Male Teachers' Narratives: Experiences of Teaching in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Globally, women are over-represented in teaching in the early years of primary school, or the Foundation Phase, as it is known in South Africa (SA). We explore how male teachers in SA may experience challenges in teaching in primary schools that are complicit in reproducing men as managers. Men tend to be positioned within dominant notions of masculinity, which produce masculine power in school management, while primary teaching is characterised as 'women's work'. Teachers of both genders are complicit in safeguarding the primary school as a nurturing, female domain while reproducing gendered binaries and unequal power relations. Through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, we explore the experiences of five male early childhood development (ECD) teachers from five rural primary schools in diverse settings in Free State, SA. Males have challenges in ECD as they are not allowed to teach but are encouraged to be involved in management, where they may sit on different school committees such as those related to sport and discipline, and also take care of the school premises. There is a need to create alternate masculinities beyond rigid notions of appropriate gender performances and address social challenges such as the paucity of male teachers, children being exposed to only one gender, and gender transformation in SA. In this way, the challenges facing male ECD teachers, who are not being entirely accepted in this field, will be eliminated.

Keywords: male teachers, primary schools, early childhood

1. Introduction

Globally, teaching patterns are highly gendered, with a lack of male teachers in the early years of primary schooling (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Skelton, 2012). Some academic studies have argued that equal involvement of men and women as teachers of young children can work towards changing gender patterns in primary schooling (Younger, 2016). In South Africa (SA) the Foundation Phase of teaching refers to the cohort of children in Grades 0 to 3, who are generally between the ages of five and nine (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Men's reluctance to teach in the Foundation Phase is highly gendered. As scholars have noted, the low status of the profession, men's desire to teach older learners instead of young children who are assumed to require nurturing, and the characterisation of primary school teaching as a mothering profession combine to reduce men's involvement at primary school level (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Petersen, 2014). Throughout SA men's engagement with and association with children have become a key intervention area (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Richter et al., 2012). Male involvement with children is critical in the 2012 White Paper on Families in the country (Department of Social Development, 2012). Increasing the number of men in primary school teaching can increase their involvement in care work and in the lives of young children, where they remain under-represented.

1.1 Background

The regulation of men within hegemonic masculine ideals by distancing men from being teachers of young

children has received global attention. The idea of men as early childhood development (ECD) teachers is often met with contestation and uncertainty by existing ECD teachers who actively conform to hegemonic masculine beliefs, positioning men as school managers while distancing them from care (Moosa & Bhana, 2016). Early childhood education (ECE) attaches more importance to caring practices than secondary schooling (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). In many societies care and education are viewed as primarily women's responsibility, and such stereotypical assumptions have gendered consequences regarding who teaches young children (Piburn et al., 2011). More specifically, the association of teaching young children with mothering has resulted from it being considered a traditional female occupation (Haas, 2008; Msiza, 2020). Such beliefs conflating mothering with teaching young children is problematic not only for men intending to enter the profession, but also for women who have trouble balancing their expected role as both mothers and teachers in the workplace (James, 2010). Recruiting more male teachers of young children could help challenge existing stereotypes that label ECD school teaching as essentially female territory (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). On the one hand, men are embraced as vital role models in a society with a prevalence of absent fathers (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Evans & Jones, 2008; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Mathwasa & Okeke, 2017), while on the other hand, they are treated with suspicion as a result of accusations that men are/are potential sexual predators (Baris, 2013; Cushman, 2008; Deneen, 2011; Evans & Jones, 2008; Moors, 2010; Petersen, 2014).

1.2 Social Identity Theory and Its Relevance

The social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. This theory originated from the minimal group of paradigms, which demonstrated people's inherent desire to distinguish themselves from others based on their group memberships and willingness to sacrifice absolute rewards and maintain relative superiority over members of other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory holds that individuals should define their identities concerning social groups and that such identifications work to protect and strengthen self-identity. Hogg and Williams (2000) attempted to apply cognitive grouping phenomena to social groups. Cognitive grouping involves judgemental accentuation. Mental categories increase the salience of distinguishing features between types, exaggerating category differences, which means that male teachers must protect their categories from being judged for choosing ECE as a career. In contrast, category differences are exaggerated, where male teachers are only considered good with sport or to occupy a management position (Petersen, 2014). Social identity theorists assume that individuals' identities are based on the social groups they belong to and their traits (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Scheifele et al., 2021).

