

Appropriate physical contact: The alignment of policy and male primary teacher perceptions

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Young children often seek acceptance and warmth from their teachers in the form of physical contact. However, this expectation can create fear and uncertainty for male teachers who are unsure of what is, and is not, appropriate physical contact for a man to make with their young students. This paper builds on previous research by ascertaining male primary teachers' perceptions of when it is appropriate for them to make physical contact with their students and examining the alignment of these perceptions with relevant policy guidelines. Findings suggest that policy documents may need more specific clarity about what is and is not acceptable physical contact for teachers to make with their students. The comparison of perceptions and policy can provide important insights into male primary teachers' knowledge of appropriate physical contact and could be used to inform coping strategies to help them persist in the teaching profession.

Introduction

Fear and uncertainty surrounding physical contact can be a difficult challenge for male primary teachers. Young children often seek acceptance and warmth from their teachers in the form of physical contact (Smith, 2008), however numerous studies (e.g., Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015; Cruickshank, Pedersen, Cooley & Hill, 2018; Reid et al., 2019) have found that male primary teachers are not comfortable with this expectation. This discomfort stems from their perceptions that actions such as hugging a distressed or injured child are acceptable for their female colleagues, but not necessarily acceptable for them. Previous research (e.g., Gosse, 2011) has specifically noted male primary teachers (N=223) who were very reluctant to interact with their students in ways they believed many women would consider accepted behaviour for nurturing their young pupils. Similarly, studies such as Palmer et al. (2019) and Sargent (2000) found that male primary teachers were not comfortable being tactile (e.g. hugging a distressed child), but used "compensatory activities" (Sargent, 2000, p. 425) to develop relationships with their students without using the same level of physical contact as their female colleagues. Compensatory activities can be defined as "strategic attempts to offset the lack of touching and closeness in the classroom" (Sargent, 2000, p. 427), and include low-level non-intrusive physical contact, such as handshakes and high fives. Female teachers are also likely to include handshakes and high fives in their classroom practice, yet, the previous research described above suggests male teachers could be using these strategies because they perceived other more tactile strategies were too risky for them to use.

Male primary teachers are highly aware of the dangers of making physical contact with their students. Studies (e.g., Ashcraft & Sevier 2006; Cushman, 2005; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004) have noted men who were very fearful of being accused of making inappropriate physical contact, and consequently, choose not to make any physical contact with their students, to reduce the chance of such an accusation. This strategy could work

for some men, but does not align with other research (e.g., Ashley & Lee, 2003; Cushman, 2008; White, 2011) that found evidence of schools wanting males to display behaviours that demonstrated that they had a caring ‘feminine’ side. Eleven of the principals in Cushman’s New Zealand study stated that it was important for male teachers to deconstruct stereotypes by being caring, talking about feelings and showing emotions. The breadth of opinion in these and other studies highlight the assistance that male teachers require in developing strategies to deal with challenges surrounding making physical contact with their students.

Male primary teachers have reported that they are unsure of what is, and is not, appropriate physical contact for a man to make with his young students. This fear and uncertainty could contribute to men choosing to leave the teaching profession and choosing not to become teachers in the first place (Cruickshank, 2016; Cushman, 2007; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006). Identifying coping strategies to help male teachers deal with the fear and uncertainty they experience around physical contact is a vital step in stopping their declining numbers (Cruickshank, 2019a, McGrath & van Bergen, 2017) in primary school classrooms. This decline is problematic considering calls from policy makers (e.g., Martin & Marsh, 2005), parents and school leaders (e.g., Cushman, 2008) and statutory authorities (e.g., Weldon, 2015) for a greater number of male teachers in primary schools.

Additionally, previous research (e.g., Cushman, 2005) has found that the fear and uncertainty male teachers experienced in relation to physical contact can be exacerbated by a lack of knowledge and understanding related to policy. Cushman noted that few schools have detailed physical contact policies to assist new teachers, particularly male, to know where to set their boundaries in relation to physical contact. She also stated that when schools do give direction on this topic, this advice is often followed by males and ignored by females. This paper attempts to build on previous research in this area by ascertaining male primary teachers’ perceptions of when it is appropriate for them to make physical contact with their students, and examining the alignment of these perceptions with relevant policy guidelines. The comparison of perceptions and policy will provide important insights into male primary teachers’ knowledge of appropriate physical contact and could be used to inform coping strategies to help them persist in the teaching profession.

