

Challenging essentialist beliefs about teacher gender: An exploration of male primary teachers' classroom discourse

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Essentialist gendered paradigms argue that there are differences between the traits women and men possess caused naturally by biological sex. Such principles are often inaccurate, and have led to discriminatory attitudes, which is when essentialism becomes potentially damaging. The view that women and men behave 'differently' because of their biology presents a naturalist view that is dangerous. This is a salient political issue with global applicability across different geopolitical landscapes. Although what is seen to be 'suitable' behaviours for both sexes is often subject to socio-cultural variation dependent on geographical location (Humbert, van den Brink, and Kelan 2018), what is globally consistent is that gender politics is closely linked to cultural ideologies, and this in turn is often tied to primary school teaching being marked for gender. People associate the term 'primary school teacher' with 'women's' work (Thornton 2006).

The different skills and characteristics attributed maintain the patriarchal status quo, that gender inequality is 'natural', and that men are natural leaders and women born followers. Such worldwide beliefs are utilised to justify occupational segregation by sex, and gender inequalities within the workplace. Such 'differences' are often marked by language. Due to gender stereotyping and the marked linguistic term of 'primary school teaching', men often report feeling deterred from entering what society deems as 'women's work'. This trend is evident in countries worldwide (McDowell and Klattenberg 2018; McDowell, Klattenberg & Lenz 2021; Bhana and Moosa 2016; Cruickshank et al. 2018). So, the problem persists that too few men enter primary school teaching due to essentialist gendered beliefs about the job itself (that is only suitable for those with female characteristics).

This paper aims to tackle stereotypes of essential gendered behaviour which have led to certain discriminatory beliefs about one gendered occupation in particular; primary school teaching. Twelve teachers (6 male, 6 female) in 3 U.K. primary schools video recorded their classroom teaching for 2 full days, collecting over 150 hours of classroom discourse. This data was transcribed and then analysed qualitatively using the theory of Interactional Sociolinguistics within a social constructionist framework to code the various strategies these teachers employ when performing classroom management. NVivo 12 software was used to store and collate the data analysis.

This paper outlines key empirical findings from this applied discursive analysis of male and female teachers' classroom discourse to shift how we think about the performance of this profession as gendered to gender neutral to change our cognitive representations of the occupation as a 'feminine' one. Such data can act as an aid in challenging persistent gender essentialist beliefs that have led to bias about certain jobs and the people we think are suitable to perform them.

References

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