

The 'brave' man in the early years (0-8): the ambiguities of the 'role model'

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ABSTRACT

The call for more 'brave' male teachers (Plowden, 1967: 64) remains prevalent in current educational discourse as boys' underachievement and their behaviour continues to dominate the education agenda. In an attempt to address these issues, there appears to be a recognised need, backed by government policy, educationalists and public discourse, for more men to enter the early years (0-8) profession and act as 'role models'. This paper reports on the ambiguous nature of this as a term by presenting select findings from the author's doctoral research which set out to critically examine the notion of the role model. By investigating the thoughts and perceptions of men who work with children across the 0-8 sector, data generated from the research suggests that there is a general lack of consensus with regard to how the 'role model' is actually defined, that role models can be female as well as being male, and that there is an unreported negative impact that role models can have on children's lives.

INTRODUCTION

There are many local, national and international expressions of concern, proliferated by moral panic and media scare stories, with regard to boys' levels of academic achievement compared to that of girls. In an effort to close the 'gender [attainment] gap' (Carrington *et al.* 2007: 397) a number of concerted local authority and government campaigns have been realised (Watson, 2010), coupled with institutional recruitment drives in both the United Kingdom (UK) (TDA, 2008) and abroad, urging more 'brave' men to work with children in the early years (0-5) and primary school sectors (5-11). In recent years it has become generally accepted that male practitioners/teachers are not only of benefit to boys' schooling but also because they [boys] are considered to be at a disadvantage due to a dearth of male presence in their lives (Johannesson, 2004). With rising numbers of children experiencing a breakdown of the traditional family unit and growing up in single parent families, there is increased calling from Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) (cited in Ward, 2009) and the UK government (cited in Holley, 2010) to redeem the concomitant shortage of men who work in early years settings and primary schools – McNamara *et al.* (2008) cite the figures of 2% and 13% respectively – so to counteract the negative process of 'feminization'

of learning and teaching in settings/schools and thus raise academic motivation, behaviour, engagement and attainment levels of boys by acting as 'strong male role models' (Parkin, 2009: 6). It is this notion of 'role model' to which this research paper focuses its attention.

This paper serves to report select research findings from a doctoral Work Based Project (WBP) which set out to critically examine the complexities of the 'role model' rhetoric. In particular, it presents a critical exploration of the term 'role model', examining definitions in literature which have attempted to offer clarity and precision to a term which is freely used in educational and public discourse yet is one which is '...multi-faceted, ambivalent and often difficult to understand and interpret' (Biskup and Pfister, 1999: 204); indeed, this sentiment of uncertainty resonates through the responses of those interviewed as part of Sargent's (2000) study of the lives of male elementary teachers in the United States (US):

Whenever I asked for clarification on the concept of male role model, the men would typically ask me to define what I meant by the term...the concept is so uncritically embedded in their discourse that they do not feel it needs any explanation (p421).

To initiate an exploration of this topic of discussion this paper will present a critical review of literature which focuses primarily on the concept of 'role model' and definitions of the term.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of 'role model'

The concept of 'role model' is rooted deep in role theory (Merton, 1957) which makes the assumption that people define roles for themselves and others based on social learning and reading. The importance of the role model plays a large part in the socialization process described by Bandura (1986), whose social learning theory claims that we learn about others' attitudes, values and beliefs and eventually come to our own as a result of observing and experiencing the behaviour of others. Thus, if the 'active model' (in this case the practitioner/teacher) shares characteristics such as 'sexuality and religion' (Skelton, 2003: 196), along with 'gender, age, race and/or social location' (Bricheno *et al.* 2007: 384) with the passive modeller (in this case the child) it is believed that the passive modeller is more likely to emulate the active model because of their shared characteristics. Ashley (2002: 1) articulates this within an educational context in what he refers to as 'crude, common sense' terms:

If boys see men reading books and doing lots of neat writing, then boys will avidly read books and produce volumes of neat writing.