The present study

It is important to acknowledge that the participants in this study were all working in non-government schools. Therefore, these findings are not claiming to be representative of male teachers working in government primary schools. The non-government schools participants worked in were all affiliated to a denomination of Christianity, predominantly Catholic. Private Christian schools are strongly focused on the ‘pastoral care’ of their students. The term ‘pastoral care’ originated in Jesus’ image as the Good Shepherd who takes care of his flock, and emphasises care for, and growth of, the whole person (Catholic Schools Tasmania, 2014). This focus on pastoral care is aimed at nurturing and enhancing the personal, social, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing of

students in order to develop them as Christian men and women (St Mary's Catholic Primary School, 2018).

One of the key elements of pastoral care is the development and nurturing of quality relationships within school communities (Catholic Schools Tasmania, 2014). There are numerous strategies teachers can use to build positive relationships with their students, yet, the use of physical contact is common for teachers developing rapport with young children, particularly when these children are injured or upset (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Johansson, Hedlin & Aberg, 2018). This situation can create a challenge for male teachers in Christian primary schools who are expected to develop strong relationships with their young students, but do not feel comfortable using physical contact. This discomfort could also have been added to by the findings of the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The final report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) stated that 94% of perpetrators were male, predominantly priests and teachers. Additionally, 59% of survivors stated that they were abused in an institution managed by a religious organisation. While participants in this study are unlikely to be personally involved with this Royal Commission, it is important to acknowledge that it may have resulted in an increased awareness and heightened scrutiny of the actions of men in schools.

Method

Participants

A total of 175 Tasmanian male primary teachers were invited to respond to an online survey containing open ended questions focused on their perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate physical contact with their students. 57 accessed the survey, of which 53 (mean age = 37.82, $SD = 10.44$) completed it. This number represents 30.3% of the identified population. Demographic details can be seen in Table 1. Interview participants were chosen from amongst the participants who self-nominated at the end of the survey and contacted by email. The interview participants ($n=5$) were purposively sampled from those that self-nominated at the end of the online survey ($N=18$) to ensure a variety of ages, schools, years of experience and geographical locations.

Table 1: Survey participant demographic characteristics ($N=53$)

Age	n	Experience	n	No. men teachers in school	n	Principal	n	Parent	n	1st career	n
21-40	36	0-5 years	12	1	7	Male	26	Yes	34	Yes	32
41+	17	6+ years	41	2+	46	Female	27	No	19	No	21

Procedures

Survey participants were contacted through their school principals and invited to fill out the online survey (Appendix A). Participants were required to provide consent before they

could access the open-ended survey items, and all responses collected during August and September 2015 were anonymous. This study was approved by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: H12257). The survey data collected and analysed was used to construct the guiding interview questions around participants' perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate physical contact with their students. All interview participants were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes in June 2016. Interview participants chose, or were provided with the pseudonyms Fenton, Fred, Harry, James and Steve.

The guiding questions for these interviews were designed to allow participants the opportunity to describe their perceptions of the factors that lead to physical contact with their students being acceptable or unacceptable in different contexts. The direction of the interview was led primarily by the experiences and views shared by the participant, and all interviews were audio-recorded. After the interviews were transcribed, clarifying questions were added via track changes before the transcripts were returned to participants to check for accuracy and add additional explanatory information if required. All interview participants added clarification and additional material to these questions using track changes before sending the document back. Member checking is an important strategy for minimising researcher bias (Berger, 2015), and was undertaken to try and ensure that the collection and representation of data was done in a way that authentically represented the voices of participants.

Qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions were initially coded line by line into key themes in both an inductive and deductive manner before being consolidated into themes for discussion. The same process was followed for the analysis of interview data. These themes were modified and refined through the data analysis process (Dagkas, Benn & Jawad 2011). The findings presented below utilised excerpts from the open-ended survey responses and the verbal responses of interview participants. These data are presented together in an attempt to present a more informed picture of participants' perceptions of the factors that influence the appropriateness of making physical contact with their students. All coding and analysis was done using the *NVivo* software package (Version 10).

