

TEACHER-GENDER: EXPERIENCES OF MALE TEACHERS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In South African primary schools, the Foundation Phase (Grade R, the year before formal schooling until Grade 3) is dominated by female teachers because few men enrol for a teaching qualification in this phase. There are various reasons why there is a reluctance by males to teach in this phase. These include parental nervousness around men who decide to seek employment in a traditionally female profession, scepticism in males' abilities to teach young children as well as their female counterparts, the perception that men cannot handle the responsibility of taking care of young children and the perception that men who choose to teach young children are unnatural, homosexuals and deviants. The study was motivated by two factors: firstly, by the researcher's interest in male teachers who teach young learners (because of the scarcity of male teachers in early education); and secondly, by the large number of students who enrolled for the B. Ed Foundation Phase degree at a South African university. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of male teachers in the Foundation Phase. Data were collected through focus group and face-to-face interviews and were analysed thematically. The participants were nine male teachers who teach in the Foundation Phase. The researcher wanted to obtain narrative portraits and in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences as males in a reality that is female-dominated. The results show that in many schools, male teachers experience gender prejudice and gender stereotyping from both male and female colleagues, and often from parents. For example, some of the male participants asserted that teachers make fun of them by saying that men cannot be 'nannies'. However, some schools were happy to employ male teachers, regardless of the societal misconceptions about male teachers teaching young children. It is recommended that, amongst others male teachers in the Foundation Phase be encouraged and educated about strategies to cope with criticism in order to be resilient.

Keywords: *Foundation phase, male teachers, gender, female-dominated, young children.*

1. Introduction

Men teaching young children is often perceived with scepticism, criticism and discomfort. Research has shown that the lack of male educators in *Early Childhood Education* is greatly influenced by the association of Early Childhood Education with mothering and being 'natural' for woman, while men interested in the field are often perceived as 'unnatural', as sexual predators and as sexual deviants. There is therefore a perception in society that young children should rather be taught by women (Mashiya 2014; Kewuti 2018:1 and Msiza 2016:iv). Because of these barriers, male teachers in the Foundation Phase in South Africa are under-represented. Thus, teaching young children is a predominantly female occupation in South Africa. This also seems to correlate with studies internationally. Kewuti (2018:3) asserts that many international studies show that there is a gender-imbalance in Early Childhood Education. For example, in Germany the proportion of male elementary school teachers is 4%, in Finland it is 10% and in the United States it is 2% (Mashiya 2014). These findings are supported by Drudy (2008), Cushman (2008) and Skelton (2009) as cited in McGrath & Sinclair (2013:2) when they state that 'the perceived need for more male primary school teachers has emerged as an international issue with research and media reporting proportional and absolute decline in the number of male primary school teachers in Australia, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Finland, Canada and the USA'. In Africa the trend is similar. According to Nyoni and Nyoni (2012) African societies do not welcome men to teach young children. In Tanzania, for example, teaching at primary schools is perceived as a low-status job meant for female teachers (Sayed and McDonald 2017). A study conducted in Kenya found that men are still under-represented in Early Childhood Development Education because the society is uneasy and suspicious about men who choose to work with young children (Mukana and Mutsoso 2011).

2. Aim of the research

The primary research question this paper seeks to address is: What are the experiences, positive and negatives, of male teachers in a female-dominated work environment? I will attempt to address this question by answering the following sub-questions:

- Why are male teachers in the Foundation Phase discriminated against?
- What benefits do male teachers offer in the Foundation Phase?

