

Teacher Narratives on Female Dominance in Sustainable Development: Early Childhood Education

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doi:10.63593/RAE.2788-7057.2025.09.001

Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) teachers are female, even in school management positions. ECE is perceived as dominated by females and has long been regarded as a female occupation. This study explores teacher narratives on female dominance in sustainable development in ECE. Even though females dominate ECE, slight changes occur as some male teachers break the stereotyping and the gender imbalance. This article explores the teacher's narrative through qualitative research, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, which were employed to understand teachers' narratives on female dominance. Female teachers were purposefully selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The paper is theoretically grounded on social identity theory, emphasizing that individuals must protect their identities through favorable groups to preserve their self-esteem. A thematic analysis approach was applied to analyse and make the collected data meaningful. The findings show that there are few male teachers in ECE, and as a result, men who wish to become teachers in ECE are scared to be ridiculed and not regarded as man enough. The suggestion is that for ECE to be sustainable, the Department of Basic Education must consider male teachers to be included in ECE and develop strategies for recruiting male teachers and their sustainability.

Keywords: teacher, female, dominance, early childhood education

1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) settings mainly involve female teachers, who predominate since ECE is generally a female occupation (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Women have historically held positions of power in ECE because of the general belief that they are more capable of nurturing than men. This prevents male educators from reimagining themselves as ECE professionals and moving further in their profession (McGrath, 2018; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). The literature shows that the stereotypical ideas of 'nannies' and 'carers' accompanying ECE instruction are more often connected with women's roles than men's (Petersen & Petker, 2011; Petersen, 2014; McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020). In ECE, most teachers are female, even in school management positions. Hence, ECE is perceived as dominated by females and has long been regarded as a female occupation space (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Society trusts women to teach young children because women are considered more nurturing than men. As a result, society has deemed that this sector should be dominated by female teachers (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020).

Even though females dominate ECE, slight changes occur as some male teachers are in ECE settings. Men who deviate from traditional and stereotyped gendered performances tend to be ridiculed by other men and women (Brown, 2016; Moosa & Bhana, 2017; Yang, 2018). However, solid evidence suggests that many parents or guardians are concerned when their young children are assigned a male teacher (Yang, 2018). Therefore, it is evident that for ECE to be sustainable and continue to develop, women are relevant and should occupy the space. Male teachers who have joined the female sector as sustainable proclaimed that they are not soft and feminine compared to females (McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020). The argument is that children's gender knowledge is

extended upon observing male teachers demonstrating feminine and masculine traits.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding of this paper is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory is crucial in exploring how females in ECE settings view themselves and the roles deemed appropriate for them against the other gender. Delahaij (2020: 660) states that social identity theory posits that individuals must protect their social identities through favorable groups to preserve their self-esteem. In addition, the female teachers will get the opportunity to answer questions about how they socialize with children, how they operate in a sector that believes working in an ECE setting is a woman's career, and how they protect and preserve their self-esteem. Social identity theory emphasised the existence of social groups and the principle that could explain society's perceptions towards female teachers compared to other groups. As a result, female teachers in ECE get the opportunity to protect their identities.

3. Research Objective

This paper explores teacher narratives on female dominance in sustainable development in early childhood.

4. Literature Review

Education plays an essential role in human life. Early childhood education is the development and education phase, including most cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development (Berk, 2013; Silman, Bozcan, & Koran, 2019). Differences in behavior and personal characteristics between men and women are socially learned and shaped. Children at ECD age are given gender-stereotyped answers and act appropriately following their gender as expected by society (Kanka, Wagner, Schober & Spiel, 2013). During the development phase, the child is introduced to the rules and behavior deemed appropriate to their gender by society and family. An early childhood teacher is essential as it is the first teacher figure apart from parents. The teacher's attitudes and behaviors have permanent effects, allowing them to learn and internalise attitudes and behavior regarding gender roles (Avci & Toran, 2012; Connell, 1998; Driscoll & Nagel, 2008; Meece & Daniels, 2008; Inceoglu & Akcali, 2018). Gender denotes both innate physiological and biological traits for men and women.