Policy review

Initially this review focussed on the policies of the Tasmanian Catholic Education Office (TCEO) and Christian Schools Tasmania (CST), because participants were employed in these sectors. Due to a lack of information in these Tasmanian policies, further policies from around Australia were accessed via organisation websites. While I did not expect that a male teacher in a Tasmanian catholic school to follow, or probably even look at, the policy of, for example, the South Australian Department of Education; I was interested in whether these policies could assist male primary teachers by detailing strategies that potentially they could use in their schools, in situations where the directions in their own physical contact policy documents were vague or non-existent. In all, 14 policies and teacher code of conduct documents were reviewed. This review included policies from all six Australian states, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. Both

government and non-government policies were reviewed, as well as the policies of organisations such as Edmund Rice, who govern numerous Australian Catholic schools. The 14 reviewed policies are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Reviewed physical contact policies

Organisation	State	Policy
Edmund Rice Education Australia	All	Code of conduct
Australian Jesuit Province	All	Principles, protocols and standards of practice
Dept of Education and Training	ACT	Code of professional practice
Department of Education	NSW	Professional responsibilities
Catholic Education Wollongong	NSW	Code of conduct
Teachers Registration Board	NT	Protective practices
Catholic Education Brisbane	Qld	Code of conduct
Catholic Education South Australia	SA	Code of conduct
Dept of Education and Child Services	SA	Protective practices
Catholic Education Commission	Tas	Code of conduct
Christian Schools Tasmania	Tas	Code of conduct
Department of Education	Tas	Conduct and behaviour standards
Victorian Institute of Teaching	Vic	Code of conduct
Department of Education	WA	Code of conduct

It is important to note that this policy review was undertaken during the data analysis phase of this study. The survey did not contain any questions specifically relating to the policies subsequently analysed and the researchers did not ask any policy related questions during the interviews. The purpose of this paper is to use the survey and interview data, in light of the subsequent policy review to see how what policy says aligns with the participants' views. This comparison is important as it might reveal gaps in participants' knowledge of appropriate physical contact and areas in which policy wording could be used to inform coping strategies for men dealing with challenges surrounding making physical contact with their students.

The structure of the following findings and discussion section has been influenced by a similar policy review conducted by Cushman (2005), who reviewed the New Zealand Educational Institute's *Code of Practice*. Cushman concluded that "appropriate contact situations" (p. 235) were limited to those involved in physical restraint, first aid and physical education. These three contexts have been used as part of a framework for this section, which includes a review of policy wording, and relevant data from participants detailing their perceptions of policy and its impact on their practice. These data sources are compared to show that most participant perceptions do align with policy directives in these 'appropriate contact situations'. Other situations not identified by Cushman but referred to by policy and or participants will also be examined.

Findings and discussion

Physical restraint

Student safety and wellbeing is a key priority for teachers and a key aspect of pastoral care. Consequently, participants in this study indicated they believed it was appropriate for them to make physical contact to protect themselves and others from harm. Many participants described how they had, and would continue to separate students who were fighting or physically endangering themselves or others. For example:

If I have a child who has been misbehaving or I might need to restrain, planning ahead is a big thing for me to ensure that if I do have to be physical there is someone else there to witness how it is done. Fortunately I haven't had too many students here who I've needed to restrain; and if I have ever had to restrain a student it has been a very minor incident. So maybe just holding their hand or something like that or putting my hand on their shoulder (James).

I have had to separate students who were fighting and have never been reprimanded for doing so. I would always attempt to stop a student hurting another student physically or otherwise (Survey Respondent 37).

I would stop students who were fighting or attempting to hurt another student. This can involve things like physically restraining them until they cool down or grabbing a students' wrist before they hit someone (Survey Respondent 44).

These and other similar comments clearly illustrated that participants believed it was appropriate for them to make physical contact to protect students from harm. These findings align with previous research such as Cruickshank (2016) and Cushman (2005). Participants indicated that the immediate safety of their students was more important to them than worrying about other people scrutinising their actions. It seemed that in potentially dangerous situations many participants made the quick decision that making physical contact was in the best interests of their students. Participants willingly made physical contact to assist their students, despite any fear and uncertainty they might have experienced. These actions aligned with the wording of relevant Tasmanian policy documents that identified physical restraint as an appropriate contact situation.

