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Received 9 Nov 2015 | Accepted 26 Feb 2016 | Published 5 Apr 2016

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.7

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# What are male teachers' understandings of masculinities?—an exploration of sex, gender and bodies in Irish primary schools

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**ABSTRACT** Primary teaching has traditionally been framed by assumptions about gender. These commonly held, but seldom voiced, assumptions have a strong impact on male primary schoolteachers and on men considering teaching as a career. Focusing on the lives of five Irish male primary teachers, this article unpacks a number of the assumptions relating to men who teach children at primary level. Many of the assumptions are often shrouded in silence, which increases the difficulty in addressing them. In this context, discussions surrounding the topics of care, men working with young children and teaching as a feminine occupation, are presented. The study employs three data-collection phases using the interview as the primary method of enquiry. Overall, two major challenges were identified: informal barriers and the concept of care in education. The study's findings show that gender relations within a feminine environment are central to understanding masculinities in primary schools. This article makes a contribution towards revealing how issues of masculinities are navigated and negotiated on a daily basis. Allied to this, it also provides a context for understanding the challenges male teachers face on a continuous basis. This article is published as part of a thematic collection on gender studies.

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## Introduction

A paradigm shift has taken place in Ireland surrounding identity, meaning and politics. The historic Irish Marriage Equality Referendum (Griffith, 2013) is such an exemplar. The Referendum campaign, which sought to extend civil marriage rights to same-sex couples, initiated a series of passionate public discussions and high-profile debates. Gender emerged, to borrow Woodward and Woodward's (2015) words, as a field that was "hotly contested". Such intense debate has resulted in an increased public awareness of gender and gender politics. As the gender equality lens has traditionally focused on women (Mac an Ghaill, 1996: 1; Kimmel, 2013: 5), it comes as no surprise that measurable and progressive advancement has predominantly benefitted Irish women. Yet, to focus on equality and inequality as something that only happens to women gives us a partial view. This study focuses on one major interest group in education: the male teacher. For some, this study will seem a surprising act (Goodwin, 1999), particularly as it is carried out by a female researcher. The fact that so many researchers are men, Lynch (1999: 41) writes, and so many teachers are female "further compounds the power relations of research production in education", resulting in the inevitable outcome of poor dissemination of research among practitioners (Hargreaves, 1996).

Despite the growing representation of women in public life, only rarely do women work alongside men, performing the same task and functions in the same industries. Most jobs are clearly divided into "women's work" and "men's work" (Williams, 1993: 1). According to figures released by the Irish Central Statistics Office (2013), over nine out of every ten workers (91.2%) in skilled trades are male. Just over five out of every six workers (83.6%) in caring, leisure and other services are female. Although women are significantly over-represented in professions such as teaching and nursing, these are neither the most prestigious nor the most highly paid jobs (Lynch, 1999; Apple, 2013). Bringing men into an analysis of a female-dominated workforce will both trouble existing beliefs about teaching and about society (Goodwin, 1999: 1). On a micro level, it will challenge attitudes, experiences and relationships that men encounter in the workplace. On a macro level, it will question how society identifies men and what men do. To understand what keeps men out of female jobs is just as important as it is to understand what keeps women out of male jobs (Williams, 1993: 2).

## People and places

I begin by introducing the five male teachers whose stories are the heart of this study. The teachers wrote their own introduction. Each teacher also chose either to use a pseudonym or to use his own name. Through their words, we the readers are taken into the world of a male schoolteacher. The stories of each teacher are unique to himself, but all are united by the desire to question the school as a female-dominated occupation. Each introduction serves as an entrée to this article.

David: I'm 24 years of age and I have been teaching for the past three and a half years. Despite being relatively newly qualified; I would estimate that I've been in approximately twenty different staffrooms as a teacher. On each occasion, as a male, I was in the minority. Previously, the skewed gender distribution of teachers was a matter that I accepted rather than questioned. Now more than ever, I have begun to question how my gender has both influenced my teaching career and impacted on others' perception of me as a person.

Matthew: I am a 31-year-old, assistant principal and have been teaching for almost ten years. I work in a large urban school.

Most of my career has been spent teaching in the younger classes. This research interested me because even though my school staff is almost 50% male, very few male teachers opt to teach the younger classes and equally few are assigned there. This has always puzzled me as I believe that male teachers have a lot to offer to infant classes.

Tim: I am a 26-year-old teacher. I graduated in 2010 and have been teaching in an urban school ever since. I have taught junior infants for three of my six years as a teacher. I want to express my opinion on the level of masculinity in infant classes and its importance to children at such a young age.

Darren: This is my 4th year of teaching. I've taught in rural and urban school settings. As a male, I am always in the minority in schools. I worked with 13 women last year and 8 this year. This research interested me because somebody finally wanted to research the topic of men in teaching. It hasn't been spoken about before, that's very evident.

Michael: I have been teaching for 29 years. My teaching experience includes having taught every class from junior infants to sixth, in a variety of schools. I was appointed Principal of a rural school in 2005. I have a specific interest in gender issues arising from a report issued by the Department of Education in 1994 called "Gender Equity—Action Research Report". This challenged many stereotyping practices of the time and much of it is still relevant today.

## Personal incentive for undertaking this research

The incentive for undertaking research on men in teaching initiated from reflections on Kimmel's (2008) book, *Guyland. The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Considering the buddy culture experiences of young American men today, identical to "Laddism" in Britain and Australia, Kimmel (2008) unmasks a landscape devoid of the traditional signpost, signals and clues that had once marked out young men's journey to manhood. In its place, Kimmel (2008) identifies a new stage of development, a phase in which young men "shirk the responsibilities of adulthood" (4), an arena that continuously challenges young men's sexuality, a code that demands conformity. Paradoxically, young boys struggle "heroically" to prove that "they are real men despite all the evidence to the contrary" (Kimmel, 2008: 4). Kimmel's compelling account surprised me. After all, masculinity appears to be an obvious, taken-for-granted, visible phenomena. My thoughts led directly to the mystery of male schoolteachers. The duality of their existence perplexed me. They appear as the most obvious staff members of a school and yet are the most invisible. Two distinct but interconnected questions informally guided my reflections. What barriers do male teachers experience inside and outside the school? What is keeping men out of the teaching profession? The answer to both questions rest in Butler's (1999) critique of gender as a construct that is "so taken for granted", while at the same time as being "so violently policed" (xx).

