ROLE MODEL, HERO OR CHAMPION?
CHILDREN'S VIEWS ABOUT ROLE MODELS

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Total word count including title, correspondence addresses, abstract, figures and tables 4832

Abstract

Claims that male role models can improve the behaviour and achievement of boys are familiar and persistent. In the media the lack of male teachers as role models in schools has been cited as a cause for particular concern. However, research has not confirmed such a link; recent UK studies indicate that peers and relatives may be far more important to boys than their teachers. A new study, reported here, explored whether or not children actually see their teachers, whatever their sex, as role models. It inquired directly of children, aged from 10 to 16 years, from four English schools in different socio-economic environments, about their role models, and about what they regard as important attributes for a role model. This article illustrates the range of role models adopted by young people today, and their reasons for choosing them. Teachers are not prominent amongst them!

(145 words)

Keywords: *Role models; Male teachers; Children's views*

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Introduction

What is meant by a role model? Do boys in particular need role models? Are teachers role models for children? We need to explore the largely taken for granted assumption that boys need and would benefit from more male teachers acting as 'role models', specifically for them. The re-emergence of 'role model' solutions as policy prescriptions to remedy boys' so-called underachievement, and laddish behaviour (Francis, 2000), requires that past research be reviewed and new research undertaken to see if things have changed over time.

The British government is actively promoting the use of footballers as role models: 'Playing for success', the government's after-school scheme, promotes professional footballers as role models, and the National Reading Campaign (2003) uses football heroes to encourage boys (and apparently girls also) to read.

> *"Motivating boys to read has hit the headlines following growing evidence that, overall, boys are falling behind girls in achievement. This has led many schools to look for role models to encourage boys (and girls) to read. What better place to start than with local sporting heroes? As the UK's most popular sport, much of this activity is focused on football."(NLT, 2003).*

Are sportsmen the type of male role model that schoolboys are thought to be in need of and might get from male teachers? And what of the boys (and girls) themselves, what do they think?

Role Modelling

Socialization is the process by which we learn about others attitudes, values and beliefs and eventually come to formulate our own. Children (and adults) learn, amongst other ways, by

observing and experiencing the behaviour of others. This is what makes us social beings. It is called social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). We may be 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.

Role models are considered key players in this socialisation process although it must be noted that they can portray a variety of stereotypical and counter stereotypical behaviours. Where the model in question shares some characteristics with the potential modeller, such as gender, age, race and/or social location, Bandura argues that the modeller is more likely to seek to emulate the model because their shared characteristics (model-observer similarity) indicate that the modeller has the potential to become like the model. However, socialisation is an active process, influenced by the unique characteristics of the individual and their unique social context so outcomes are in no way predetermined. Nevertheless patterns have been found. In relation to role models the most commonly cited are social class and gender (Freedman-Doan, 1996, Lucey, 2001).

The title of this paper refers to role models, heroes and champions. A diversity of meanings attach to these concepts within common usage and in the literature (Sargent, 2001:118). For the purpose of this study a dictionary definition of role model is used, namely a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like. The definition used by Vescio et al (2004:2) is very similar, that is someone 'to imitate, to be like', and 'perceived as exemplary and worthy'. However, they distinguish between role models and mentors (coaches, guides and confidantes who have a personal relationship with the mentee) and between role models and heroes (admired, inspirational but not necessarily imitated). For Vescio et al mentors can also be role models but are not necessarily so. There is some similarity between their concept of mentor and the way in which we use the term champion, as a caring person, who is known to someone personally, who helps and sticks up for them and whom they look up to and

respect. There are similarities and differences in our interpretations of heroes: we define heroes as admired, inspirational and, unlike Vescio et al, imitated and aspired to, but often unrealistically so, due to lack of model-observer similarity and/or the context in which modellers are able to construct themselves.