For example, the TCEO (2007) guidelines on appropriate physical contact state that physical contact is appropriate "in order to prevent harm or further harm to students, self and others" (p. 4). An interpretation of this wording suggests that teachers can physically restrain students to protect themselves or others, yet there was no specific information on how they should and should not do this. Similarly, Christian Schools Tasmania (CST) mentions physical restraint in the more detailed "physical contact with students" section of their code of conduct for teachers. They stated that physical contact is appropriate to protect students, self and others as long as the physical intervention is "proportional to the circumstances" (CST, 2015, p. 12). Even though such wording suggests a common-sense approach, it is very subjective and highly likely to change from one context to the next, depending on the strength of the student and teacher involved. This subjectivity

might make male teachers uncertain whether they would have support from leadership if they decided to take physical action in order to protect a student or themselves. The CST guidelines also contain numerous cautionary statements such as advising teachers to be mindful of the potential for touch to be misconstrued, which add further subjectivity and uncertainty. The more detailed directives the Christian Schools Tasmania guidelines contained were likely to be helpful to some male primary teachers, yet they still did not contain specific information about how a teacher should restrain a student if required.

When other physical contact policies around Australia were reviewed, it appeared that the South Australian guidelines for staff working in education settings (Government of South Australia, 2019) contained some more specific directions on how a teacher should or should not restrain a student. While all policy documents listed physical restraint as an acceptable situation to make physical contact, the 'appropriate physical contact' section of the South Australian guidelines contained a section specifically about safe practice when using physical restraint. Along with typical cautionary statements such as using "reasonable force" (p. 17), teachers are instructed to grip clothing rather than the body whenever possible, take care to avoid contact with the breasts if restraining a female, and continue talking to the child throughout the incident so they understand that physical restraint will stop as soon as it is no longer necessary. Teachers should not apply force to the head or neck, restrict breathing or hold a child by the hair or ear. These appear to be common sense directions, yet the lack of specific definitions for terms such as 'reasonable' might contribute to male primary teachers being uncertain of exactly what physical contact they can make, and fearful of making contact that others might perceive as unreasonable. It is important to note that numerous documents (e.g., Department of Education and Training, 2006; Government of Western Australia, 2011) stated that physical restraint should only be used as a 'last resort'.

Male primary teachers who are fearful of making unreasonable contact could resort to non-physical interventions to managing violent behaviour. The Government of South Australia (2019) suggested that these more verbal strategies could include directing the child to a safe place while directing other students to move away, talking to the child about the problem and what will happen if their behaviour continues, and sending for assistance from other staff when required. These guidelines do offer more specific directions than many other reviewed policies, yet questions remain. For example, teachers are given no direction on contacting the groin of either male or female students. As other body parts such as the head and breasts are specifically mentioned, the omission of this and other areas could be interpreted as implying that they can be touched during the physical restraint of a student. Teachers are unlikely to make this assumption, yet they could experience fear and uncertainty about physically restraining a student because of the lack of specific direction in policy documents.

First aid

Similar to physical restraint, situations involving first aid were also identified by most participants as being appropriate for them to make contact with their students. Steve

stated that he was willing to make physical contact that was in “the interest of the child” and said that this would include first aid. Other comments included:

I generally do not make physical contact unless it is of a first aid situation. If I need to make contact to assist a student I ensure I ask permission first and am never in a one on one environment with a student (Survey Respondent 9)

I ensure that any physical contact, due to first aid, upset or relocation is observed by a senior colleague and that it is appropriate zonal contact (Survey Respondent 13)

I have and will continue to physically assist injured students. If students are in pain I am more concerned with helping them as quickly as possible, rather than worrying about what other people would think of the physical contact I make (Survey Respondent 23).

As with situations involving physical restraint, these perceptions might have been influenced by a belief that student safety was more important than worrying about what other people might think of them making physical contact with their students. It seemed that preventing further injury to their students caused many participants in this study to disregard their self-protective mindset and make physical contact to assist their students.

Most participants indicated they would make physical contact to assist students in need of first aid, yet other participants appeared to be less willing to do this. Fenton detailed an alternative approach that involved contact only when absolutely necessary;

Fenton: If it is a cut or scrape I have given them a wipe or a *Band-Aid* etc. to use or put on but I will not actually administer that myself. In most of those cases it is really a noncontact all the time sort of situation. If someone had broken a limb and I had to carry them I would do that but I would want a female member of staff present who said, “Can you carry them please” and then escort me down to first aid. Thankfully I've never been in any life-threatening situations but if you're in a situation like that then you have to respond. There does come a point when political correctness does have to take a back seat such as if someone is drowning.

Researcher: So for you that line of actually making physical contact is almost death?

Fenton: Yes. Unless there is an absolute necessity to me to physically be involved I will stand back. I can talk, I can guide, I can hand things (Fenton).