3. Problem statement

Teaching in the Foundation Phase goes far beyond the formal instruction of subjects because teachers are also tasked with supporting learners with behavioural, social, emotional and physical development. Foundation Phase teachers are thus responsible for the all-inclusive education of young learners through their most formative years. This endeavour is complex and challenging for both male and female teachers and needs to be effective in order to ensure learner success (Meier and Machaba 2021:4). Many South African teachers experience formal teaching challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and lack of adequate resources. Male teachers in the Foundation Phase seem to experience another challenge simply because they are male. The notion exists in many societies that a 'soft' female is supposed to handle young children - not the rough male, hence the onslaught on males who dare to cross the divide and invade a 'female domain' in the eyes of patriarchy (Nyoni and Nyoni 2012:183). Furthermore, Sumsion (in Mashiya 2014) claims that male teachers are facing challenges because of their 'otherness' in relation to their female colleagues. There is also the stigma that men are generally associated with child abuse and child molestation. These barriers lead to the problem of the under-representation of male teachers in Early Childhood Education because of gender discrimination and gender stereotyping. Because of these stereotypes many men are hindered from pursuing a career in Early Childhood Education because they are depicted as abnormal and are not seen as 'real men' (Bhana, McGrath, Van Bergen and Moosa 2019). The discrimination men face is in contravention of law. The Employment Equity Act (1998:6(1)) asserts that no person in the workplace should be unfairly discriminated against on grounds such as gender, sex and marital status. Gender equality is also enshrined in the Constitution. In addition, the Employment of Educators Act (76 of 1998:7) emphasizes the values of equality and equity when it comes to the appointment of teachers. Despite the obstacles experienced by male teachers, research suggests that there are benefits of having male teachers in the Foundation Phase, and that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. McGrath and Sinclair (2013) assert that the call for more male teachers in primary schools has long been associated with the educational needs of boys, the importance of positive male role models in schools and the disproportionate number of male and female teachers in primary schools internationally (cf. Martino 2008; McGrath and Sinclair 2013). Rolfe (as cited by Okeke and Nyanhoto 2021) states that men and women have a different caring style – males promote a more active, physical environment while women foster a nurturing and calm environment, but both caring styles can be beneficial for young children.

4. Theoretical framework

The research employed Eagly's social role theory (SRT), which argues that widely shared gender stereotypes develop from the gender division of labour that characterizes society. The social role theory developed during the 1980s as a gender-related theory in which Eagly used gender roles as a term for the social roles that society designates to men and women. The theory further concedes that regardless of early socialization and upbringing, men can learn behaviours which are associated with the role of caregiver through participating in those social experiences that were once reserved for women (Biddle, in Okeke and Nyanhoto 2021; Okeke and Nyanhoto 2021). Gender roles have an influence in the teaching profession, and the focus of many studies about male teachers in the Foundation Phase is not necessarily based on their ability, skills and competence, but on their gender (Kewuti 2018:16).

5. Research methodology

Data were collected through qualitative phenomenological research. The purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon. Lived experiences of the everyday world, as revealed through interviews or conversations is the main focus of phenomenological research (Van Wyk and Taole 2015:175). The researcher wanted to obtain narrative portraits and in-depth understanding of the participants' experience as males in a reality that is female-dominated. These narrative portraits aided the researcher to understand the thinking and feelings of the participants. Semi-structured focus group

interviews were conducted. The researcher opted for semi-structured interviews because they provide the best of both worlds as far as interviewing is concerned, combining the structure of a range of issues to be covered together with the freedom to ask follow-up and/or probing questions (Thomas 2017:206).

5.1. Selection of participants

A sample can be defined as the participants who are selected from a larger population for the purpose of conducting research (Lumadi 2015:226). The study was conducted in the Motheo District in the Free State. The participants consisted of nine male Foundation Phase teachers from four schools. Because the participants in the study were male educators, purposeful sampling was used to select only schools that have male teachers in the Foundation Phase.

6. Data analysis and findings

Thematic analysis was conducted based on the themes that emerged from the respondents' responses to the questions. The following themes emerged from the data: a) competence of male teachers with regards to formal teaching; b) treatment of male teachers; c) stereotyping impacts on male teachers' working conditions; d) male teachers can be beneficial for young children. The findings reveal that men can perform their teaching duties as well as their female counterparts. The participants generally feel supported by their colleagues, but they do face societal barriers, bias and resistance. They report that many parents feel unsure about having males teaching their young children, especially their daughters. One male educator reported that he is even reluctant to hug his learners because people look at him funny. He continued to report that it is difficult to work under such conditions of scrutiny. One participant stated the following: "My principal and colleagues say there's nothing wrong with my teaching skills, but they still find it awkward that I chose to teach in the Foundation Phase. They are always curious as to why I do not teach older children instead." Another participant reported that some parents asked during a school meeting: "Are you going to teach my daughter?" He responded by saying he is. Generally, the participants agreed that it is unfair for them to be judged and discriminated against because they are male. The majority of them cited that they enjoy working with smaller children, not because of ulterior motives, but because they love children. Some referred to the Constitution and their right to be treated equally. These responses indicate that male Foundation Phase teachers have positive and negative experiences at their respective schools.