## Masculinities and the science of knowledge

The concepts of "masculine" and "feminine", Freud observed, "are among the most confused that occur in science" (Freud, 1953: 219–220, as cited in Connell, 1995: 3). While, in many practical situations the term "masculine" and "feminine" raises few doubts; upon logical examination, Connell (1995: 3) acknowledges, they prove to be "remarkably elusive and difficult to define". Connell (1995) and Connell and Pearse (2015)

suggests that this is due to the historically changing and politically fraught character of gender. Kimmel (2013: 114) offers a similar explanation, suggesting that definitions of masculinities and femininities vary “from culture to culture” and “in any one culture over historical time”. In addition, feminist philosopher Harding (1987: 7) notes that not only do gender experiences “vary across the cultural categories; they also are often in conflict in any one individual’s experience”. Conflicting forms of knowledge about gender “betray the presence of different practices addressing gender” (Connell, 1995: 5). Two suggestions are offered to illustrate these differing practices in relation to gender. First, perhaps it is because women and men act differently? David alludes to this belief stating, “... there are certain things that female teachers can do that male teachers can’t really do ... you know, males are a bit more awkward ... in general, around the younger children”. Second, perhaps men and women act differently because they *are* different? David considers infant teaching to be “geared more towards females than males because, like I said earlier, I think you have to be a bit more motherly ... with the infants”. In addition, Michael states that “next time round, I have a plan in my head and it won’t be any of the male teachers that get into sixth class because ... you need a firm hand and the ability to think outside the box. It just takes a different mentality”.

Theories of difference can be taken one step further. American author and relationship counsellor John Gray (1992) considers men and women to be so vastly different that they inhabit separate cosmic spaces (Kimmel, 2013: 1, 283). Men are from Mars and women are from Venus. According to Gray (1992), in the workplace men “retreat to a cave” when they have a problem to work out by themselves, whereas women “demonstrate sharing, cooperation, and collaboration” (as cited by Kimmel, 2013: 283). Yet, despite these alleged interplanetary differences, “we’re all together in the same workplaces ... evaluated by the same criteria” (Kimmel, 2013: 1).

### Theoretical background

The political ambiguities of masculinities and scientific knowledge stem from the question of what counts as knowledge? The first attempt to create a social science of masculinity centred on the idea of a male sex role (Connell, 1995: 21). According to sex role theory, society comprises males and females who provide different and complementary functions (Allan, 1994: 3). It has its origins in the work of Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1953), who claimed that all societies need to fulfil the functions of production and reproduction. Although, sex role theory informed the early men’s movement of the 1970s, it has numerous shortcomings. Sex role theory has largely been criticized by social constructivists, such as Connell (1987, 1995, 2009, 2015) and Kimmel (2000, 2013), who believe gender is non-static and is negotiated within and across cultures. A number of critics have also pointed out that by focusing on one normative standard of masculinity that is white, middle class and heterosexual, sex role theory is “unable to account for diversity and difference in men’s lives” (Pease, 2007: 555). In addition, it under-emphasizes male economic and political power and their “resistance to change” (Pease, 2007: 555; Connell, 2009: 178). It is clear that the sex role model does not work. However, Connell (2000: 132) states, it is not very clear “what way of thinking about the making of gender should take place”. Recently, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has considerably influenced recent thinking about men, gender and social hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 829). Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as “an aggressively heterosexual masculinity” (Connell, 1987: 120) or

“the form of masculinity that is culturally dominant in a given setting” (Connell, 1996: 209).

Sex role modelling, a set of accepted assumptions (Allan, 1994), is reflected in the stories of those interviewed. As one teacher stated, “You are sent to do whatever jobs men are supposed to do, lifting things ... fixing things”. Gender, in this case, appears to make two jobs out of one (Hochschild, 2012: 176). Expectations about masculinity and femininity in the teaching profession are also clearly illustrated in the gender-specific roles assigned to teachers, “The lads would take the sports teams, the girls would do cooking on a Friday”. These two examples reveal how male teachers demonstrate hegemonic masculinity while engaged in “women’s work”. The complementary alternative to sex role theory and sex role modelling, Allan (1993) states, is the folk theory of hyper- and hypo-masculinity (115). Hyper-masculinity is related to male violence, rape and other unrestrained aggression (Allan, 1994: 3). Hypo-masculinity is considered to be homo-sexuality, effeminacy, cowardice in battle and abandonment of family responsibilities (Allan, 1994: 3). Tim’s comment exemplifies the folk theory of hypo-masculinity, stating, “It’s very girlie to become a teacher”. Furthermore, Tim believes that his sexuality comes under scrutiny by others due to his infant teacher status, “Is he gay because he’s in infants? Is his masculinity gone out the door when he becomes an infant teacher?”. Tim qualifies this by stating, “I don’t think so because I have M.R. in front of my name”. Tim’s anxiety can be read in relation to Butler’s (1999) claim that sexuality and belief are related in a complex manner, which are “very often at odds with one another” (xi). Indeed, Butler (1999) contends that the first formulation of her most famous thesis, *Gender Trouble*, is the fear of losing one’s place in the gender hierarchy due to a failure to appear in accordance with accepted gender norms.

Mindful of Lather’s (1987: 30) suggestion that if the working lives of teachers are to be understood and changed “issues of gender are central ...” it is with a sense of urgency that this study places a spotlight on five male primary schoolteachers. The overarching question considered in this article is “What are male teachers’ understandings of masculinities and how do they impact on their daily lives?”. For the purpose of this article I will explore two themes that emerged regularly in interviews. The first relates to informal barriers male schoolteachers encounter, both inside and outside the school. These barriers are introduced by the topic of gender entry patterns to teacher education colleges. An outline of Ireland’s cultural relationship with education follows to contextualize this research study. The second theme I will explore is a gender paradox experienced by male schoolteachers. While most teachers interviewed receive encouragement from parents and colleagues simply based on their gender, this is often inadvertently reversed through management decisions and perceived restrictions placed by society’s perceptions and beliefs regarding men who work with young children. Evidently, the meaning of each schoolteacher’s masculinity is navigated and negotiated day by day. It is hoped that this research will enhance our understandings of the many barriers that male primary school teachers face both inside and outside the school. Due attention will be paid to R Connell, C Haywood, M Kimmel, JR King and M Mac an Ghail because of their considerable contribution to the discourse on masculinities. Owing to their extensive contribution to the discourse on Irish education, further consideration will be paid to academics J Coolahan, S Drudy and K Lynch.