Fenton's comments clearly indicated that he had adopted an approach that was non-contact in nearly all situations. He had developed this approach primarily for self-protection, as he was very fearful of being accused of making inappropriate physical contact with students in these situations. This finding aligns with previous research from Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015), who noted that male teachers' feel highly scrutinised so they self-surveil, and consciously avoid making physical contact with their students. Fenton's fear and resultant self-protection mindset appeared to have been a significant influence on his behaviour in situations where his student had minor injuries, but he did acknowledge that he would act and make physical contact in life-threatening situations. His reference to political correctness having to take a back seat in severe situations might

have suggested that he was uncertain if physical contact was even appropriate in these instances. Alternatively, Fenton might have been saying that he wanted to make physical contact in first aid situations but believed it was politically correct for him not to do so. Either way, it seems nonsensical for male primary teachers such as Fenton to be uncomfortable assisting injured students until their injuries become life threatening.

The majority of policies identified first aid as a situation in which it was appropriate for a teacher to make physical contact with a student. No policy wording inferred it was inappropriate to make physical contact in first aid situations, yet, policies such as the TCEO (2007) provided no direction for teachers in these situations. CST (2015) and other organisations that identified first aid as appropriate (e.g., Government of Western Australia, 2011; Northern Territory Government, 2011) stated that any physical contact for the purposes of student care must be age, maturity, and health appropriate. Teachers were advised that they should always ask permission before making physical contact with a student, and advise them of their intention to touch the specific body parts required to assess their injury. The review of all 14 policies revealed that it was appropriate for male teachers to make physical contact with students in first aid situations, if the directions described above were followed. This review indicated that participant perceptions did align with policy directives surrounding physical contact and first aid, yet, this was less clear for participants from Catholic schools.

In class demonstrations

The only subject that participants specifically referred to in relation to the appropriateness of physical contact was health and physical education. Previous research has noted that health and physical education teachers commonly use demonstrations in their pedagogical delivery (Hyndman et al., 2019). Most primary schools in Tasmania have part time specialist health and physical education teachers, but classroom teachers can be involved in these lessons:

When we go to the pool with the preps and I get in and the kids are doing star floats, I'll grab their legs and pull them apart so they can feel what the position is like. With the 2/3s I'll still get in the pool, but I might not be quite so hands-on, and by the grade 4/5/6 you're not in the pool anymore. If we are doing something like netball or soccer, I might position someone correctly and say "put your body here, kick it that way" but only if it is really necessary because they're not getting it (Steve).

I am very conscious about making any physical contact with students. If I need to make contact to assist with a physical skill, I always ask permission first and make sure there are other people around (Survey Respondent 16).

I do not get involved with gymnastics, swimming or after last year; dance. Very sad, but I have had a few problems last year with safety issues. I guided a child and was reprimanded, thus why I won't do those activities any more. I will do activities that do not require me to physically assist my students (Survey Respondent 45).

Steve's comments about physically guiding students who were uncertain of correct technique were echoed by several other participants. These comments indicated that some male primary teachers believed it was appropriate for them to make physical contact with their students to physically assist students with the correct performance of a skill or movement. The third comment above indicated that not all participants shared this belief or had positive experiences with making physical contact in physical education situations. This survey respondent gave no contextual information about how he did the guiding, student age, or whom the reprimand had come from; which made it hard to make a judgement on the appropriateness of his actions. His, and other similar comments did indicate a lack of participant consensus about the appropriateness of making physical contact during in class demonstrations.

Similar to the first aid situation, no policy wording stated or inferred it was inappropriate to make physical contact when demonstrating skills in health and physical education classes. The TCEO (2007) and CST (2015) provided no mention of these situations in their policy documents. Other states inferred the acceptability of physical contact for demonstration without directly stating it. For example, the *NSW Professional Responsibilities* (NSW Government, 2015) indicated that "If teachers physically contact students in class demonstrations, such as PE or drama lessons, they should explain the activity involved and what they will do" (p. 1). Similarly, the Government of South Australia (2019) stated that "Where touch is essential for safety reasons (e.g., with aquatic or gymnastic instruction), always tell the child or young person that you need to hold them in a particular way and seek their permission to do so" (p. 16). The South Australian document directed teachers to use verbal instructions rather than touch where possible, yet, the wording of these two statements indicates that these situations are perceived as likely to occur and that physical contact is acceptable if required. The only policy that does state directly that examples of appropriate physical contact included demonstrations during physical education (Government of Western Australia, 2011), cautioned that this contact was "subject to a test of reasonableness" (p. 8). This wording is another example of the highly subjective contents of policy documents that can lead to male primary teachers being fearful and uncertain about making physical contact with their students. The alignment of participant perceptions and policy is much harder to judge in physical education contexts, due to the lack of information in policy documents, particularly Tasmanian documents, and a lack of consensus amongst participants.