Whilst the outcomes of this active process are in no means predetermined – 'we may be both attracted or repelled by what we observe and experience but we do learn from it and we

individually construct our own behaviour in the light of it' (Bricheno *et al.* 2007: 384) – patterns linked to gender support the notion that male role models are likely to be influential to boys, particularly as, traditionally, boys model themselves on their fathers (Lamb, 1987; Dryler, 1998). This is supported by Willis (1990, cited in Odih, 2002: 95) who is insistent that 'only a man can teach a boy how to be a man' and reinforces nationalistic sentiments expressed during and after the First World War: 'if boys were to become 'real' men they must be taught by men, men are thus seen as essential for boys' (Smedley, 2007: 308). However, I support the views of Skelton (2003) who highlights how the assumption that raising the number of male practitioners/teachers will provide boys with positive, work orientated role models is based on notions of gender which have long been challenged; that is, such strategies are underpinned by sex role socialisation theories (see Arntson *et al.* 1987) whereby masculinity and femininity are located within male and female bodies respectively. This one-dimensional, essentialist way of conceiving gender has been unsatisfactory in explaining and understanding differences between men and men and women and women (Skelton, 2003).

Sargent (2001: 127) deems the term 'male role model' to be 'standard jargon' which is rooted in sex-role theory that is 'basically a-historical, devoid of comparisons of cross-cultural gender constructions, and uncritical of the way male-female interactions construct masculinities and femininities'. Interestingly, Pepperell *et al.* (1998) claim that both concepts of role model and socialization theory are widely challenged in the literature on gender, yet, as an awareness of these theories may underpin some of the 'targeted advertising' used to recruit more men into the early years and primary school sectors, there remains a level of variance which surrounds attempts to actually define the term 'role model', mainly because efforts to understand and critically examine this term continue to be limited in both educational and political discourse. Cushman (2008) claims that this is largely as a result of academic researchers tending to focus on the concomitant debate of the robustness of links between underachievement, behavioural issues and the lack of male presence in schools and settings. It is this 'level of variance' to which this *Review of Literature* will turn its attention.

Defining the term 'role model'

Wolfendale (1989: 11) argues that attempts to define educational concepts of this nature are notoriously fraught with difficulties because we bring '...different experiences, expectations, observations and knowledge' to the terms being used. Sargent (2001: 118) supports this, acknowledging that the concept of role model has a diversity of meanings attached to it due to its common usage in educational and popular literature. Indeed, Jones (2008: 701) suggests that definitions of the male role model are not explicitly articulated within public discourse; therefore 'the role is characterized by complexity'. It is interesting to note that personal efforts to locate definitions of the term 'role model' in academic literature yielded few to analyse; this is likely to be one of the contributing factors towards the ambiguous

nature of the role model, particularly as current policy making (TDA, 2008) continues to stress the need for role models without there being any clear indication to its meaning.

When conducting research which sought to examine children's views on role models, Bricheno *et al.* (2007: 385) used a dictionary definition of role model to drive their questionnaire: 'namely a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like'. This mirrors thinking in the definition set by Vescio *et al.* (2004: 2) which defines a role model as being someone 'to imitate...be like' and who is 'perceived as exemplary and worthy'. The notion of emulation is strong in both of these definitions, and is also evident in the work of Allen (2000) who presents a number of different definitions of the role model, initially describing it as 'an ethical template for the exercise of adult responsibilities'. Whilst the gender of the adult is not specified, one may speculate as to whether *all* practitioners/teachers can be considered as role models. Indeed, this is an interesting notion, and is one which I advocate, for it challenges widely accepted views of the role model as being male, particularly as little published research positively advocates 'the woman' as being a role model (Burn, 2002), largely due to the fact that in educational discourse women are largely presented as being less competent than their male counterparts (Drudy, 2008).