Social identity theory is suited to this study since it could explain society's perceptions towards male teachers compared to other groups. Male teachers will get the opportunity to protect their identities in ECE, where often their sexuality is also viewed with suspicion (Martino, 2008). This theory helps understand social identity construction and reconstruction for male teachers in ECE settings. It helps male teachers to understand how to manage challenges, protect their identities, and enhance their self-concepts against negative out-group characterisations in their communities. Similarly, through the self-categorisation of social identity theory the individual's identity forms by belonging to a social group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Social identity theory is relevant because it opens the minds of male teachers to express themselves about the female-dominated environment and protect themselves from being scrutinised and stigmatised as not having nurturing and caring skills like females. Furthermore, male teachers in ECE will be able to explain how they feel about being in social groups that perceive ECE to be of low status. This theory helps male teachers construct their social identities and fulfil the expectations of the role of ECE teachers as the environment and society expect.

1.3 Challenges of Male Teachers in Teaching in ECD in Rural Primary Schools

Male primary teachers face gender-related challenges after graduation (Cruickshank et al., 2018). These male teachers are very aware of being in the minority and of working within a more feminine environment (Cushman, 2005). Previous qualitative studies have identified a range of challenges, including dissatisfaction with salary (Cushman, 2007), increased workload due to expectations to perform masculine roles (Smith & Hung, 2008), negative perceptions in society and the media (Mistry & Sood, 2015) discouragement from family (Foster & Newman, 2005) and friends, social isolation, questions about their sexuality (Mills et al., 2008), and uncertainty about role modelling (White, 2011). Male teachers are often scrutinised more than their female colleagues regarding physical interaction with children and their motives for pursuing the career have been questioned (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). These challenges are moderated by demographic variables such as age, years of teaching experience, the number of male teachers at the school where they work, whether or not teaching was their first career choice, the gender of the principal at the school where they are employed, and whether or not they are a parent (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Smith & Hung, 2008; White, 2011). Male teachers in primary schools start to experience these may criticised challenges as early as during their training, with a lack of understanding from peers who them for choosing an 'easy' career option (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). This lack of support experienced by male trainee teachers might be linked with the concept of

'identity bruising' highlighted by Foster and Newman (2005). These researchers argue that male trainee teachers have often received knockbacks from peers, colleagues, and occasionally parents and partners about their decision to follow this career. Concerns are raised about primary school teaching being a low-status profession, and some males have expressed that people perceive them as having lower intelligence than those teachers who teach older children (Pollitt, 2017).

1.4 Research Objective

This study aims to explore male ECE teachers' narratives in rural primary schools and seeks to respond to the following question: What are the challenges of male teachers in teaching in ECD in rural primary schools?

2. Methodology

This study draws from the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bonache & Festing, 2020). A phenomenological research design is used an approach to qualitative research focusing on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 1998, 2013). The best criterion to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of the human experience common to a group of people. This research design is relevant as it allows the researcher to interview male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE about how they identify themselves in space for women only. This design will allow the researcher to build meaning of events, situations, or experiences and to arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

2.1 Sampling

The researcher used the snowball sampling technique, which is relevant for this study because it is extensively used for conducting qualitative research with a population that is hard to find (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This sampling technique involves primary data sources nominating other potential data sources to take part in the research study. Snowball sampling, or the chain referral method, is based purely on referrals, which enables the researcher to generate a sample (Ramrathan et al., 2017; Matthews, 2019). I consulted with the Department of Basic Education in Thabo-Mofutsanyana District, Free State province, to assist me in locating schools with male ECE teachers. I communicated with one male teacher about the research study I wished to conduct, and they referred me to other male teachers. In this way, five male ECE teachers were selected as participants. Since the researcher will be working on a delicate phenomenon, male teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences. Using semi-structured interviews coupled with a focus group are appropriate research tools that are relatively well understood and have the advantages of simplicity, versatility, and low cost (Adejimi et al., 2010).