Findings from existing research

In the academic world the ‘male teacher as role model’ assumption was explored in the USA in the late 70s and the 80s: Gold and Reis (1982) examined the proposition that an increase in the number of male teachers working at the lower school level would reduce the number of school-related problems for boys. They evaluated the proposition in terms of two major theories of sex-role development - social-learning and cognitive development theories. However, the proposition that male teachers reduce boys' problems did not receive much support empirically or theoretically. Other research in the USA at about the same time found that sex-associated stereotypes were determined more by role status than by sex (Geis et al, 1984), and that sex-role concepts of children were related to social class and ethnicity (Romer and Cherry, 1980). This suggests that a single characteristic of model-observer similarity (sex) is not sufficient and that other individual and contextual factors must also be taken into account such as the status of the male model and the ethnic and social background of the children.

More recently, Biskup and Pfister (1999) interviewed 44 girls and 53 boys from 5 different Berlin primary schools, asking 'do you have a role-model?' and 'who is your role-model?' Less than 10% of the role-models named were from the direct social environment (friends or relatives) of these children, and teachers do not appear to have been mentioned at all. Boys predominantly chose sportsmen, cinema figures and actors. Girls mainly chose figures from the music world. This research supports that idea that

"a role model today is most often equated with 'a symbol of achievement' and is sometimes conflated with being a 'star' or an 'idol'." (Carrington and Skelton, 2002). From this evidence it seems highly unlikely that boys would see their teachers as role models.

Most surveys tend to find that relatives, and particularly parents, are most frequently chosen as best role models, and that sports personalities tend to come a close second, particularly for boys. Whereas pop, film and TV stars are often second most popular with girls. Shell Youth Studies from different years (reported Biskup and Pfister, 1999) show that for 10-11 year olds, 80% reported a member of their family as their role model, and recent surveys from the USA and UK broadly agree that the most frequently chosen role models are parents.

Given the seemingly relentless reference to male teachers (and footballers) as role models for boys, the lack of agreement about the concept role model, and the wide variety of role models available within and between genders, it was felt that, in the current educational and social climate of concern for boys' behaviour patterns and achievement levels, it would be useful to test whether or not children in the UK tend to conform to either of the patterns described above, and to find out who their role models actually are.

Methodology

A questionnaire was used, comprising both quantitative and a qualitative aspects: in the first part pupils were asked to choose attributes of a role model from a prepared list, and in the second part, a free response section, pupils were asked to say which attributes were most important to them and to talk about their own role models. They were invited to add any attributes not mentioned by the researchers.

Responses to the list were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software program and exploratory factor analysis was used to establish groups of items relating to distinct constructs about role models. The free-responses were analysed with

the assistance of the QSR N6 software package (Fielding and Lee, 1998). All the responses were coded according to descriptive data (gender, year group and school) that had been gathered.

Sample

Four schools in Hertfordshire, a shire county in south-east England, agreed to take part in a pilot study using the questionnaire, which was administered to all pupils aged 10 and 11years present on the day in the two primary and junior (elementary) schools, and to all pupils aged 14 and 16 years in 2 classes in the two secondary (high) schools. The researchers briefly explained what the questionnaire was about, and gave the dictionary definition of a role model:

> *"The dictionary says that a role model is a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like."*

The schools were in different socioeconomic areas, with different intakes of pupils and academic outcomes, in order to allow comparison of results by socioeconomic status as well as gender and age. Patterns of social disadvantage often impact on the types of responses given by children (and adults), but, despite our structuring of the sample to allow comparison between schools in socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas, there were no statistically significant differences found between pupils responses against this variable.

The numbers of boys (197) and girls (182) taking part in the survey were very similar, as were the numbers of children in each year group.

Findings

Attributes of role models

Principled personality traits, such as honesty, helpfulness and hardworking were the most frequently attributed by these children to role models. Characteristics related to celebrity and fame were less frequently cited. Table i shows the attributes chosen by all pupils. The total number of attributes named is greater than the total number of pupils since many referred to more than one attribute.