Other situations

In addition to the contexts described above, participants also identified challenges and strategies relating to physical contact when delivery of pastoral care, such as consoling students and congratulating students. Student age and specific body locations appeared to be important considerations when making physical contact in these situations. These other situations were mentioned by some policies but were omitted from many others. It was therefore difficult to determine if these organisations considered physical contact to be unacceptable in these situations, or if they had not even considered them. This inconsistency was added to by the wording of different policies giving teachers conflicting advice on the same situation.

Hugging an upset student

Participants' in this study had contrasting views on the appropriateness of men hugging an upset student. Most participants in this study indicated that they would not be comfortable making physical contact in this situation. This finding aligns with numerous previous studies (e.g., Gosse, 2011; Burn & Pratt Adams, 2015) who have encountered male primary teachers who were also reluctant to make physical contact in this context. Participants made statements such as:

I feel it is ridiculous that I cannot comfort a child when they are in distress as it might be seen as inappropriate even though hugging a child when they are upset is perfectly reasonable. This issue doesn't affect my day to day interaction as I don't do it (Survey Respondent 9).

It is ok for female staff to hug children when they are hurt/upset but it is not OK for men when similar or the same circumstances exist (Survey Respondent 18).

I do not feel comfortable hugging students in my class (Survey Respondent 27).

Despite this majority view, a vocal minority believed it was vitally important that male primary teachers did hug their students:

I am certainly aware of other people's perceptions, but I do respond to a hug, I just have to really be careful and make sure everything is done in public. If they come and lean up against and I don't push away because they are doing that for a reason (Fred).

I don't want my students thinking that male teachers can't give them a hug. The worst thing male teachers can do is withdraw. How can you not console a prep child by giving them a hug? Men can and should be nurturing as well (Harry).

This comment demonstrates that there are male primary teachers who think it is appropriate for men to hug an upset young student. This finding aligns with previous research (e.g., Cruickshank, Pedersen, Cooley & Hill, 2019; White, 2011) that noted male primary teachers who believe men should display the same behaviours as their female colleagues do. Despite the passion of participants such as Harry these beliefs were not consistent across most participants in this study. These men will need to adopt other less physical strategies to ensure they are nurturing the students in their care.

The TCEO (2007) code of conduct made no mention of the appropriateness of a hug in this situation, and this lack of information was consistent across the CST guidelines (2015) as well as the great majority of teacher code of conduct documents across Australia. Those policies that did mention this context gave contradictory advice on the appropriateness of making physical contact. The New South Wales professional responsibilities guidelines (NSW Government, 2015) stated that it was appropriate to provide reassurance by putting an arm around a younger student who is hurt or seeking comfort, whereas South Australian teachers are directed to discourage younger children from inappropriate expectations of hugs (Government of South Australia, 2019). When

physical contact guidelines do not offer clear advice, and guidelines from similar bodies around Australia offer conflicting advice, it is easy to understand why men might be uncertain about what they should do when providing pastoral care to their students, and fearful of doing the wrong thing.

Congratulating students

There was more agreement evident in participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of making physical contact when congratulating students. Most participants who referred to these situations indicated they believed making physical contact was appropriate. For example:

I am really into shaking hands and giving them high-fives so that kind of contact helps to develop rapport where they don't feel uncomfortable if I do put my hand on their shoulder. So it sets a precedent of what acceptable physical contact is, and that it is quite normal for boys and girls (James).

I will give students a pat on the shoulder or upper back if they have done a good job. I think small gestures like this are important for congratulating and building rapport with students (Survey Respondent 28).

I give students high fives or fist bumps when they have done a good job; the boys in particular really like this (Survey Respondent 47).

These comments were consistent with previous research (e.g., Cruickshank, 2016; Sargent, 2000), and physical contact guidelines from organisations such as CST (2015) that listed shaking hands, and pats on the upper arm or back as being acceptable physical contact. Participants believed that making this low level non-intrusive physical contact was an important part of providing pastoral care and building rapport with students without needing the same level of physical contact as their female colleagues. These and other comments also revealed that participants were very particular about where on their students' bodies they made contact with in the event that they did choose to make physical contact in order to congratulate them. This review indicated that participant perceptions did align with policy directives surrounding physical contact and congratulating students, yet, this was less clear for participants from Catholic schools as the TCEO (2007) made no mention of this context.