2.2 Data Collection

Focus group interviews aim for interaction to generate data (Merton, 1990; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Carey and Smith (1994) define the focus group technique as using a semi-structured group session, moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting, to collect information on a designated topic (p. 226). Focus group interviews are relevant as they will assist the researcher in identifying the group of male ECE teachers and trying to understand how they identify themselves in a sphere dominated by female teachers. Male teachers who have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE are often taken as 'not man enough' and do not have hearts as soft as those of female teachers (McGrath, 2020; Msiza, 2020). Essential elements of focus group interviews are that they are devoted to data collection with interaction as a source of data, with an active role played by the researcher in creating group discussion for data collection. The experiences and expertise that are revealed stem from the terms and language people use to give meaning to their everyday world (Calder, 1977). The interview guide was developed through reading literature on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The researcher developed a preliminary list containing the key issues to be explored during interviews. The list was examined, and broad issues were identified and incorporated into the interview guide. Comprehensive questions were used, and the participants were informed of the questions before coming to the focus group. The purpose of the interview guide is to direct group discussion, stimulate conversation about the research topic, and ensure that all the desired information is sought (McLafferty, 2004). However, these questions act only as a guide, and the researcher asked other questions or commented as necessary to stimulate and focus the discussion.

Recording of data is crucial when conducting semi-structured interviews. The researcher realised it would be challenging to record everything said by making notes during the interviews. Hence, a voice recorder was used after obtaining permission from the participants to do so. Hand-written notes were also used, particularly when probing further for clarification or elaboration was necessary. According to Henning (2014), whether a researcher has collected data through interviews or voice recording, one must make notes to remember what was said. The researcher used face-to-face interviews because the qualitative research design allows for interaction with the participants. During the interviews, the researcher created a relaxed atmosphere so that the participants felt comfortable talking about their experiences in ECE and the challenges they faced in a sector dominated by

women. The data was transcribed to develop a formal report after the researcher completed the interviews.

2.3 Participants

Five male ECE teachers constitute the participants in this study. They were purposively selected from five rural school in Thabo Mofutsanyana District in the Free State, an available and convenient location for public primary schools. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009, p. 79) defined purposive sampling as selecting participants based on specific characteristics that qualify them as holders of data required for the study. This researcher believes that all participants expressing their experiences and understanding may help to increase the recruitment of male ECE teachers in rural primary schools. Their demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables of the participants

Age (years)	Duration of teaching experience in primary school (years)	No. of male teachers in the school
Teacher 1, 27	Three	One
Teacher 2, 28	Three	One
Teacher 3, 32	Five	One
Teacher 4, 28	Three	Four
Teacher 5, 30	Four	One

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the primary data analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017). Three of Creswell's (2013) steps for data analysis were followed. In step 1 the data were organised and codes were defined. The data was read to gain a general sense of the information and then reflected on. In step 2, the categories and codes were developed using open coding. I read the data repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants. This involved looking at the relationships among the open codes; I looked at what influenced these connections and what conditions precipitated them, including context and strategies used. In step 3, the themes and sub-themes were developed. When coding the data, I marked passages and grouped them according to patterns from the research literature and what the male ECE teachers said. I checked for themes emerging from the collected data and then tabulated them.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations refer to ethical principles used to avoid harm to participants when conducting research (Orb et al., 2001). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board and authorisation to carry out the study was sought from and provided by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education of the University of South Africa (2020/10/14/64019209/07/AM), and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of Basic Education. Ethical standards were carefully considered and upheld to protect participants' autonomy and confidentiality (Babbie & Mouton, 2002), including the main ethical principles of non-maleficence and beneficence. The researchers ensured that no harm was done to anyone involved in this study, and all ethical considerations were attended to.