The essence of 'woman' is clearly evident in Allen's (2000) second definition which defines the role model as being a 'nurturer providing educational services'. Whilst King (1998: 2) regards this nurturing quality as being one of the 'privileged attributes in primary schooling contexts', it is, along with caring, construed by public perception as being attributed to 'women's work' (Sarler, 2009). Younge (2002, cited in Carrington *et al.* 2003: 258), on the other hand, avoids gendered assumptions by defining the role model as being 'meaningful, accessible, honest and rounded'. This supports the thinking of Hutchings *et al.* (2007) who highlight how it is not necessarily the gender of the person which is the role model, but more the characteristics and qualities that they emulate. Unfortunately, policy making and media discourse provides little clarity as to what these traits/attributes actually are, offering more of a presumption that these are already known. Carrington *et al.* (2003) add to this confusion by questioning whether the male teacher as a role model is expected to model qualities linked to being a good male person or a good male teacher; this is a sentiment shared by Cameron *et al.* (1999: 163) when considering what male childcare workers are meant to be modelling. Ashley (2001) focuses his thoughts more to qualities linked to being a good male person, suggesting that a male practitioner/teacher is a role model because he shows men to be caring, nurturing and who have a "feminine" side, qualities which from personal experience are of paramount importance to anyone working with young children. This, however, is challenged by Burn (2002) who argues that the man is a role model because he can demonstrate hegemonic masculine traits common to a specific culture. Attempts to explore the qualities of a good male teacher have been made by Skelton (2002) who suggests that the male is a role model because he has a part to play in fostering positive attitudes to study amongst boys. Thornton (1999), on the other hand, believes that as role models for male pupils, male teachers can be viewed as offering very positive images of

teaching and working with children as a suitable career. There is an underlying assumption in Thornton's claim that men entering the profession will be willing, or indeed able to embrace this role model 'status'. However, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) (2002) has reported how some male teachers have become both irritated at been seen as 'special' and annoyed at being expected to be a role model, particularly as Lunenberg *et al.* (2007: 586) express 'serious doubts about the competences of teacher educators to serve as role models'.

Allen's (2000) final definition of a role model further exacerbates the difficulties surrounding a shared understanding of the 'role model' by describing the model as 'a symbol of special achievement'. The dominant notion of the role model being a male practitioner/teacher is somewhat superseded as Allen (2000) refers to the 'symbol' as being popular celebrities who enjoy an apparently guided lifestyle. Thinking of this nature is not new; Erikson (1968, cited in Walker, 2007) claims that when children begin to detach themselves from family members they look to the mass media – TV, film, music, magazines – to provide role models; Fitzclarence and Hickey (2001) in fact suggest that Hollywood icons have become an important force in identity formation for young people all over the world. Walker (2007: 515), however, refutes this thinking, of which I support, on the grounds of these figures being too 'glossily distant' for them to be useful as role models:

The more famous a celebrity becomes, and the more that is known about his glamorous private life, the less similarity his life bears to that of an ordinary boy and the less point there is in trying to emulate him (p509).

For role models to be value to children, Walker (2007: 515-6) argues that 'these need to be geographically, generationally and experientially close to their own lives'. As a result, Walker (2007) shows support for the thinking of Lamb (1987) who believes that the term 'role model' refers to a relatively mundane, personally known figure from a previous generation (cited in Walker, 2007: 515). This notion mirrors the findings of Bricheno *et al.* (2007) who conclude that children clearly favour role models from their direct social environment e.g. their friends and/or relatives. Two important findings from Bricheno *et al.*'s (2007: 394) research are worthy of mention, the first being how it is highlighted that 'there was no indication that...boys and girls identified with their teachers, male or female'. The second, and most profound finding, is that 'they [the children] did not see their teachers as role models'; this supports the research findings of Biskup and Pfister's (1999) study eight years previous.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Four principle aims were developed to drive the direction of the Work Based Project, the second aim being *to explore definitions of the term 'role model' in relation to the early years (0-8)*. Whilst a number of different questions were devised to generate data in relation to each aim, only one question was formulated in relation to Aim Two:

- How do men who currently work/train in the early years (0-8) define the term 'role model'?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research conducted as part of the Work Based Project took the form of a study of men who actively train/work in the early years (0-8) in a county in the Midlands, UK. With its key focus on exploring how these men understood their roles and responsibilities as a 'role model', it was possible to place the research within the ethnographic approach as it aimed to 'understand the way people (in this case, males) in that culture (in this case, settings/schools in the early years (0-8) sector) 'see' their world' (Taber, 2007: 77).