Body parts

Participant's comments revealed that if they ever made physical contact with their students, they were very conscious of where on their students' body they contact. Some men made specific reference to the parts of the body they believed were appropriate to make contact with.

If I have to touch them then I'm a bit more particular and specific about where I touch them and how I touch them - only on the shoulder or elbow (Fred).

In relation to comforting a student I only ever put one hand on either their shoulder or back and make sure my stance and body position is open and positive. In relation to younger students who want to hold your hand; I allow it. But when they want to sit on your knee or lean up against you I say to them that I need some space to read the book better (Survey Respondent 9).

These and other comments demonstrated that participants in this study were very aware of which parts of students' bodies they made physical contact with. These remarks echoed previous research on male primary teachers such as Ashcraft and Sevier (2006) which identified these body parts. Like James above, the actions Fred and others described were consistent with guidelines such as those written by CST (2015). It was also evident that participants tried to make sure they did not embarrass or offend their students if they choose not to respond to requests for physical contact. This behaviour was consistent with the South Australian guidelines for staff working in education settings (Government of South Australia, 2019) and highly relevant for those male primary teachers working in the early childhood area.

Fred's acceptance of physical contact as a part of his teaching could be partly attributed to his experience in the early childhood area. Students of this age are much more tactile, especially when in need of support and reassurance (Johansson et al, 2018; Smith, 2008). As these younger students require more physical help and comfort those men who teach in early childhood are likely to become accustomed to a higher level of physical contact when delivering pastoral care than men who teach older students.

Student age

Participant data suggested that there was a perceived difference between making contact with a grade six student and making contact with a younger early childhood student. This finding aligns with previous research such as Cushman (2009). This difference might be because a comforting hug for a five-year-old is seen as more socially acceptable and innocent than a similar act with a more mature pre-teen. It is difficult to define the exact age at which it becomes less appropriate to make physical contact with students. Despite this difficulty, many participants suggested there was a difference between making physical contact with early childhood (kinder to grade two) students, and making physical contact with upper primary (grade three to six) students;

When they are younger in grade 2/3 I think it is more acceptable that the girls might come and have a kick of the football and things like that and it's a bit easier to build relationships without being so aware that you do need to be a bit careful. I think that upper primary is where you become aware of it [physical contact] and need to consider it. So just make sure you're a bit more hands off. I generally am very hands on with kids but once it gets to grade 5/6 girls even a pat on the back you just don't go there, I think (Steve).

I am much more aware of this [physical contact] with students once they get to about grade three and are considered upper primary (Survey Respondent 10).

These comments reveal that male teachers are much more aware of making physical contact with students once they have entered the upper primary grades and started to mature and develop physically. Their statements echo teacher comments from previous research such as Andrzejewski and Davis (2008). Steve appeared to be comfortable making physical contact with students but believed that it was less appropriate for male primary teachers to contact older students, particularly female. Consequently, the physical contact he made with his students decreased as their age increased. Steve's comments imply that he would have to constantly adjust his teaching approach and level of physical contact to ensure he was interacting appropriately with all students. Most of the policy documents reviewed made no mention of student age affecting the appropriateness of physical contact, but many included subjective statements such as all physical contact "must be age appropriate" (Government of South Australia, 2019; p. 16). Despite this lack of direction from policy, age did appear to be an important consideration for the participants in this study.

Unofficial policies

Despite the glaring omissions from policy documents, no participants in this study directly stated that policy contributed to their fear and uncertainty in relation to making physical contact with their students. While teachers should be aware that policy documents exist, the lack of conversation on policy suggested that some participants may likely not be aware of the existence, contents or shortcomings of the policies dictating the appropriateness of their actions. Rather, participants referred to 'unofficial' policies (i.e. unwritten social and institutional norms) that did affect their behaviour regarding physical contact.

As far as I'm aware there is no policy that says a male teacher should not comfort a child in distress. You would think the policy would be the same for all teachers but it's sort of the unspoken reality that as a male you are very much more aware of any physical interaction with the kids, even sitting close to a kid (Fenton).