Participation in this study was voluntary (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Participants signed a consent form (Bertram & Christensen, 2014) to assert their autonomy, and pseudonyms (participants 1 to 5) were used to conceal their identity. They were informed that they could withdraw from participating at any point should they wish to do so. Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility and dependability. According to Polit (2017), credibility refers to the extent to which the research accurately represents the phenomenon being studied and the degree to which the findings are believable and trustworthy. Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different contexts. It involves establishing rigorous research procedures, collecting data systematically and in standardised away, and ensuring that the data analysis methods are reliable and replicable. Credibility and dependability help ensure that the research findings are robust and can be used to make informed decisions and draw valid conclusions. This was a small-scale case study, and therefore the results may not be generalized (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). No claim is made for the transferability of the results to other situations or contexts.

3. Results

3.1 Mistrust of Male Teachers

The results revealed that male teachers are mistrusted in teaching in ECE. The male teachers mentioned that they

experienced challenges as they were not allowed to touch the children. Some male teachers highlighted that they relied on female teachers whenever an issue arose. Male teachers are not trusted because of other men who are child abusers, which is why they were told not to touch the children. This becomes challenging because when working with children they may touch their teacher, who may be in trouble in that space. Having more female teachers than males indicates that men are not trusted, even though the Department of Basic Education is trying to correct the imbalance in the ECE setting:

> *… Female teachers would tell me if a girl child had a problem, I must call the female teachers, and they could not trust me …* (Participant 2)

> *… I was told to call for a female teacher because I am a male teacher…* (Participant 4)

> *… The Department does not trust male teachers because if not, there would be an equal number of female and male teachers; we all know how to teach children in the ECE…* (Participant 2)

> *… If the child comes to a male teacher asking for help, it is like males are incapable of doing that…* (Participant 3)

The results showed that female teachers in primary schools could challenge male teachers not to have physical contact with children. It is impossible to work with children and not touch them; some classroom activities require the teacher to show the child things and be in close proximity when doing so. In such situations the male teacher should try not to touch the children, which is not the case for female teachers.

3.2 Inability to Handle Children

The results revealed that male teachers cannot handle the young children in some instances. They mentioned that they experienced challenges as they were not allowed to touch the children. Some male teachers highlighted that they relied on female teachers whenever an issue arose:

> *I am the only male teacher in primary school.* (Participant 1)

> *I experience challenges when I must attend the workshop; the female teachers will ask, am I at the right place?* (Participant 2)

> *The challenge I am facing is trying as possible not to have physical contact with children* (Participant 3)

> *Female teachers would tell me that if a girl child had a problem, I must call the female teachers* (Participant 2)

> *The child will have messed up themselves; as a male teacher I will have to assist the child* (Participant 4)

3.3 The Only Male Teacher

Male teachers are in the minority in primary schools; they are intimidated and feel unworthy in a space dominated by female teachers. Another challenge is being the only male teacher at the school, which results in them not being taken seriously when they voice themselves, since no one is listening to them:

> *As male teachers, we are not taken seriously when we voice ourselves because we are the minority in schools.* (Participant 4).

> *I feel unworthy or untrained to teach in primary school.* (Participant 3)

> *I have realized that women are soft compared to males.* (Participant 2)

> *Working with people who have experience created the inferiority complex.* (Participant 1)

> *I had a horrific challenge whenever I had to go to school because there was no time for teaching. I was attending to reports, and so doing this and trying to discipline the children; I found that challenging.* (Participant 5)

Their narratives revealed that the male teachers face challenges as they sometimes feel unworthy in the primary school setting and even gave the analogy of not being as soft as women; this created an inferiority complex. They were a male teacher in school, resulting in them being forced to apply their masculinity as they will be assigned the work of disciplining the children. They feel that they are not teachers enough because they are not doing what they must to teach the children.