### Theoretical framework

This research draws on feminist poststructural enquiry to address the research question, what are male teachers’ understandings of masculinities and how do they impact on their daily lives? The

theoretical orientations of feminism and poststructuralism, and, more specifically, the work of contemporary theorist, Butler (1999), influenced the methodological choice, data collection and analysis of this research. A feminist theoretical orientation disrupts traditional ways of knowing through its commitment to studying the “lived experiences” of gender (Pillow and Mayo, 2007: 161). Feminism places the personal being at the centre of one’s enquiry. This creates rich new meanings by highlighting concerns of boundaries, identities and speaking. Furthermore, poststructuralism facilitates a constant engagement with “the tensions and omissions” in a text (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 5). A poststructural reading of data troubles the innocent idea of any term. It adheres to a suspicion that “something may be wrong with what we currently believe” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 23). As a result, poststructuralism holds the idea that no reading or writing of a life is ever complete. From this belief emerges accounts that “are playful, open-ended, and incomplete” (Denzin, 1989: 46; Van Maanen, 2011). Together, a feminist perspective and a poststructuralist methodology critically deconstruct gendered social practice and support alternative understandings of power and subject formation. Deconstruction, in this sense, does not mean “dismantling and replacing” or “de-constructing and re-constructing” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 15). It is a tool that facilitates the possibilities for the stories of each teacher to go far beyond the pages of this manuscript. Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity is interweaved into the theoretical framework, informing the embedded question, what are the performative acts that (re)produce male teachers’ subjectivities as primary school teachers? It is questionable whether there is any utility in analysing, yet again, the work of Butler and particularly that of *Gender Trouble* (1999). Yet mindful of Hekman’s (2010,2014) position regarding this question, there are two possibilities of answering this query. First, as Butler’s (1999) theory has had such a profound effect on the evolution of the feminine subject, her theory could possibly be revisited to extend a contemporary thesis of the masculine subject in light of current global transformations (Hekman, 2014). Second, Butler’s theory has fruitfully evolved since *Gender Trouble* to include the materiality of the body, addressed most directly in the introduction of *Gendered Bodies* (1993: ix), “I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body”. This alone, Hekman (2014) believes, “constitutes a significant reason to return to that work” (117).

Gender, according to Butler (1999), is an internal feature of us, “one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts” (xvi). It is a performance brought into existence through action and repetition, rather than the expression of a pre-existing reality (Connell, 1990; Jackson and Mazzei, 2013). Furthermore, Butler’s (1999) ontological view illustrates gender as a culturally authorized performance, “a repetition and a ritual” (Butler, 1999: xvii), which requires a body to execute within a heteronormative matrix of intelligibility. The naturalization of gender performance, Butler (1999) claims, accepts and privileges heterosexuality. Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity works to unsettle the normalizing and regulating categories of gender through the surface politics of the body. When the body is regarded as a cultural locus of gender meanings, the natural aspects free of cultural imprint become unclear.

### Research design

This design consists of three interconnected yet distinct rounds of interviews. The categorizing of data collection into three phases enables methodological self-reflection and interactive relationships to develop between researcher and researched (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Rapley, 2011). Teachers, both male and female, were invited to participate in this research by responding to an open call

for participants. The open call was in the form of an article, entitled *Why the decline in male primary school teachers?* placed by the researcher in Ireland’s largest teachers’ union monthly magazine, *InTouch* (2014). A specific timeframe was selected, spanning from December 2014 to June 2015, to interview the schoolteachers who responded to the call. All responses received were from male schoolteachers, both retired and in-service. The sample in this round was, by design, a convenience sample of 11 schoolteachers. During this frame, Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interview was used to guide the informal interviews, which was useful as major issues were discovered during the early months of the research. These interviews served to generate a deeper insight into their personal experiences and to identify emerging data. Each interview lasted between 1–2 hours and was conducted face-to-face. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outsourced professional vendor and offered to the participants for review.

The second round of interviews, which was driven by “emerging analytical findings” (Rapley, 2011: 285), consisted of individual interviews with seven teachers between June 2015 and September 2015. Formal interviews were added to focus on specific topics such as care in education, gendered bodies and gender-specific roles. The Long Interview, “allows us ... to achieve crucial qualitative objectives within a manageable methodological context” (McCracken, 1988:11). This process was repeated for the third and final round in October 2015, with a sample size of five schoolteachers. Although, it is rare for several interviews to be conducted with the same person during a single research project (Gobo, 2011: 29–30), engaging in rounds of cycles of fieldwork and analysis allowed each participant to share as much as they wished about their lives and their experiences. A case-study approach was followed to best illustrate the relationship between sex, body and gender of five male schoolteachers.

### Sampling

Employing three rounds of interviews and note-taking allows each phase of the research design to mutually inform one another. It also signifies the importance of sampling (Rapley, 2011: 285). As a feminist poststructural study, this research does not seek to uncover generalizable characteristics to draw conclusions about the larger population. Instead, the most information-rich cases are selected to enable further investigation (Patton, 1990 as cited in Morse, 1998). The first aim of this approach is to obtain high-quality case descriptions, “useful for documenting uniqueness” (Morse, 1998: 73). The second aim is to identify significant shared patterns of commonalities existing across participants (Morse, 1998: 74). Variables are used to identify appropriate participants including age, gender, background, number of years of teaching experience, school setting and position held within the school.

### Data collection and analysis

Mindful that teachers are often the subjects of research but not the partners in its design (Lynch, 1999: 41), data sources generated for the research are as follows:

1. In-depth interviews with male schoolteachers
2. Field notes
3. Texts such as governmental reports and newspaper cuttings brought by participants to the interview
4. Transcripts

Due to the size of the study and the time available, an electronic coding system, NVivo 10 software, was utilized to efficiently store, organize, manage and reconfigure data from the first round of interviews. Although a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was useful to discover emerging themes during the first round of interviews and enabled “human analytical reflection”

(Saldaña, 2013: 28), it overly constrained the options available for marking up the transcript (Rapley, 2011: 281). The subsequent two rounds of interviews were analysed using a voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 126). The analysis consisted of four readings of the data, beginning with a focus on the respondent and moving towards an emphasis on broader cultural contexts and societal structures. Four readings of the data offered multiple ways of knowing and thinking about the voices in this study. When the four readings process were complete, notes were made of each reading on separate sheets of paper, which were slowly organized around various categories. These category sheets provided the starting point for analysis of numerous topics. As this is quite a detailed and time-consuming process, a number of cases were selected in phase two and phase three to do all four readings. Data was used as a filter, facilitating an ongoing process of idea reformulation and validity (Lather, 1991: 73), which analytically links the lives of these teachers with the structure of neo-liberalism in all of the Western world. Each interview began with the question, “Since our last meeting, is there anything you wish to add or elaborate upon?”. This question yielded fruitful results as it interrupted researcher-participant power dynamics. It allowed the participants to become collaborators in the research process and partners in the production of knowledge. The holistic strategy employed in this research design ensures that each phase of the research integrates with the other two phases (Leavy, 2011), allowing the participants to be informed about the researcher’s interpretation of results concerning themselves. Lather described this as “research *with* people, instead of the more typical research *on* people” (Lather and Smithies, 1997: xxv).