The simplest, and dare I say 'expected' strategy is to maintain personal space at all times. In the event of injury, provide verbal comfort and send for a female member of staff. When dealing with an upset child, remain in the open or move to an open area, ask a friend to remain close, sit opposite, never next to, the child and depending on the issue/gender of the child involved, send for a female member of staff. As a man I am 'allowed' to deal with angry, aggressive boys, but not girls. While none of this is written anywhere in school, policy, it is an agreed upon and generally understood policy-by-default (Survey Respondent 24).

Numerous participants stated that they had experienced double standards in terms of what was acceptable physical contact for male and female teachers to make with their students. Cushman (2005) identified these double standards in her work on male primary teachers and reported that they often resulted in physical contact policies being followed by men and ignored by women. This situation revealed an obvious inequity as these male teachers felt that they could not comfort an upset child like a parent or female teacher could, without putting themselves at risk.

Conclusion

Participant perceptions of when and where it was appropriate for them to make physical contact with their students were largely in line with policy documents. Despite this alignment, many of these documents were vague and lacked the depth of information required by male primary teachers who were fearful and uncertain in relation to physical contact. Some examples of missing information included where on the body a teacher could make contact when physically restraining a violent student, and whether the appropriateness of physical contact was affected by student age. These omissions made it difficult to compare participants' perceptions and policy documents.

Most policies and participants agreed that it was appropriate to make physical contact with students in situations involving physical restraint and first aid; yet contrasting opinions were evident for other situations such as in class demonstrations and hugging upset students. A review of the 14 policies revealed that many made no mention of these other situations. These omissions made it impossible to ascertain whether these organisations viewed contact as appropriate or inappropriate in these situations. Further inconsistency was evident when the policy documents that did refer to these situations were in direct conflict. Participant opinions were also in direct conflict when referring to situations such as hugging an upset child.

Physical contact guidelines such as those written by the TCEO (2007) and CST (2015) could be improved through the inclusion of more specific directions on appropriate behaviour in common teaching contexts, such as those involving first aid, physical restraint and upset students. This increased guidance could allow teachers, particularly male, to be more confident in their actions when offering their students the pastoral care and support they require, and help them develop coping strategies to deal with the fear and uncertainty they experience in relation to physical contact. Alternatively, more detailed guidelines could perpetuate the gendered double standards noted by participants and Cushman (2005). These guidelines would be gender neutral and written for all teachers, yet the reality described by both Cushman and participants in this study is that they could make the experiences of male primary teachers even harder. Female teachers are likely to continue making the same amount of physical contact they currently do, whereas their male colleagues would likely feel that they had to follow strictly all guidelines (Cruickshank, 2019b).

More detailed guidelines could reduce some of the uncertainty surrounding when and where male primary teachers should make physical contact with their students, but they might not reduce their fear. If men are to feel less fearful about making physical contact with their students they will need the support of their colleagues, school leaders, and the school community. Future research should also explore how to best educate teachers and members of the school community about what is contained in policy documents. Male primary teachers who continue to be fearful of being accused of making inappropriate physical contact with their students might decide that not making any physical contact with their students is the best way to cope with this challenge and consequently protect themselves from accusations of inappropriate behaviour.

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Appendix A: Survey questions

Question set 1: Demographics

What is your age?

How many years teaching experience do you have?

What grades have you taught? (Select all that apply)

- Kinder
- Prep
- Grade 1
- Grade 2
- Grade 3
- Grade 4
- Grade 5
- Grade 6

What has encouraged/motivated you to be a primary school teacher?

Question set 2: Physical contact

In your teaching career have you ever had to make physical contact with one of more of your students for any reason? If yes, please describes some of these situations.

When do you believe it is acceptable for a teacher to make physical contact with their students?

Are there any factors that influence this acceptability, or is your previous answer true for all teachers in all primary school classes? Please elaborate on any influencing factors.

When do you believe it is not acceptable for a teacher to make physical contact with their students?

Do you have any other comments?

Appendix B: Indicative interview questions

Can you tell me about your experiences of being a male primary teacher?

In your teaching career have you ever had to make physical contact with one of more of your students for any reason? If yes, please describes some of these situations.

When do you believe it is acceptable for a teacher to make physical contact with their students?

Are there any factors that influence this acceptability, or is your previous answer true for all teachers in all primary school classes? Please elaborate on any influencing factors.

When do you believe it is not acceptable for a teacher to make physical contact with their students?

Do you have any other comments?

Prompt questions (if required)

Do you think your gender has affected your experiences in relation to making physical contact with your students? Can you tell me about some specific examples?

How do you deal with uncertainty in relation to making physical contact with your students?

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