The research followed a staged approach involving 174 questionnaires being sent to men who were training or were working *directly* with children (0-8) in a variety of roles (Stage One), a focus group interview with men who were at an *operational* level from primary school settings (Stage Two), and six individual semi-structured interviews involving men who worked across the 0-8 sector (Stage Three). The research was gathered over a one and a half year period and was collated and analysed using 'frequencies of occurrence' (Cohen *et al.* 2005: 283) (Stage One), descriptive coding analysis (Stage Two) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) (Stage Three). The presentation of results below, in the form of a concise descriptive and statistical summary (as recommended by Wilson, 2009) offers pertinent findings from Stages One and Two of the WBP in relation to the main research question presented above. Care has been taken to protect the identity of those taking part in the research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Stage One

When questionnaire respondents were asked to offer a written definition of the term 'role model' a wide range of responses were made, all varying in length and detail. A number of respondents merely offered nouns as their answer – '*Guidance and practice*' (Teacher, 3-4 yrs) – whereas others presented their definition in a dictionary-style format:

'A positive model/example of good responsible behaviour. The majority of young people I work with only have negative experiences with males/role models, they expect men to shout, hit, drink, be unreliable I have to show them otherwise'
(Learning Mentor, 4-8 yrs)

Definitions of the 'role model' were by no means gender specific; all of the definitions gave reference to the role model as either being '*someone*' (Head teacher, 5-8 yrs), '*somebody*'

(Teacher, 7-8 yrs) or 'a person' (Sports Co-ordinator, 4-8 yrs). Definitions also illustrated how the role model was perceived in a number of different ways: some gave an indication of what a role model *does* e.g. 'someone that shows attitudes for others to follow' (Trainee teacher, 4-5 yrs) whilst others defined the role model from the perspective of those who see this 'member of society' (Teacher, 5-6 yrs) as a role model, for example 'Someone to aspire to. Someone to look up to.' (Team Leader for Year Three, 7-8 yrs). During the period of data collation a number of key ideas and themes emerged from the definitions offered. These are presented in Table 1 below with a numerical indication of the number of times these were mentioned by respondents:

| Key ideas and themes relating to the role model | No. |
|--|-----|
| The notion of 'emulation'/'aspiration'/'being looked up to'/'being followed'/'being copied'/'imitated' (Head teacher, 5-6 yrs) | 42 |
| The role model demonstrating 'positive characteristics'/'traits'/'qualities'/'attitudes'/'a positive personality' (Teacher, 4-8 yrs) | 25 |
| The role model being 'well behaved' (Original mistake, Support Worker, 6-7 yrs) | 22 |
| The idea that 'you can learn bad things from a role model' (Teaching Deputy Head Teacher, 7-8 yrs) | 9 |
| A role model 'sets a good example' (Teacher, 5-6 yrs) | 8 |
| The role model 'influences lives'/'has a positive impact on lives and learning' (Nursery Nurse, 0-5 yrs) | 7 |
| The role model is able to 'give good advice' (Trainee Teacher, 4-7 yrs) | 4 |
| The role model 'spends a lot of time with others' (Teacher, 7-8 yrs) | 3 |
| Others 'seek praise from the role model' (Teaching Assistant, 7-8 yrs) | 2 |
| The role model demonstrates 'good practice' (Teacher, 6-8 yrs) | 2 |
| 'Someone who is real/normal' (Teacher, 3-4 yrs) | 1 |

TABLE 1: Table to show the frequency of ideas and themes presented by male questionnaire respondents when defining the term 'role model'.

Stage Two

When respondents of the focus group interview (FGI) were asked to define the term 'role model' definitions offered shared a similar appreciation of the notion of emulation and of others imitating exhibited qualities and characteristics:

'In its most simplest term, it's just something that you'd want children to copy... behaviours, erm ... attitudes, values, actions, words, relationships.' (Will)

'It's [a role model] kind of what you might aspire to be or what you follow.' (James)

Sentiments of the role model being human were supported by Ben who stated that *'the word 'model' suggests something active...you know...a person, a teacher for example, that is doing something which is going to be imitated.'* However, comments made by Will raised awareness to the fact that the role model could actually be an inanimate object if young children took on the role of *'Sonic'* or *'Mario'* (two popular animated computer game characters) in their play.