### Gender entry patterns

The following five accounts portray teaching as a career choice developed in the context of family values. Each story reflects the cultural emphasis on teaching as a traditional occupation. The stories also illustrate teaching as a traditional family occupation that remains highly respected in Irish society coupled with the public perception that men who teach are “principals in training” (King, 1998: 3).

*Why did primary school teaching appeal to you?*

David: “... my mother wanted me to do it ... I kind of had an inkling to do Journalism and New Media and that’s probably what I would have done if I was left to my own devices ...”.

Matthew: “Oh God, I hate that question ... My uncle and his wife, they live next door to us and they were both teachers ... And I do remember my Mammy saying it to me, you know, if you are ever thinking of a job, teaching is the way to go because look at your aunt and uncle”.

Tim: “(Giggles) Appeal to me? Um ... It came down to my third and fourth class teacher who got me thinking that this is kind of what I would like to do ... Um ... because before that I just felt that teachers were just, like, old-fashioned”.

Darren: “I suppose being a male, I thought I would get a job fast enough and that it might be easier to climb the ladder too, to become a Principal ... I remember my family thought I could be something much better, they thought I could be an accountant or a doctor”.

Michael: “I’m not a hundred percent sure why, but I suppose teaching was in my family ... I’d say it was more their

influence, the fact that they were doing primary school teaching that I applied for it”.

The accounts introduce Ireland as a site of entry to this research. In addition, they introduce the topic of gender entry patterns to teacher education colleges and informal barriers that exist within for male teachers.

### Ireland as a site of entry

Ireland is an interesting site in which to study patterns of gender entry to the teaching profession for a number of reasons. Education in Ireland has always been shaped by the strong cultural values placed on it within Irish society. Historically schools have long been embedded in Irish communities, with high emphasis placed on teaching as a “vocation” and on teachers hearing “a call” (Coolahan, 2013). All teacher education institutions held denominational status and, except for the Church of Ireland College, were single sex until the 1960s. Before Ireland’s advancement to the European Union, it was possible for male applicants to gain places in Irish teacher education colleges with lower Leaving Certificate achievements than their female counterparts (Drudy, 2009). Today, the main teacher education institutions remain denominational. A monopoly exists in school patronage and the State depends on private patrons, in particular the Catholic Church, for school provision of denominational education. As one teacher involved in this study pointed out, “It’s not possible to be a teacher, to apply for training in Ireland, unless you already have a religion, preferably Christian”. A time series analysis presented in the report *Sé Sí* on behalf of the department of Education and Science (O’Connor, 2007) reveals that women have repeatedly outnumbered men among primary teachers in Ireland over the last 70 years. The report also illustrates that the proportion of female primary teachers increased steadily from 58% in 1930 to 83% in 2005. While the total number of teachers at primary level has more than doubled over those years, the actual number of male primary teachers has not varied greatly during this time. As the number of female entrants to teacher education colleges continues to rise against a static number of male entrants, clearly there is cause for concern regarding the under-representation of men in primary schools.

### Findings

#### Theme 1: informal barriers

*Teacher education colleges.* The fact that men are greatly under-represented in education at primary level offers them both advantages and disadvantages related to their gender. In this section, I focus on two disadvantages that were continuously raised by all five teachers. The first relates to experiences as pre-service teachers in teacher education colleges. Michael, an administrative Principal, recounts a story from his experiences in the 1980s. David, a substitute teacher, and Tim, an infant teacher, offer a more modern version of the same divide described by Michael. Michael’s experience of teacher education college in the 1980s highlights the realities of non-formal barriers that exist for male teachers. Lynch and O’Neill (1994) outline a minimalist conception of equality that should not prevent any persons from entry to education and employment on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity disability or any other irrelevant characteristic. Michael’s story sharply brings this conception into question with regard to gender entry patterns.

Michael: “So, for example, there were no showers for the men or the boys, whatever we were at the time, in the college ... There was a hall, a gym, there so we were always kicking ball

or playing basketball or something. Then the head nun commented that we smelled from time-to-time so they actually got the showers in ...”.

The relational realities of nurturing constitute a concealed site of social practice through which inequalities are created (Lynch, 2013: 173). Such a discrete site, which is obvious in Michael’s story, is the lack of basic facilities for male pre-service teachers. To a large extent, formal barriers to equal access and participation in education and employment have been removed since Ireland joined the European Union in 1973. However, some exceptions remain as the invisible and indeterminate nature of indirect discrimination makes it a difficult issue to address (Lynch, 1999). Interestingly, Michael was one of seven male students in that year. In the entire teacher education college there were 10 male students and 65 female students. The teacher education college in question was on the same grounds as an all-female secondary school, a “Montessori college” and a “Home Economics college”, all united by the same denominational status. As Michael remembers, “So we were going into this complex every day with well over a thousand girls and ten lads”. Significantly, each building was separated into distinct areas, “You were walled off, you know? You didn’t have any other influences”.

A more recent example of gender separation within teacher education colleges is offered by David, who remarks a gender divide within lecture theatres.

David: “You would have one side that was predominantly male and the other side was predominantly female. One of the lectures made a remark about it saying it’s like a dance hall in the ’50s”.

In addition, both Tim and Darren give examples of how lecturers in teacher education colleges automatically refer to the students as females.

Tim: “They just fall under the illusion, ‘Hello girls, hello ladies’. Then you hear a little heckle in the back ‘I’m here, I’m not a lady, hello to you too, Sir.’ They are assuming the whole room is full of girls”.