Positive experiences of participants and benefits of having male teachers	Negative experiences and challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Compared to their female counterparts, the respondents claim they face the same challenges with regards to formal instruction. Examples include shortage of educational resources, teaching young writing and reading skills, discipline problems and overcrowded classrooms. b) There are colleagues that accept them with open arms and make them feel included. c) The participants all reported that the learners do not find it strange to be taught by males. Learners also do not seem to notice the unequal gender distribution. d) The participants love young children and teaching – that is one of the main reasons they chose to teach younger children. e) Male teachers are perceived as good disciplinarians. Participants also reported that female colleagues feel men can assist better in sport development. f) Many parents see male teachers as good role models and as father figures, especially for children who do not have fathers, or where fathers are absent. g) Colleagues get used to the idea of having males as colleagues, especially in schools where these male teachers have been teaching for long. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Some female colleagues make the male teachers feel unwelcome and are antagonistic towards them. b) Male teachers are scared to touch or hug children for fear of being labelled abusers. They are thus not trusted because they are associated with sexual abuse. c) Many parents are uncomfortable with having male teachers teaching their young children. d) They are often asked questions such as: "do you really want to mother and babysit these kids all day?" This stems from the perception that it is unnatural and unusual for men to mother and teach young children. Men's masculinity is questioned because they cannot be 'real men' if they want to teach young children. e) Because male teachers are generally so few in the Foundations Phase, they often experience isolation and loneliness. They will often sit alone in their classes during break because there are no other males to befriend. Or they will be the only male among female teachers. Their working conditions are therefore negatively affected.

7. Recommendations

In South Africa few teachers in the Foundation Phase are male. This is consistent with a global trend that sees men more likely to teach adolescents than young children. In addition, there is little policy imperative that addresses the ‘missing men’ in the early years of schooling. Based on the findings, it is recommended that, for schools and communities to promote positive representation of men in early education, the focus must be on creating gender harmony. Furthermore, society needs to change its stereotypical perception that only females should teach young learners, because children can benefit from male and female teachers. We need to do away with the negative connotation that Foundation Phase teaching is a ‘motherly’ and ‘babysitting’ type of profession, only suited for females. Male teachers should be applauded, encouraged and supported for their willingness to teach in primary schools. They should not be treated with distrust and suspicion because they want to teach young children. Not all men are bad, not all men are perpetrators. Sayed and McDonald (2017) recommend that policy makers need to nurture a culture of teaching as a positive and highly esteemed profession for men and women. Universities and other state departments should provide career advice that will better prepare male pre-service teachers for the challenges and criticism that awaits them. There need to be strategies or policies in place to educate in-service male teachers on how to cope with prejudice so that they can become resilient and not leave the teaching profession because of these negative connotations associated with male teachers. The value of all Foundation Phase teachers must be recognized, regardless of their gender.

8. Conclusion

Teaching is much more than mere formal instruction of subjects. Teachers also have to act in loco parentis (in the place of the parent), meaning that teachers are obliged to take care of the social, emotional, physical and mental needs of the child. A view exists in society that teaching and caring for young children is a woman’s job, that men are harsh, that they are not nurturing enough and that they cannot take care of young children the same way as women. These views contribute to the scarcity and underrepresentation of male teachers in the Foundation Phase. The few men that have chosen teaching as a career often face challenges that female teachers do not face. Despite these challenges, more male students are enrolling for Foundation Phase teaching at Higher Education Institutions, which means more males are going to enter this female-dominated field. Some men enter the teaching profession because they love children and want to make a difference in their lives. By working in roles that are typically viewed as being appropriate for women, men can break down polarized differences that foster gender inequalities. Dialogue and further research are needed to address the shortage of male teachers, the reasons for this shortage, and to explore more reasons pertaining to the value male teachers can add to young children’s lives.

**Early Childhood Education (ECE) in South Africa can be defined as a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to nine years of age with the active participation of parents and caregivers (Department of Education 2001:14).*

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