Whilst initial definitions presented the role model in a positive light, James countered these by suggesting that *'a role model is like an example, so it could be a good or bad role model.'* Illumination of this alluded to the idea that footballers were regarded as being bad role models for young children due to their swearing (attributed to Wayne Rooney) and incidences of deliberately kicking others (attributed to David Beckham).

Comments made later on by Ben highlighted how the concept of the role model was complex and ambiguous when one considers different interpretations of certain vocabulary and the gendered characteristics of those emulating the role model status:

'There's a distinction in being a role model and seeing 'male' in that context as just an adjective so that you're a role model who is male...or you are a male role model in the sense that you are role modelling maleness and masculinity – I'm sure there is a level of confusion over that.' (Ben)

'...is it enough that you're male in a school – are you automatically a male role model? Is it just to do with sex or is to do...is it more of a gender thing to do with your behaviour?' (James)

DISCUSSION

Hutchings (2005: 3) argues that the notion of the role model is 'somewhat fuzzy'; this is supported by my research findings as over seventy different definitions of the term 'role model' all demonstrated variance in terms of their length, clarity, meaning and understanding. For example, the definition *'Guidance and practice'* (Teacher, 3-4 yrs, Stage One) merely presents two nouns for the reader to interpret. Whilst it is possible to establish that a role model *does* something e.g. offers guidance to others, a level of confusion ensues as it is unclear as to what kind of 'guidance' the role model is meant to offer and what exactly the role model is meant to 'practice'. Other definitions from Stage One attempt to offer some clarity to the definition above by defining the role model as someone who is able to *'give good advice'* (Trainee Teacher, 4-7 yrs) and demonstrates *'good practice'* (Teacher, 6-8 yrs). These examples, however, only exacerbate issues of interpretation as no information is forthcoming to substantiate what specific 'advice' the role model is meant to give and how it is known that the advice and practice being given is indeed 'good'; one may also question whether it is the role model or the person receiving the advice and practice who perceives

that it is 'good'. These various interpretations support Jones' (2006) argument that there is a lack of general consensus about what a role model is and how it is defined. There are, however, a number of shared themes and ideas present in the definitions of the role model gathered from my research, many of which will be explored below.

In Bricheno *et al.*'s (2007: 385) research a dictionary definition was used: 'namely a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like'. A large number of Stage One definitions mirror sentiments contained within Bricheno *et al.*'s definition, with the notion of being 'followed', 'looked up to' and 'emulation' being the most prominent ideas evident in respondents' thinking (see Table 1, page 7). It is interesting that the notion of 'respect' was not considered by Stage One respondents as a way in which the role model is regarded by others; instead, when asked to identify the five most important quality/characteristics for role models to emulate to others later on in the questionnaire, respondents identified being 'respectful' as the fourth most important quality/characteristic. This raises an important consideration when defining the term 'role model' as it is unclear as to whether definitions should specify how others *respond* to the role model, for example '*copy/imitate*' them (Teaching Assistant, 7-8 years, Stage One), or detail the qualities and characteristics that the role model *exhibits* (Hutchings *et al.* 2007). Whilst my research supports both of these assertions it is evident that the majority of Stage One respondents define a role model based on how others respond to the model:

A person other people imitate so they can be like them (Teaching Assistant, 7-8 yrs)

Someone who is viewed by others as a positive example (Teacher, 5-6 yrs)

These examples offer support of Vescio *et al.*'s (2004: 2) definition of a role model as being someone 'to imitate...to be like' and who is 'exemplary and worthy'. There is, however, no evidence in my findings which support Allen's (2000) definition of a role model as being a 'symbol of special achievement' as there is no suggestion that respondents associate 'role model' with one's endeavours; a definition from Stage One actually defines the role model as being '*someone who is real/normal*' (Teacher, 3-4 yrs) which would suggest that *all* people have the potential of being a role model. This is supported by the Civil Service Disability Network (CSDN) (2010) who states that 'anyone...can be considered a "role model"'; this assertion is also validated by findings which relate to the idea of the role model not being gender specific. In Shapiro *et al.*'s (1978) definition the role model is referred to as 'an individual' (cited in Singh *et al.* 2006); all of the definitions offered in my research make use of the words '*someone*' (Head teacher, 5-8 yrs), '*somebody*' (Teacher, 7-8 yrs) or '*a person*' (Sports Co-ordinator, 4-8 yrs,/Ben, Stage Two) to describe the role model. With a lack of gender reference I emphasise a point previously argued which advocates that both genders could be considered to be role models; this challenges much debate about 'role model angst' (Ashley *et al.* 2003: 258) in education as the term 'male role model' is used with little consideration being given to the presence and value of female role models in educational settings.