Darren: “You know, at different times the lecturer might say ‘Girls’ or something and then she would say ‘Oh sorry, sorry to the lad in the corner’”.

In spite of differences in the pattern of economic development, in political structures and in the types of ethno-national differentiation of the 1980s and 2000s, a common cultural phenomenon still exists between a division of the sexes among pre-service teachers. An analysis of both implies that the feminization of teaching is a historical process as much as it is a social, psychological or an educational one (Drudy, 2009: 165). One striking feature about schools in Ireland has been the role of philanthropy and the idealism of “patrons” to serve a local community. Although the churches, in particular the Catholic Church, has played a central role in the formation and development of Irish education, the churches have received scant attention as a social force in Irish education (Drudy and Lynch, 1999). The separation of religion from the “secular” life of a country is not always clear cut (Tuohy, 2013). There are often unexamined assumptions or practices in the organization of a society that are based on a religious approach that was embedded in a historical context (Tuohy, 2013: 135).

*Staffroom interactions.* Interview findings reveal that male school-teachers find the staffroom an intimidating and lonely room to be

in. Male teachers may become “fed up” with socializing in female milieu such as the staffroom. As Darren notes, “It’s just trying to pass half an hour really”. This difficulty is explained in part by the topic of conversations, which make it harder for men than women to participate in.

Michael: “Conversation is usually about jewellery, clothes ... children ... there is zero concession to what I would like to talk about, you know? Being a male in that situation is a lonely experience”.

David echoes this sentiment of loneliness, “Sometimes you go through lunch times without saying anything”. Similarly, Darren describes the staffroom as “quite isolating at times” where “you can either be very much on your own or you can be very much the centre of attention”.

Equally, Tim agrees that the topic of staffroom conversations was quite limited. However, the most difficult situations encountered in the staffroom are as a result of uncomfortable interactions with other male teachers, particularly male teachers of senior classes.

Tim: “Nothing against the other male teachers, it’s just that they do give off the vibe of machoism and big bravado and they wouldn’t talk about every single interest in the world. They would have their one specific topic and if you are not part of that loop ... they won’t talk to you”.

Interestingly, Michael recounts the difference in conversation style when male teachers are in a majority in the staffroom. Male teachers are more willing to use coarse language in each other’s company and appear to encourage each other to do so.

Michael: “I was in a heavily male dominant staff one time, so there was twenty of us ... bad language as in swear words would have been ... all the time in the staffroom. Effing and blinding, the whole lot. The Principal was atrocious, in a nice way, you know? F-this ... you know? He set the tone so the rest of us would have felt comfortable then about letting fly as well”.

As teaching is considered a “soft option” career for men (Connell, 1985) and an essentially feminine occupation rather than a masculine one, the masculinity of male teachers is continuously in doubt. Male teachers are constantly aware of others’ attention to their maleness (Thornton, 1997, as cited in Skelton, 2001: 127). Similarly, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2013: 14) state that men occupy a hegemonic masculinity “or assert a position of superiority” by “winning the consent of other males ... in order to secure their (hegemonic) legitimacy”. Furthermore, Bradley (2013: 157) claims, even in situations of warmth and companionship “embodied masculinity remains on display”. Just as Tim understands male teachers’ unwillingness to broaden the topic of conversation as a fear of portraying too much femininity, “You can’t give off any viable femininity in your personality or your character or else you would have to assert your masculinity”, Bradley (2013: 157) notes that where friendship groups are heterosexual, a wariness remains about possible misinterpretations of emotionality.

Through the manipulation of gendered power relationships at micro-political level, the traditional model of male dominance is turned on its head.

Tim: “I can see it in them, that they would have to portray I am the man. I am a man here in this job. I do what men do ... I will talk like a man, I will walk like a man, I will teach like a

man, and I don't get that. We are all teaching the very same way".

*Perceptions of men working with children.* Male entry into a highly feminized occupation such as teaching renders it a difficult choice for many men. The perception of teaching as female-dominated, and the associated perceptions of the minority of men who work in them, have possible implications for school leavers' perceptions and the decision-making process (Williams, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Matthew: "I don't really remember ever telling someone I am a teacher without someone going 'Oh?' or the eyebrows going up or registering some sort of surprise, do you know?"

Similarly, David recounts a summer working on a building site. He had just finished the Leaving Certificate Examination, the final examination in the Irish secondary school system, and was awaiting his results.

David: "I suppose the only time I would have been conscious of it would have been working with my father on the building site. Some of the people there, they were asking, 'What are you going to do?' And I was like, 'I haven't got a clue', even though I had put teaching down as my first choice. They said, 'You know what you would be good at? An electrician'".

Jacobs (1989, as cited in Williams and Villemez, 1993: 65) identifies social control as a normative measure that both persuades and constrains individual choice of workers. Normative measures act as operations of power. Butler (1999: xxii) describes a normative account of gender as judgements made on acceptable and unacceptable expressions of gender. Williams (1992) further clarifies how "negative stereotypes about men who do 'women's work' can push men out of specific jobs" (263). As a result, the majority of men appear to reluctantly enter female-dominated occupations, as revealed by the answers to the question "Why did primary school teaching appeal to you?"

## Theme 2: gender paradox

*Active encouragement.* Being a male is a potential source of simultaneous advantage and disadvantage within the gendered structure of power in primary schools (Allan, 1993). The fact that men are particularly under-represented in teaching at primary level offers them both advantages and disadvantages. The majority of the teachers interviewed noted the delight conveyed by parents to them, simply because they are men. They also noted having a particularly positive effect on male pupils.

Darren: "This year a lot of parents said the boys just jump out of bed and say, you know, I just can't wait to go to school. I suppose they ... thanked me for finally being a male teacher and they thanked the Principal on several occasions for the purpose of having a role model and so on".

Darren notes the hesitation of both the school and parents of having a male teacher, "they were nervous at the start and even the parents were nervous. They didn't know what it would be like for their boys having a male ...".

The main reason given for this apparent gender advantage was the public's demand for male role models in the classroom. All male teachers interviewed were happy to be considered role models for pupils and were happy to act out the traditional role of authority in their schools. However, Michael believes that role

modelling is not assigned to a specific gender in schools. He believes both males and females model good practices but he believes they model different aspects of positive living.

Michael: "You are a role model in generosity, you are a role model of kindness, and you are a role model. That doesn't have to be a male or a female thing ... a role model models different aspects of life".