3.4 Stigmatisation

Male teachers are stigmatisation as it is believed that they cannot deal with children, and males are thus scared of becoming teachers of young children. Other teachers in the higher grades laugh at them, saying ECE is all about playing with children and they must go and play with the children. This makes them feel belittled and not accepted by colleagues in the higher grades. If they have to attend the practical the male teachers will choose the higher grades when they arrive at schools, because they do not want other teachers to know they have chosen to teach young children:

… other male teachers think I might not be man enough, half man or half woman (Participant 1)

Can you work with young children? (Participant 1)

They think I am earning little because I teach young children. (Participant 1)

I do not have qualifications, so I teach young children. (Participant 2)

A parent said that only if he knew that his child's teacher is a male he would not allow it, and male teachers are incapable. (Participant 5)

From the above narratives it is clear that male teachers are experiencing challenges teaching in primary schools. As a teacher, it is not acceptable to be asked by other teachers whether you can work with children, and society thinks that if you are a male teacher teaching young children, it is because you are not qualified enough. Also, it is held that they earn little because they find themselves in a space where female teachers dominate.

3.5 Exercising Discipline

Because there are few male teachers in primary school, they are supposed to exercise their masculinity whereby they are good at disciplining the children, and spend most of the time doing that instead of teaching the children. Male teachers even report that children would like them to shout as the female teachers do, but they only use their normal voices and the children will do whatever they are supposed to. Their classes are not as noisy as those of the female teachers:

… the discipline is excellent because I am a male teacher. (Participant 1)

… for a male teacher, the discipline is different from that of female teachers as for female teachers shout at children repeating themselves when commanding the discipline, but with male teachers, I only speak once, and they listen. (Participant 2)

Children fear males more than females. (Participant 3)

I cannot shout, but I use my deep voice as a male teacher. (Participant 4)

I raise my voice, and the child listens. (Participant 5)

This shows that the classes held by the male ECE teachers are disciplined enough, compared to those of the female teachers. Children need to be exposed to different genders at school so that they may learn how to behave. Male teachers need to know how to make the children feel comfortable in class, so that they do not feel that they are being punished more because of being in a male class.

4. Discussion

Male teachers teaching in primary schools face the challenge of not being taken seriously by other teachers; there is a lack of understanding from their peers, who may criticise them for choosing an 'easy' career option (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Being in the minority resulted in not being taken seriously, and other teachers in the more feminine environment asked them if they were able to work with young children (Cushman, 2005). The challenge for male teachers in primary schools starts while they are still in training; they have to negotiate a training course that is often more suited for their female colleagues and their learning style (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Male teachers are ridiculed by being told they are earning little and not qualified enough, which is why they teach in primary schools (Foster & Newman, 2005; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Male teachers often feel they are under more scrutiny than female colleagues regarding physical interactions with children, and have questioned their motives for pursuing their career (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). These challenges are moderated by demographic variables such as age, years of teaching experience, the number of male teachers at the school where they work, whether or not teaching was their first career, the gender of the principal at the school where they are employed, and whether or not they are a parent (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Smith & Hung, 2008; White, 2011). The societal notion is that roles that have a caring aspect are a natural choice for females rather than males (Cameron, 2001; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training come together to discuss the situation prevailing in primary schools, why there are so few male teachers, and what challenges could be prohibiting male teachers from joining primary schools. I recommend that the Department of Higher Education and Training go to different universities to develop marketing strategies and provide motivation and clarity on becoming a male teacher for primary schools. It is clear that when teaching in primary school as a male teacher, the benefits are the same as for teachers teaching in higher grades. There needs to be more explanation in high schools, before the students pass matric and apply for higher education institutions, so they can choose their career with understanding. Also, male teachers in primary schools should be given motivational talks, so that they do not feel like leaving the primary setting too early

because of not feeling that they are taken seriously by their colleagues and other teachers in high schools. Developmental workshops are crucial at this stage to motivate all primary school teachers, so that male teachers can feel accepted in their career choice.

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