TABLE i HERE

Factor analysis revealed strong groups of attributes that tended to be associated for these children. These groups have been represented by the following names: 'star', 'worker/helper', 'emotional ', 'physical prowesses and 'amusing'. So, for example, children who chose 'good singer' were also likely to choose 'nice looking, famous and makes a lot of money'. Figure 1, below, shows the mean values for boys and girls on each of the factors, the lowest possible value is 1 and the highest is 2. It is clear that there are some differences between boys and girls; girls score highest on worker/helper attributes and lowest on star attributes.

FIGURE 1 HERE

More girls than boys say that they have a role model (76% and 64% respectively), and there is a significant difference between the responses of boys and girls (Fisher's exact test p=0.006). This suggests that boys are less likely than girls to have any role models at all. If boys do have role models then they are more likely than girls to relate to physical prowess.

When asked what they thought was the most important attribute for a role model, most suggested caring and trust; attributes often associated with parents and carers but less frequently with teachers. Typical examples of both boys and girls naming caring and kindness include:

Kind, loving, helpful (girl, 10yrs)

Doesn't lie, being able to listen to what other people have to say, be kind always (girl, 11yrs)

I think a role model is a good kind person who helps people when they are in need (boy, 12yrs)

Nice and understanding and when you are upset they look out for you (boy, 14yrs)

There were some clear differences in the choices made by girls and boys. More boys named 'physical prowess' attributes: athleticism and bravery, and more girls named 'worker/helper' attributes: honesty and hard working; additionally there were many more references from girls to caring, trust and kindness (58% from girls and 34% from boys).

TABLE ii HERE

There seem to be some important gender differences here, with far more girls selecting caring, kindness and trust as the most important attribute while more boys selected surface attributes such as looks, fame, success and money than girls did. While there appear to be big differences between boys and girls on citation frequency for caring and kind, both ranked this attribute as the most important one for a role model.

Who are their role models?

Both girls and boys named relatives as most important role models more often than they named anyone else In second ranking, girls named friends and boys named footballers. Pop music stars were 3rd in popularity for girls but only 6th for boys. Very few teachers were named, they came 6th in rank order for girls, and 9th for boys (Table iii).

TABLE iii HERE

Friends, although of less importance to boys than footballers, were mentioned more frequently than were teachers. This supports the findings of Ashley & Lee (2003) and Williams (1980) who have indicated that peers are more important to boys than are teachers. Only 2.4% of pupils in this study referred to teachers as role models (compared to 9.8% who referred to peers).

Relatives as role models

Overall, 31.7% of pupils chose one or both parents as their most important role model.

Some typical examples of the choices made, with reasons are given below:

my dad
Because he is who I look up to, and I would like to be like him when I grow up (Boy, 14yrs)

mum
Because she's trustworthy and friendly and I would like people to think of me like that (Girl, 12yrs)

When the references to relatives are shown in more detail it is clear that girls tend more frequently to choose female relatives and boys male relatives (Figure 2)

FIGURE 2 HERE

References to male relatives are similar for both secondary schools, but at primary school fewer male relatives are mentioned by pupils in the more disadvantaged school, and may have encompassed more male pupils who potentially lacked positive male role models. (Ashley & Lee, 2003).

Gender of role models

Boys and girls named a wide variety of people and professions as 'most important' role models but when they are identified by sex a clear pattern emerges; boys choose mainly male role models, girls chose mainly female role models. (Table iv). Boys appear to have a very small number of female role models, and these are almost exclusively relatives, whereas girls do name male role models in the majority of categories.

TABLE iv HERE

Eighty two men and 18 women were named by boys as role models (65% male and 14% female role models**).** Ninety-two women and 24 men were named by girls as role models (17% male and 64% female role models)**.** In addition 26 role models for boys, and 28 for girls, were named but not differentiated by sex, for example:

A friend
My mates
My Parents

The few female role models named by boys are mainly relatives, although 2 named a female pop singer. As well as naming many relatives, girls named a wider range of other male role models, including footballers and film or TV personalities.