Michael believes, however, that "there is some little thing missing when there isn't a male teacher, there is some male role model missing". Interestingly, Darren's following story of the first day of the new school year coincides with Michael's ideas. Darren's account illustrates the effect that the lack of having a male schoolteacher can have on a young child, particularly if the child does not associate teaching as a male activity.

Darren: "One boy got so shocked by having a male teacher that he vomited, he vomited ... there were coco-pops everywhere. But I cared for that boy by cleaning up and calming him down and calling the Mum and ever since, he's just been so happy in school".

Most pupils in primary school will only come into contact with a male teacher at the senior end of the school, if this is even a possibility.

*Active opposition.* The opposition of colleagues, both formally and informally, to men teaching young children is also noted. One such formal example is David's experience as a substitute teacher in a rural school. He was assigned to teach the infant class to cover a teacher who was on maternity leave. However, school administration reshuffled the staff and reassigned the teachers to different classes. As a result, a female teacher was the junior infant teacher.

David: "... they did their own swop ... if I was a girl they might have left me with Junior Infants. But because I was male, they gave me Second, Third and Fourth".

Similarly, Michael recalls a friend's personal experience of working in a six-teacher school. The staff, all-female, actively sought not to employ male teachers.

Michael: "They would never look for a substitute male teacher because they were familiar with each other, they were familiar with a kind of 'mammy role' and that was how they liked to run a school ... it was a conscious decision by that school".

In this scenario, female teachers exert considerable influence over the hiring possibilities of male teachers. More informally, Tim presents an account of his Principal's surprise at requesting to teach in the infant classroom.

Tim: "So ... when I approached my Principal and I was like, 'Do you know I would like to go for Infants?' His first immediate reaction was 'Are you mad? Nobody volunteers to go down there'. He said to me that I would be the first male teacher in about thirty years to go down there".

Given the persistence of these patterns, it is important to remember that there is no systematic evidence to suggest that men are inappropriate persons to provide the nurturing and care that are thought to be essential to young children (King, 1998: 5).

*How do you teach like a man?* The caring qualities needed for teaching are deemed to be natural, intuitive and inherently

feminine. The teachers interviewed believe care is an important part of daily teaching interactions. However, when care is demonstrated by male teachers, the problematic relationship between male teachers and the concept of care emerges. David gives a clear example of this phenomenon as he recalls how he interacted with a child who fell on the ground during lunch time.

David: "... this child fell and he was balling his eyes out and I went over and I was trying to comfort him with words. Then the Principal came over and gives him a big hug, she rubs him on the back and then he is beginning to get a bit better and she walks away holding his hand ... I couldn't do that though. If somebody saw, if somebody was looking over the wall and saw me holding a child's hand and hugging them it would look weird (Giggles) ... I mean, it only takes one person to be suspicious".

As an act of caring, King (1998: 66) notes, "hugging and touch are risky behaviours for men who work with children". David's description of the child who fell and his inability to engage with strategies of care, such as hug and touch, exemplifies the risk of such behaviour. David is clearly aware that young children need affection and warmth from him as a teacher. However, he also keenly notes that the very same incident created an opportunity for a female colleague to demonstrate care and emotional connection. The decision to teach "in women's ways" is difficult for male teachers and one that requires "abandoning preconceived notions of caring and learning" (King, 1998: 67). Although, all schoolteachers interviewed perceive role modelling as a positive and unwritten rule of teaching, their stories offer a very different picture. Some teachers always teach with the classroom door open, others always keep the blinds open in the classroom even on a sunny day or while watching a DVD. All demonstrate their sensitivity to pupils through words rather than action. As Michael notes, "The fear factor is very real". Another teacher noted, "it's a little bit like a humming fridge, every now and again you hear it in your head". These sentiments can be read in relation to Whitehead's (2002) exploration of men's private selves. Whitehead's study, which works within a broad post-structural framework, concludes that trust, friendship and emotions are difficult concepts for men to engage with. This is due to men's general desire to control and to deep anxieties felt around their manhood and their sexuality. "These factors make it difficult for men to let go ... " (as cited in Bradley, 2013: 156).

## Discussion

Primary teaching has traditionally been framed by assumptions about gender. These assumptions have "sometimes been articulated but more often left silent" (Weiler and Middleton, 1999: 2). Similarly, Noddings (2003: 20) states that much of what is most valuable in the teaching profession "cannot be specified". These commonly held, but seldom voiced, assumptions have a strong impact on male primary schoolteachers and those considering teaching as a career. It is important to unpack some of the assumptions about the relationship between teaching and masculinities. To be more accurate, it is necessary to investigate the concept of masculinities and its relationship to education at particular moments and in certain contexts. Male primary schoolteachers' experiences will be placed within various social, cultural and global contexts. These specific contexts include an exploration of teaching as a feminine occupation, attitudes towards care in education and staffroom interactions. In addition, the paradox of gender in teaching will be discussed as will perceptions of men working with young children. These varying

contexts serve to demonstrate masculinities as non-static and as part of larger cultural, economic and social networks.

## Theme 1: informal barriers

*Teaching as a feminine occupation.* Work is, "or should be" Collier (1998: 74) considers, "the key reference point through which men's subjectivities are understood". Historically, work stood as the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity. Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2003: 21) note that men have often been understood through the notion of being a worker, "with which they have closely identified and invested". Indeed, an assumption about the relationship between masculinities and men rests, for many, between "a particular correlation ... between men and work" (Collier, 1998: 74). Connections between masculinities and work are reflected in various social processes and social structures (Evans, 2003: 2; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 22). Social processes involve the interconnection of becoming a worker with becoming a man. Work, alongside marriage, facilitates an otherwise problematic transition from youth to male adulthood. For those working within the sex role paradigm, work not only matters to men, but it is also part of them (Edwards, 2006: 8). Entering teaching as a profession means entering a profession that is built upon complex cultural and social networks. This network is constituted by factors including attitudes towards caring, gender-coded behaviour and the gender division of labour in emotion (King, 1998: 3; Connell, 2009: 179).