As has been previously established, a strong sense of emulation and imitation of the role model is evident in definitions offered by Stage One respondents, examples of which are offered below:

Some one to look up to in a positive way and aspire to be like in some or many ways (original mistake, Teacher, 7-8 yrs)

A person that is worthy of imitation; someone who serves as an example whose behaviour is emulated by others (Teacher, 5-6 yrs)

These examples support the definition of a role model offered by The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English (2009) which states that a role model is 'a person looked to by others as an example to be imitated'. What all of these definitions neglect to offer is an idea as to what *specifically* is to be imitated. It is of interest, therefore, to note that certain findings from my research help to extend these definitions by proposing a list of attributes of the role model which '*you'd want children to copy...behaviours, erm...attitudes, values, actions, words, relationships.*' (Will, Stage Two). Will's comments infer that these are positive in nature as they are attributes that '*you'd want children to copy*'; indeed, this is supported by Stage One findings as respondents defined the role model as demonstrating '*positive characteristics*' (Class teacher, 5-8 yrs), '*positive traits*' (Class teacher, 4-5 yrs) and '*positive attitudes*' (Teaching Deputy Head, 6-7 yrs). This perception of positivity, however, is countered by definitions which suggest that '*you can learn bad things from a role model*' (Teaching Deputy Head, 7-8yrs):

Someone you learn behaviours/habits from, good and bad. (Teacher, 3-4 yrs)

Someone who has an effect (positive/negative) on their behaviour/or personality/morals (short term/long term). (Teaching Deputy Head, 7-8 yrs)

My research extends Nauta & Kokaly's (2001) definition of role models 'hav[ing] an impact on another' (cited in Schroeter, 2010) by suggesting that role models can have a *negative* impact on the lives of children, a view that is seemingly devoid in educational communities and the broader society as within these arenas as it is advocated that more male role models will have a positive effect on boys' lives. My research findings, therefore, offer some challenge to 'taken-for-granted beliefs' (Carrington *et al.* 2007: 398) of the benefits of male role models for children as the definitions above suggest that role models can have a negative effect on children's personalities, morals and behaviours. This assertion is supported when one considers the swearing and 'kicking' behaviours of footballers, as highlighted in Stage Two findings; even though footballers were seen as role models for boys by nearly 80% of Stage One respondents and by children themselves (Ashley, 2002), some of their behaviours can be considered as being inappropriate and unsuitable for young

children to emulate (Ross, 2010). I thus argue that role models can be defined as having both a positive and negative effect on children's lives.

Reference to the notion of behaviour is evident in many of the definitions offered from Stage One findings which supports the Chambers Dictionary (1998) definition of a role model being 'a person whose behaviour etc. is imitated by others...'. Definitions offered particularly by respondents working in the 5-8 yrs sector give explicit reference to the role model modelling 'good behaviour' (Class teacher, 7-8 yrs) which suggests that the behaviours exhibited by the role model are of significance; indeed, one definition offered by a Teaching Assistant (5-6 yrs) stated that the behaviours of the role model 'determine whether they are seen as a role model or not'. Sentiments of these behaviours being 'appropriate', 'responsible' and 'good' (Stage One) offer some support to Carrington *et al.* (2003: 255) as they question whether the term 'role model' 'is taken to mean a representation of a law-abiding member of society'. However, as examples of these behaviours are not explicitly identified in the large majority of definitions offered in my research, there remains a lack of clarity with regard to what kind of behaviours are being referred to – those behaviours associated with the modelling of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; 2002), 'counter-hegemonic behaviours' (Hutchings *et al.* 2007: 137), behaviours associated with being a good educator (Carrington *et al.* 2003) or as a good person (Ashley, 2001). Clearly this highlights the complexities of defining the term 'role model' as different ways of interpreting the word 'behaviour' determines the kinds of behaviours the role model is meant to emulate. This variety of different behaviours is, however, evident in a small number of Stage One definitions, examples of which are offered below:

Someone who tries to nurture and extend dignity, courtesy, and respect to all, who dresses reasonably smartly, shows good humour, and shows that it isn't unmanly to appreciate art, music and beauty as well as sports and traditional mens pursuits such as being competitive. (original mistakes, Teaching Assistant, 3-4 yrs)

I would define it [role model] as someone who demonstrates consistently a set of appropriate behaviours that build confidence and belief and socially desirable attitudes, i.e. does not hit or shout but listens and is kind, sensitive and tolerant. (Teacher, 4-5 yrs)

These definitions raise several interesting points for discussion. For example, both of these definitions define a role model as being someone who emulates a combination of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic behaviours. Whilst there is clear reference to activities in these definitions which are considered to be masculine, such as sports and competitiveness (Connell, 1995; 2002), mention is also given to interests, activities and qualities which are perceived to be feminine in nature (Balchin, 2002) such as beauty, art, and being a listener and kind. This mixture of male and female traits being demonstrated by the role model helps to validate Jones' (2007: 190) notion of the 'millennium man', one who '...is constructed...by

partial discourses of traditional masculinity, fused with more progressive discourses...[of] sensitiv[ity] and caring'. These definitions from my research also support Salisbury *et al.*'s (1996) assertion that there should be more male practitioners/teachers who can display a range of masculinities for children; indeed, no definitions offered from Stage One or Two solely advocated the promotion of traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. It is also interesting to note the use of the word 'nurture' in the first definition offered on page 11. Whilst the idea of nurturing is construed by public perception as being attributed to 'women's work' (King, 1998: 2), it is evident, particularly in definitions by men who work in the 0-5 sector where good practice advocates that practitioners nurture young children (DCSF, 2008), that the role model is defined as someone who nurtures children:

A role model is someone that nurtures and helps kids. They'll be in regular contact with the kids and they will learn how to behave from them (original mistake, Nursery Nurse, 1-5 yrs)

A role model is a person who nurtures children – they imitate their behaviour and opinions, thus they are somebody for the children to 'look up to'. i.e. I want to be like that because! (Teacher, 3-4 yrs)

These definitions support the work of Allen (2000) who defines the role model as being 'a nurturer providing educational services'. However, there is little evidence to support the notion of the role model being seen as a nurturer of children in primary classrooms (5-8 yrs); my findings suggest that those working with children aged 5-8 define the role model by their good behaviour; this is likely to be as a result of the continuous pressure on schools and teachers to improve pupil behaviour (Steer, 2010).

CONCLUSION

A critical exploration of definitions of the term 'role model' from literature and primary research highlights a general lack of consensus as to how the term is defined, particularly when one considers the role model's 'behaviours'. Whilst there are shared sentiments of the role model being emulated, copied and imitated, it is argued that role models can be defined as having negative impact on those who 'look up' to them, a sentiment which is seemingly devoid in policy making. My research suggests that everyone, irrespective of their gender, can be defined as a role model depending on their ability to model both 'natural' masculine and feminine traits; this challenges the idea of the role model as necessarily being 'male'. It has also been highlighted that definitions of the role model differ when taking the age of children the model is working with into consideration: role models in the 0-5 yrs sector are likely to be defined as a nurturer; in the 5-8 yrs sector the role model is more likely to be defined by their 'good behaviour'. This suggests that definitions of the role model are defined by context, situation and expectations.

NOTE: Please see Chapter 9: *WHERE ARE THE MEN? A Critical Discussion of Male Absence in the Early Years* by Guy Roberts-Holmes and Simon Brownhill which will be appearing in the following book in November 2010:

Miller, L. & Cable, C. (eds) (2010) *Professionalization, Leadership and Management in the Early Years*. London: Sage Publications.

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