Celebrities as role models

There are 30 citations of sportsmen as most important role models by boys of which 24 are footballers. All are single citations apart from Robby Keane (3) and David Beckham (6). In this sample Beckham (England's Captain) is the most frequently named male non-relative role model for boys alongside a wide range of other famous sportsmen, mostly footballers; in addition nineteen 'stars' or other famous people were cited by boys.

Only two boys named a female role model who was not a close relative – both pop stars. On the other hand, girls chose a wider range of male role models from a very wide range of areas, including 3 footballers.

Teachers as role models

Overall, only 2.4% of pupils referred to a teacher as a role model. Teachers were quite low in the rank order for both boys (9^{th}) and girls (6^{th}), and in terms of actual numbers very few were mentioned. Only 9 references in total were made about teachers:

My father, my cello teacher, my godmother (Girl, 14yrs)

Parents and teachers (Boy Year 14yrs)

Only three girls and two boys named their teacher as most their important role model.

Discussion

The dictionary definition given to pupils at the start of the project defined a role model as 'a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like'. Most pupils were clear that their named role model possessed certain attributes that were admirable, and that they wished to be like that person, in other words they reflected the breadth of the dictionary definition of a role model. However, some, mainly younger pupils' responses seemed to imply a narrower 'hero' or 'star' definition (admired, inspirational, imitated and aspired to).

For a large majority of pupils the role is a caring or loving one, performed by someone known personally. For these children the 'respect and look up to' aspects of the definition

may be the main focus. This kind of statement was found among responses from all the age groups. It suggests that for many of these pupils the relative or friend described in this way was acting as their 'champion'. Vescio et al (2004) would probably liken our champions to their concept of mentors, although both can be and sometimes are role models too. We did find that, contrary to Vescio et al, where the pupils in this study had heroes as role models they did, however unrealistically, want to be like them.

Close friends or relatives are highly likely to share some characteristics with the children who choose them as role models, such as gender, social location or race. In Bandura's (1986) terms, they share model-observer similarity, and in the theory of social learning, it should not be surprising that children seek to emulate those who are similar to themselves in some significant ways.

The evidence from this study strongly suggests that children look to close relatives (probably as 'champions' or in Vescio's (2004) terms mentors) for their role models. Overall, 31.7% of the pupils surveyed chose one or both parents as their most important role model This finding is supported by the results of other recent survey work in the UK.

Footballers came close to fathers as most important role models for boys. This could reflect the full 'role model' definition rather than the partial 'hero or star' definition e.g. David Beckham was described as caring, kind and charitable as well as a gifted footballer by three boys. However, the descriptions of other footballers are limited primarily to sporting skills and team affiliation. The latter is the more common 'hero' type role model given by some boys, representing stereotypical masculine traits and rejecting female ones. Recent research about sporting role models among 8-14 year olds suggests that a fifth of the young people questioned said that 'they wanted to be like their sporting hero' (Norwich Union, 2003). However, these particular role models are seen by the Norwich Union children and Vescio et al (2004) as unattainable, virtual heroes or heroines, not realistic ones.

The prominence of footballers as role models for boys might be the result of the media coverage. Television offers boys (and girls) images, models and fantasies of what it is to be a 'proper' man (or woman). It might also be accounted for by special schemes, such as 'Playing for Success', that promote football and literacy links within schools. Connell (1982) suggests that school sport is a heavily gendered masculinizing process, and football may be used as a means of actively reinforcing a masculine stereotype. For this reason, Skelton (2001) was critical of the government's after-school scheme 'Playing for success' (DfES) which promotes professional footballers as role models. On the other hand, many schools, recognising children's attraction to famous personalities, are developing a visits' programme which makes use of sports personalities to overtly promote certain qualities – courage, patience, maturity, dedication – through talks/discussions with students.

Boys' choice of sporting heroes may also be evidence of their selection of the "want to be like" aspect of the role model definition as the main criterion for their choice of role model, but it could also be seen as a means of reinforcing their masculinity along hegemonic lines.

That only 2.4% of all pupils referred to a teacher as a role model strongly suggests that children do not see their teachers as role models. It may be that these pupils do 'respect or look up to' their teachers but, when thinking about role models, also focus on things such as 'want to be like' and 'follow'. If so, this might indicate a lack of desire to become like their teachers.