School culture may be female. As noted by King (1998: 12), school culture may even be "feminine", but it is "decidedly non-feminist". Indeed, female participation rates do not always constitute a gendering of work. King's (1998) observation can be read in relation to Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2003), who note that the biological characteristics of male and female "do not necessarily equate to masculinities and femininities" (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 22). Labelling a workplace as masculine or feminine becomes a question of how dominant values and attitudes are perceived and enacted. For example, the professionalization of teaching and recent changes in educational policies have directed school organization towards more masculine working styles in Western societies, such as "managerialism" (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2001, 2003). Furthermore, Holmes (2006: 10) notes that it is the "interactional style" rather than "a reflection of the sex" of the workers that constitutes labelling a workplace as feminine or masculine. Connell (1985) claims an apparent incompatibility between the conventional positioning of femininity and the disciplinary role of the teacher. Connell (1985: 153) notes that "it is a tension about gender itself. Authority, in our society, is felt to be masculine" (as cited in Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2013: 94). In addition, a tension lies in the fact that primary teaching has been understood to be an act of caring (King, 1998). The connotations of authority as physical strength are juxtaposed with connotations of caring as emotional vulnerability. Indeed, care and nurturing have traditionally been defined in the Western world as women's work. Haywood and Mac an Ghail's (2012) recent work of the notion of "mothering" provides a useful context to Connell's (1985: 153) claim of gender tension. In their study (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2012) male teachers most valued teaching styles that included patience, understanding and care. However, the projection of a normal and appropriate teaching style was articulated through a notion of "motherly" care. "The effect was that good mothering became an index of good teaching" (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2013: 94). This study exemplifies that male teachers often make few distinctions between engagement with their own children and engagement with the pupils they teach. Nevertheless, the five



male teachers engaged in this study belief that caring for others is consistent with how they view their work.

*Care in education.* Teaching involves care and emotions as much as “pure reasoning” (Connell, 1993: 63). Caring about children as a teaching philosophy and caring for children as enactment of that philosophy are valued descriptions of primary teaching (King, 1998: 23). Indeed, “teach the child, not the subject” is a common mantra of primary teachers. In Western culture and in our society, women usually fulfil the role of care-giver (Hekman, 2005: 125). According to Reskin (1991: 147) women are said to have a “natural talent” for it and “similar work”. As a result, when teaching is understood as an act of caring, men’s work as caregivers “is a complex endeavour” (King, 1998: 4). This is in part due to the fact that emotions are treated and interpreted differently when expressed by a woman or a man (Gottfried, 2013: 83–84). Furthermore, it is a result of the complicated ways in which gender is constructed and embedded in work norms and practices. When men work within an environment of care and exhibit caring and emotional attributes, “these qualities are not consonant with dominant definitions of masculinities” (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 27). Consequently, men appear out of place when performing work contradicting gender-stereotypical expectations. When men do not correspond to the perceptions of occupational masculinities, assumptions regarding heterosexuality are informed by “ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality” (Butler, 1999: xxi). However, men in female-typed jobs often experience different expectations and rewards from women doing the same work (Gottfried, 2013: 84). A male teacher can shift from exhibiting nurturance to exercising rational authority without appearing abrupt. This notion of feminization suggests a more complex analytical understanding that goes beyond the simpler framework of male and female employment participation rates (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 27).

It is important to articulate how the construction of care itself is formulated. For many, attributions of care have tended to shape or have been shaped by public perceptions of care. At an abstract level, care is considered to be “deep psychological structures” (Noddings, 2003: 40). When we move from natural caring to an ethic of caring, Noddings (2003) advances the thesis that an ethic built on caring is essentially feminine, arising out of our experience as women (Hekman, 2014: 72). It is in sharp contrast to the justice voice and a masculinist morality bound by rules (Hekman, 2014: 72). In addition, Gilligan’s (1982) moral theory further challenges women’s experience of care. Traditionally, care was considered to be “intuitive, instinctive, a function of anatomy coupled with destiny” for women (Gilligan, 1993: 17). However, Gilligan (1993) sought to establish a more encompassing view of women’s lives because women’s experience provides clues to the “central truth of adult life” (Gilligan, 1993: 172). Care, Gilligan (1993) believes, is “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need” (62). Women form their moral decisions on an ethic of care or “the web of connection” (Gilligan, 1993: 62). Gilligan (1993) suggests that morality based on an ethic of care is one that tends to be female “but caring itself is not essentialized as feminine” (as cited in King, 1998: 69). Furthermore, Gilligan’s (1993) theory connects language with voice, believing that the care voice is “thematically feminine” and “is associated with culturally defined feminine values” (as cited in Hekman, 2005: 125). As education is a process “operating through relationships” (Connell, 1993: 19), care is an issue that confront all teachers in primary schools. However, for men who wish to teach within a caring environment, the understanding of these issues can take interesting “twists and turns” (King, 1998: 24).

*The staffroom.* Concerns regarding staffroom isolation and professional communication were common topics for the teachers in

this study. One important part of staffroom discussion highlights segregated sex roles. This is particularly evident in the stories the male teachers recounted of female conversation topics, which revolved around children, clothes and jewellery. For men and women who are trying to understand and share ideas with their colleagues in the staffroom, interpersonal and professional relationships are clearly divided along gendered lines. In addition, male teachers continue to negotiate their masculine identities within the staffroom, as illustrated by Tim, who recalls feeling isolated by other male staff members because of his connection with female colleagues. There is also distinct, though not absolute, hegemonic patterns of conversation among male teachers. This is illustrated by Michael’s story of male teachers’ use of coarse language in the staffroom. The use of offensive language was a way of demonstrating masculinity to oneself and to others. To identify as “real men”, the male teachers engaged in verbal exchanges that they normally would not have done. The verbal exchange in this story brings into question hegemonic masculinities in schools. According to Connell (1996), hegemonic masculinities sustain a number of relationships with men that operate through processes of subordination, complicity and marginalization (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2013: 105). The emotional traits associated with hegemonic masculinity are aggression, dispassion and ruthlessness (Gottfried, 2013: 83). Similarly, hegemonic masculinity, which signifies “a position of cultural authority and leadership” (Connell, 1996: 209), privileges the expression of “care-free” emotional displays “that appear natural and rational” (Gottfried, 2013: 889). Furthermore, schools are organizations that establish what Connell (1987: 120; 2002: 53) terms a “gender regime”. These regimes work to maintain existing gender norms within organizations. It may be deduced that the male teachers in this situation were working within the structures of a “gender regime” (Connell, 1987: 120).

