semi-structured interview questions

RPP interview questions

1. Tell me about your picture and writing about your perfect teacher?

2. Would you rather have a male or female teacher?
 - 2a. If a preference, why?

3. Do you think male and female teachers are better at different things?

4. What do you think male teachers are better at than female teachers?
 - 4a. Why?

5. What do you think female teachers are better at than male teachers?
 - 5a. Why?

6. Quick fire answers!

Out of male or female teachers, who do you think is better for...

Art?

PE?

Music?

Maths?

English?

Taking care of you when you are hurt?

Listening?

Appendix 2 - Ethics checklist

University of Cambridge - Faculty of Education
Early Years and Primary PGCE
Ethics checklist for research during PGCE placements

This checklist is intended for use ONLY by Faculty of Education students undertaking initial teacher education ('trainees') for classroom-based research carried during their formal professional placements as temporary members of school staff. The context of this research is that it will be undertaken with pupils in classes for which a qualified teacher has legal responsibility who acts as 'gatekeeper' and where the trainee's intended enquiry has been discussed with and approved by the responsible teacher(s) for the class(es) concerned.

Trainee name: _____

School/setting: _____

Questions to be answered by the trainee -please *clearly ring* the appropriate response.

1) Do you understand why educational enquiry must be scrutinized from an ethical standpoint before any research commences?	yes/no
2) Have you read and do you understand the current guideline on educational research ethics issued by the British Educational Research Association? (available at http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf)	yes/no
3) Can you confirm that <i>to the best of your belief</i> the research you plan to carry out will NOT be to the educational detriment to any pupils involved, and that there is no reason to expect it to cause any harm to any participant –including damaging any pupil's confidence, motivation, interest or self belief in school?	yes/no
4) Can you confirm that you will have sought any necessary permissions - for example to record lessons, or to work with pupils outside of timetabled lessons- in line with the school's policies and procedures? This might include seeking permission from parents, with guidance from school staff.	yes/no
5) Can you confirm that you have discussed your research plan with your mentor and other staff responsible for any specific class(es), and that they have approved your plan?	yes/no
6) Can you confirm that any substantial change to your research design subsequent to completing this form, will be discussed for approval with your mentor (and other school staff if necessary) and shared by email with your partnership tutor?	yes/no

Trainee signature and date: _____

Partnership Tutor name: _____

- ☒ I have checked that the trainee has responded 'yes' to all questions above.
☐ I have discussed issues arising from the trainee not responding 'yes' to one or more of the questions above, and am convinced that this project is ethical (as explained in notes overleaf)

Partnership Tutor signature and date: _____

Appendix 3a - Letter to Year One parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You may already be aware that there are 2 PGCE trainee teachers currently in the *****'s classroom but I would like to take this opportunity to formally introduce myself and let you know how welcome your children have made us in their classroom.

As part of our course we are to undertake a Research Project looking at pupil perspectives, and as such are required to conduct pupil interviews. The school have approved of my research and the structure of my interviews, and I will let you know a little about the nature of my research.

My project is on pupil preferences regarding the gender of their teacher, looking at whether boys prefer male teachers and girls prefer female teachers, and also whether this preference changes with age. As such I will be interviewing 6 Year One pupils and 6 Year Six pupils, 3 boys and 3 girls from each year group, in groups of 3. I will firstly ask them to imagine their perfect school and then draw their ideal teacher. I will then ask them whether they prefer a male or female teacher and then the reasons why. The whole interview process will be conducted in a light hearted manner so that the children enjoy the process and it will not take them away from their regular school work for an extended period of time.

I will be using a dictaphone to record the interviews but please be assured that all names will be changed to preserve anonymity. I have selected your child at random to take part in the interviews but if you have any questions please feel free to come and speak with me and if you would prefer your child not to be involved please could you let me know as soon as possible.

Thanking you in advance for your cooperation,
Yours sincerely,

Mr *****

Statement of declaration:

I hereby give / do not give permission for my child to be interviewed as part of the research undertaken by Mr ***** . (delete as appropriate)

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3b - Letter to Year Six parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am one of 2 PGCE trainee teachers currently in the *****'s Year One classroom and as part of our course we are to undertake a Research Project looking at pupil perspectives. As such we are required to conduct pupil interviews and I would to interview both Year One and Year Six children. The school and Mr ***** have approved of my research and the structure of my interviews and I will let you know a little about the nature of my research.