Conclusions

Unlike Biskup and Pfister's (1999) findings in Berlin, this sample of English pupils clearly favoured role models from their direct social environment (friends or relatives). However, the dire shortage of references to their teachers as role models, and boys choice of sportsmen and actors, and girls choice of music personalities accords with their findings. There is no

indication that these boys or girls identify with their teachers, male or female. They do not see their teachers as role models.

Pupils could be said to have chosen role models representing the whole definition or only parts of the definition given to them at the start of this study. The majority chose loving and caring friends and relatives (champions), but for some boys the high incidence of footballers and other sporting figures may represent a focus on heroes. Teachers, perhaps unfortunately, whether male or female, do not figure prominently within either of these categories, although they might do better if children were asked who they 'looked up to' and 'respected' rather than possibly just focusing on 'want to be like' and 'follow'.

We must therefore conclude that, despite assertions to the contrary, by government and the media, male teachers are not seen as role models, in general terms, for boys in this sample of schools in Hertfordshire, England. As a policy prescription to remedy boys' so-called underachievement and laddish behaviour it is, at present, a non-runner. However the promotion of footballers as role models for boys may be having some degree of success, perhaps because it attaches literacy to an already popular and successful image rather than seeking to create a new image (male teachers) without such a following or the powerful masculine accoutrement's (fame, physical prowess, money) that might attract boys to footballers as role models in the first place - but caution is required here in view of recent calls to keep football off the TV screen until after 9pm because boys are thought to be emulating the bad behaviour on pitch.

A further study is required that clearly defines and separates each of the possible interpretations of a role model thus allowing pupils' views about particular role models to be further clarified.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table i: Role model attributes chosen

	n	%
Honest	262	68.9
Helps other people	245	64.5
Works hard	244	64.2
Has a sense of humour	240	63.2
Successful in his/her career	209	55.0
Good fun	206	54.2
Gets a lot of respect	177	46.6
Helps others learn	158	41.6
Brave and strong	147	38.7
Well educated	124	32.6
Shows emotions	104	27.4
peaceful	100	26.3
Nice looking	82	21.6
Makes a lot of money	80	21.1
Good athlete	66	17.4
Good actor/actress	65	17.1
Famous	65	17.1
Artistic	51	13.4
Good fighter	50	13.2
Good singer	45	11.8

Table ii: All attributes cited by gender (ordered by percentages for girls)

Attributes named	% of all attributes (girls)	% of all attributes (boys)
Caring or kind	39.6	29.3
Honest	9.9	8.1
Trust	5.9	2.5
Work hard	3.2	2.0
Good example	2.3	2.0
Fun	5.9	4.0
Humour	5.4	4.0
Athletic	0.0	2.0
Brave and strong	2.3	4.5
Respect	6.8	9.1
Success	5.0	7.6
Looks	2.3	3.0
Famous	1.4	1.5
Money	1.4	3.0
Clever	1.4	5.6
Good at their job	0.5	1.5
Be yourself	3.2	3.0
Miscellaneous	4.1	7.1

Table iii: Most important role models for boys and girls ranked by popularity.

Role models	Girls		Role models	Boys	
	Rank	n		Rank	n
Relatives	1	98	**Relatives**	1	65
Friends	2	15	**Footballer**	2	24
Pop music	3	11	**Friends**	3	6
Film or TV	4	6	**Other**	4	6
Footballer	5	3	**Other sport**	5	6
teachers	6	3	**Pop music**	6	4
Famous	7	3	**fictional**	7	5
Caring professions	8	2	**Film or TV**	8	3
Other	9	1	**teachers**	9	2
Music and arts	10	1	**Famous**	10	2
fictional	11	1	**Comedian**	11	2
Total named		144	**Total named**		125

Table iv: Most important role models for boys and girls showing gender of role model