Accordingly, female and male gender traits change into gender roles due to the influences of social values and demonstrate differences in behavior (Burr, 1998; Marshall, 1999; Todor, 2010). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), most ECED and elementary school teachers in most countries are female (OECD, 2015). Cultural and economic conditions have shaped gender roles in teaching throughout history. The religious and moral values of society have influenced gender perceptions and expectations. In this respect, the trust in the protective and supportive nature of women has resulted in the perception that the ECE profession is perceived as services aimed at providing care and protection for the children and in men not giving trust as much as women do in terms of fulfilling these services (Akman, Taskin, Ozden, Okyay, Corfu, 2014; Birey, Beyidoglu, 2013; Yilmaz & Dereli, 2015). Teaching is perceived as a woman's occupation in society, specifically ECD. The influence of stereotypical judgments regarding gender roles during teacher-student communication in the teaching-learning process is apparent. Teachers' behaviors and attitudes supporting sexist, stereotypical judgments of the family and culture influence the games and toys children play, game friend choices, language properties they use, and their problem-solving methods. As reported by Berk (2013), teachers might act in a manner that continues the social gender roles taught at home and support stereotypical judgments. While the manly behaviors of girls are sometimes perceived as being strong and are approved, the feminine behaviors of boys are most often suppressed strongly. Savinskaya (2017) suggests that ECE teachers incorporate effective instructional strategies to promote the sustainability and development of ECD settings. Gender equality applies to women and me, and it is seen as an instrument of the situation of women in particular. Gender stereotyping perceptions in ECDs and schools contribute to limiting the freedom of children to make their own educational choices.

The overwhelming concentration of women teachers in early care and education programs is not new. Despite the prolonged dominance of women in these fields, limited research investigates several possible problems in having almost all women in the workplace (Ceci, Ginther, Kahn & Williams, 2014). Women are believed to be warm, nurturing, and sensitive; they are thought to be more talented at working with young learners than men (Msiza, 2020). Since the customers of early childhood programs are frequently women, the symbols of the power hierarchy of conventional gender positions of women as caretakers are being reinforced, making this repetition of gender production and reproduction of power more apparent (Ransom, 1990). The feminisation debate is linked to the historical context of gender equality. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in societies where women were restricted from choosing professions of choice, teaching was their only channel of economic empowerment (Fischman, 2007). Historically, the increase in the number of females in teaching has been in correlation with the expansion of the collective education system (Carrington & Phee, 2008). The feminisation of early childhood teaching is not only prevalent in South Africa but also in Pakistan due to the influence of

societal beliefs and norms on career choices (Danish, 2016).

In South Africa, attitudes towards ECE preservice teachers indicate different sentiments about male teachers teaching in ECE. The National Teacher Education Audit Synthesis Report highlighted the feminization of the teaching profession at the ECE level, where most teachers are females (Hofmeyr & Hall, 1995). Petersen and Petker (2011) argue that in South Africa, teaching in early or lower grades is associated with being nannies and caregivers who are most likely to be female due to their maternal instincts. Bhana and Moosa's (2018) study found that male preservice teachers were more comfortable teaching learners in higher grades, equating to having a higher status profession than teaching in the ECE. Scholars have analysed the problems in the career development of female university teachers from the dimension of power (Shu, 2020). Although female teachers now account for half the teachers in universities, men remain at the top and centre regarding administrative power distribution, participation in school management, and teaching and scientific research achievements brought about by academic power. Women tend to be at lower levels on the fringes, presenting a clear gender-segregated state. The situation is mainly brought about by social gender factors, including traditional gender patterns, policies, institutions, families, and individuals (Tao, 2016). Career development is closely related to self-actualisation (Ren, 2016).

5. Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was employed to collect rich, in-depth data. Within qualitative research, a phenomenological research design was applied to explore teacher narratives on female dominance in sustainable early childhood education. Moreover, it was used to make sense of the subjective opinions of female dominance on the topic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four ECE female teachers and selected through convenience sampling (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). The semi-structured interviews solicited teacher narratives on sustainable development in ECE settings. The data collection process enhanced the researchers' focus on the study's objectives.

6. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied to analyze and make the collected data meaningful (Peel, 2020). Importantly, it explored the teacher narratives on female dominance in sustainable early childhood settings. In understanding the teachers' narratives on female dominance using the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The data was imported into Atlas. Ti software. An independent coder was employed to code the transcribed data, which enhanced the accuracy of the coding process and the credibility of the findings (Hosseini et al., 2021). O'Kane, Smith, and Lerman (2021) explain that the reliability of findings can be achieved by reducing biases and being transparent in the coding and analysis processes. At the end of the analyses, themes emerged.