My project is on pupil preferences regarding the gender of their teacher, looking at whether boys prefer male teachers and girls prefer female teachers, and also whether this preference changes with age. As such I will be interviewing 6 Year One pupils and 6 Year Six pupils, 3 boys and 3 girls from each year group, in groups of 3. I will firstly ask them to imagine their perfect school and then draw their ideal teacher. I will then ask them whether they prefer a male or female teacher and then the reasons why. The whole interview process will be conducted in a light hearted manner so that the children enjoy the process and it will not take them away from their regular school work for an extended period of time.

I will be using a dictaphone to record the interviews but please be assured that all names will be changed to preserve anonymity. I have selected your child at random to take part in the interviews but if you have any questions please feel free to come and speak with me and if you would prefer your child not to be involved please could you let me know as soon as possible.

Thanking you in advance for your cooperation,
Yours sincerely,

Mr *****

Statement of declaration:

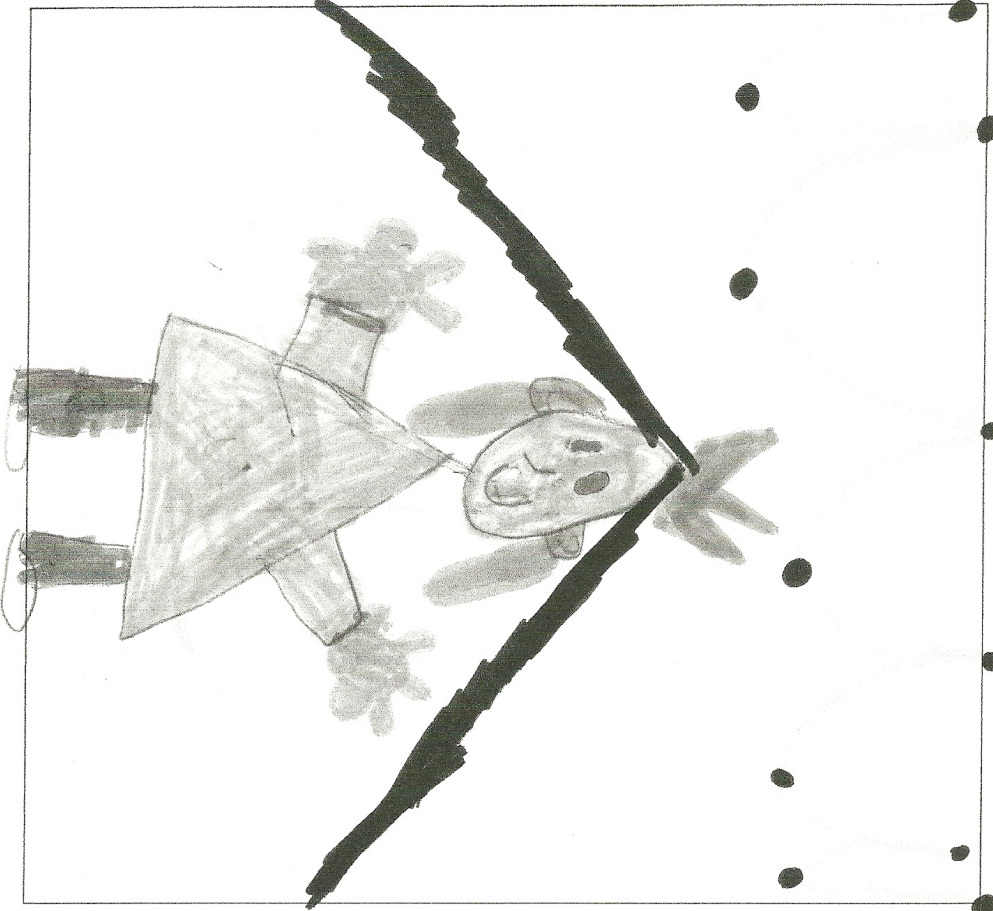
I hereby give / do not give permission for my child to be interviewed as part of the research undertaken by Mr ***** . (delete as appropriate)

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4a - Year One example drawing (girl)