## Theme 2: gender paradox

*The paradox of gender in teaching.* The recruitment and retention of quality teachers is a challenging problem in many parts of the world (Scott *et al.*, 2001). However, a strange paradox hangs over the Irish schooling system. The Republic of Ireland, unlike many countries, has no difficulty in recruiting pre-service teachers at all levels of the education system. The belief that Ireland is “fortunate in maintaining a high calibre teaching force that still attracts high quality candidates” (Coolahan, 2013: 16) has resulted in the failure to address issues of gender imbalance within the workforce. Consequently, little is known about those who enter teaching education in the Republic of Ireland (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 93; Clarke, 2009: 168). This has resulted in a failure to consider the lack of diversity within the teaching population as a possible drawback to the needs of a changing Irish societal landscape and a more diverse pupil population. Although gender is a key dimension of entrance to primary school teaching throughout Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, only a limited amount of research exists internationally concerning the background characteristics of the students who choose teaching as their future career (Aksu *et al.*, 2010; Clarke, 2009).

Irish education has experienced many policy changes during the generations, many of the policy ideas have been allowed to drift (Coolahan, 2013). The Irish governments response to the OECD study *Attracting Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* (2002–2004) noted that “there have not been major policy concerns regarding the recruitment, selecting and assigning of teachers” (Coolahan, 2003a, b: 54) and “the issues of teacher recruitment, selection and assignment procedures have been largely uncontentious” (Coolahan, 2003a, b: 59). However, given the changes that have taken place in the Irish school system

in recent years, especially with regard to a more diverse pupil population, the relatively homogeneous body of teachers presents a challenge to an ever-evolving heterogeneous pupil population (Drudy, 2009).

Proud to reflect its involvement in European affairs, Ireland has been an enthusiastic participant in all major reviews of teachers and teacher education. However, such reviews as the OECD *Review of Irish Education* (1991) and the OECD study *Attracting Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* (2002–2004) focused primarily on the continuing professional development of teachers within the teaching continuum. However, issues of gender imbalance within the teaching workforce were not addressed. Nor, indeed, has any Irish report documented the working lives of male primary school teachers. Small-scale studies carried out by O’ Sullivan (1980) in the South of Ireland and Kelly (1980) in Ireland’s capital city, Dublin, showed that teachers were from middle-class sectors with the over-representation of teachers coming from farming backgrounds (as cited in Drudy and Lynch, 1993). As these studies were on a limited scale, there is clearly further need for research in this area (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Drudy, 2009).

*Perceptions of men working with children.* Being a teacher means being able to establish human relations with the people being taught (Connell, 1993: 63). Gender relations within a feminine environment are central to understanding masculinities in primary schools. However, as Acker (1995) observes, the influence of gender in research has been minimal, noting that “there is a small literature making problematic gender issues” for men who teach at primary level (Acker, 1995: 106, as cited in Skelton, 2001: 125). Similarly, Skelton (2001) remarks that diversity “among male teachers has yet to be taken into account” (125; italics in original). This may be due to the fact that our culture defines the public realm as masculine and superior. The private realm, “the realm of the moral voice of care and connection” (Hekman, 2005: 125), is considered feminine and is subject to hegemonic power. The separation of public and private worlds, whereby schooling falls into the public domain and care falls under the private domain, marks discussion about men, sexuality and children as “cloaked in silence” (King, 1998: 119). Connell notes that gender relations involve the “structuring of social practice around sex and sexuality” (Connell, 1987: 245). Indeed, gender “involves a specific relationship with bodies” in which “our social conduct *does something* with reproductive difference” (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 11). This is clearly illustrated when adult behaviours, such as patting and hugging, are deemed feminine until they are performed by men. Then they are marked as “conspicuous” (King, 1998: 137). “There is something about the combination of children and men and a caring environment which is seen ... as outlandish to the point of being a risk” (Cameron *et al.*, 1999: 132, as cited in Skelton, 2001: 158). As a result, part of the construction of male teacher identities is an awareness of how others perceive male teachers and care (King, 1998: 139).

### Key findings

- Many concealed barriers exist for male schoolteachers, inside and outside the school.
- Male schoolteachers receive praise from colleagues and parents for their minority status in schools.
- Male schoolteachers must negotiate and navigate their masculinity in a fashion acceptable to those who evaluate them.
- The staffroom is a lonely and isolating place for male schoolteachers to be in.

- A division of conversation exists in staffroom conversations.
- Hegemonic masculinities sustain a number of professional male relationships by compliance and marginalization.
- Male schoolteachers are often asked to perform gender-specific tasks. These tasks have in the past included “chasing a dog from the yard”, “removing a dead bird by the school gates”, “fetching a ball from a stream” and “planting flowers in the school garden”.
- Acts of caring such as hugging and touching can be risky behaviours for male teachers.
- Teaching is built on a philosophy of care that is in contrast to dominant definitions of masculinities.
- The issue of gender imbalance within the teaching workforce is not a policy concern in Ireland.
- Gender relations within a feminine environment are central to understanding masculinities in primary schools.

### Conclusion

Teaching has become “a mostly female occupation” due to patterns in “the economic policy of education administration, beliefs about the nature of women and patriarchal control” (Drudy, 2009: 155). This article aims to provide readers with an insight into the professional lives of five Irish male primary school teachers. The overall theme running through all interviews is summed up succinctly in five words by Darren, “It’s a lonely profession overall”. A study of gender, and especially male schoolteachers, is essential if we are to tackle the question of teaching as a feminized profession (Skelton, 2006). The construction of teaching as a gender-inscribed social performance generates both concern for male schoolteachers and encourages gender conformity, as the nature of interactions within the school comes under scrutiny. Men who do not align themselves with dominant hegemonic masculinities are believed to have adopted traditionally ascribed feminine values such as emotionality, intimacy and sentimentality. Such stereotypes, Kimmel (2013) suggests, coupled with low occupational prestige and reduced pay, not only discourages men from entering the teaching profession but also ensures that teaching becomes more densely populated by female teachers. It is in the interest of both men and women to work together to improve the arrangements between the sexes (Whitehead, 2002).

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### Data availability

Transcripts, audio recordings and field notes were generated and analysed during the current study. These datasets are not publicly available due to potential compromises in participant confidentiality. Select sections of field notes are, however, available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Additional information

**Competing interests:** The author declares no competing financial interests.

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**How to cite this article:** O’Keeffe S (2016). What are male teachers’ understandings of masculinities?—an exploration of sex, gender and bodies in Irish primary schools. *Palgrave Communications*. 2:16007 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.7.



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