	Boys responses			Girls responses		
Named role models	**Male role model**	**Female role model**	**Sex not stated**	**Male role model**	**Female role model**	**Sex not stated**
Relatives	29	16	20	11	66	21
Footballer	24	0	0	3	0	0
Other sport	6	0	0	0	0	0
Other	6	0	0	1	0	0
Fictional	5	0	0	0	1	0
Film or TV	3	0	0	2	4	0
Friends	3	0	3	2	8	5
Pop music	2	2	1	3	8	0
Comedian	2	0	0	0	0	0
Famous	2	0	0	2	1	0
Caring professions	0	0	0	0	1	1
Teachers	0	0	2	0	2	1
Music and arts	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	**82**	**18**	**26**	**24**	**92**	**28**

Figure 1: Mean scores for boys and girls on attribute factors

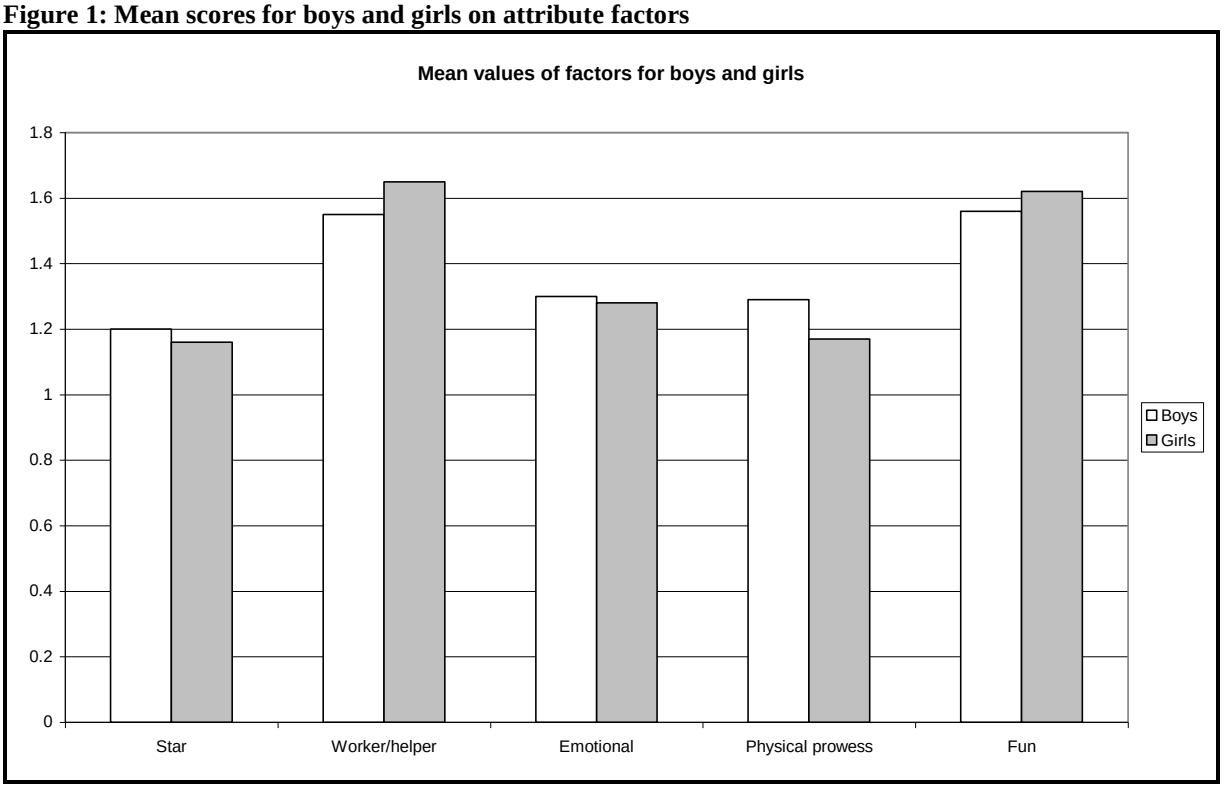

Figure 2: Relatives as role models by sex (responses to Q6)