LO: I can draw and write about my perfect teacher. ✓

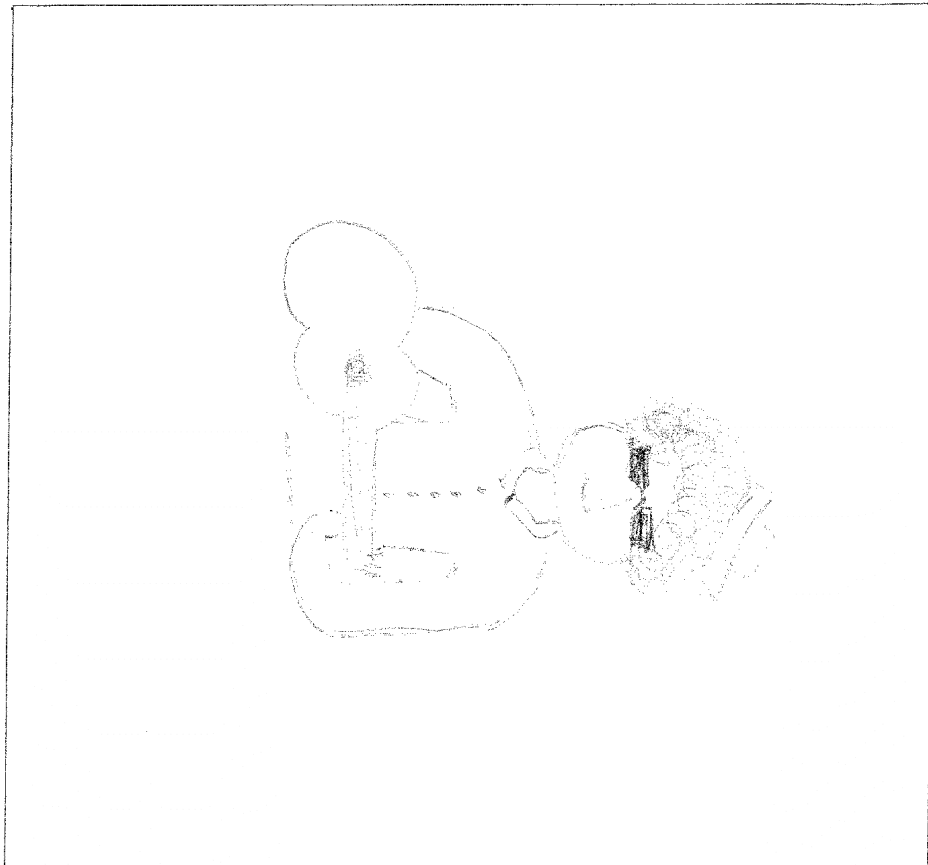


My perfect teacher is...

27.1.:

Ms Emily
She lets
you read
when ever
you think
and she
lets you
do anything
and she
lets you
do anything
over the top.

Appendix 4b - Year Six example drawing (boy)



LO: I can draw and write about my perfect teacher.

My perfect teacher is...

27.1.12

Appendix 5 - Example transcript extracts

These are extracts from two of the interview sessions; one with a year one girl, the other with a year six boy. As in the main paper, all names are pseudonyms.

I = Interviewer

M = Mandy

H = Henry

Mandy – Year One

I: *Would you rather have a man or a woman teacher?*

M: A woman

I: *A woman, okie-dokie... why would you rather have woman?*

M: Cos... I would like a woman... umm... I'm a woman, and there would be lots of only woman in the class... and one, two, about ten boys and then about a hundred girls.

I: *Okay... and why would that be good?*

M: Cos... um... boys, they're boys, they fight and they would fight with the girls. And if the girls didn't want the boys, the girls would fight the boys and the boys would fight the girls...

Henry – Year Six

I: *Tell me about your picture and what makes them a perfect teacher?*

H: Um... I like, because in year three we used to have a teacher and he, like, used to play his guitar to calm us down, and it was really fun cos it was different than just shouting at you and getting us to stop.

I: *Ah I see...a straight question; would you rather have a male or a female teacher?*

H: Um, I like male teachers because I find it easier... they somehow... they... I think they find it easier to get through to boys. I'm not sure if girls agree... but it might be easier the other way around...