The themes are presented in the section on findings and interpretation and supported by verbatim quotes of teacher's narratives and responses during the semi-structured interviews.

6.1 Female Dominance

The results showed that female teachers are dominant in ECE. For example, external forces from society question the male teachers' career choices in ECE and why they teach young children. They stated that they needed to prove themselves as they felt they were regarded as 'not man enough' because they were taught in a field occupied mainly by females. Most female teachers are regarded as knowledgeable because they have experience working with children, and in addition, the sexuality of the male teachers is questioned:

T: 1 *There is the knowledge that women are good for teaching young children because they are perceived to have love for the children.*

T: 2 *The first is that female teachers dominate ECE and are considered suitable for teaching in this setting.*

T: 3 *With female teachers, physical contact with children is easy for them; you will find them touching children's heads and ears, and I don't think it can be easy with the other agender.*

T: 4 *During our training as preservice teachers, the number of females outnumbered the number of male preservice teachers who studied early childhood education, and the notion of female dominance is evident in universities.*

6.2 Historical and Cultural Lens

The results demonstrated that male teachers were considered potentially abusive in ECE. Male teachers have to prove themselves, to show the children that not all men are mean and try to have good relationships with children by being supportive, gentle, and caring. The environment plays a significant role; if children feel unaccepted, especially in a male teacher's classroom, that is seen as abuse:

T: 1 *I teach grade 2, and there is only one male teacher among women in our school.*

T: 2 *Whenever there is a situation in a class, the male teacher is advised to call for a female teacher as the male teachers are regarded as authoritative.*

T: 3 *In a meeting, women are talking too much as they are talkative; being the minority, we have to listen to them.*

T: 4 *I am very proud of teaching young children, and I understand teaching is a job, regardless of whether it is male or female.*

6.3 Breaking Gender Barriers

Male teachers in ECE are breaking gender barriers and have constructed their identities by joining a setting where female teachers dominate and outnumber male teachers. Male ECE teachers attest that they have a passion and love for the children and can do better in teaching them; it is not only female teachers who can teach in ECE. Other male teachers do not have problems teaching young children and regard themselves as teachers like any other teachers. The Department of Basic Education should know of the skew prevailing in ECE settings:

T: 1 *In ECD, there are very few male teachers in the space of women's domination, and the male teachers are breaking gender barriers.*

T: 2 *Our school has two male teachers in our space, and the males assist us on sports grounds and managing with discipline.*

T: 4 *I asked one male teacher how it is possible to work with young children, and the answer was that I love children and have a passion for teaching ECD, and I can play with them.*

7. Discussions

This study aims to explore teacher narratives on female dominance in sustainable development in early childhood education settings.

This paper found that female teachers dominate ECE settings; however, some male teachers teach in ECE even though there are few. Male teachers were told to call female teachers whenever a class situation occurred, and as a result, they were forced to rely on females. The paper found that male teachers also had positive experiences; they could break the gender barriers in ECE for gender equity. Male teachers in a female-dominated setting were passionate about teaching in ECE (Mashiya et al., 2015; Perez, 2019). Therefore, for the sustainable development of ECE, the Department of Basic Education can conduct public awareness campaigns to actively recruit males or men for professions working with young children through teacher programmes and to expose young children not only to women but men as well as there are men who are taking care of their children at home. As a result, they can teach young children if they wish to become teachers of young children. Other children don't have a father figure at home. If they get the opportunity to be taught by a male teacher, then the ECE can be sustained and developed, and not young children can get used to female teachers only. When transitioning to intermediate, they meet with male teachers, become frustrated, and take a long time to cope with this new situation. According to the teacher narratives, females are passive, fragile, and emotional. At the same time, men are independent and assertive. With this statement, it is evident that for ECD to be sustainable and to continue to develop, the other gender is needed to reduce the imbalance in ECD settings.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

There are few male teachers in ECE in South Africa due to the gender imbalance noted in the ECE setting. This situation calls for the recruitment of more male teachers. Therefore, public recognition of outstanding male ECE teachers and male lecturers in ECE undergraduate degrees should attract males to ECE through advertising that focuses on male involvement in ECE, promoting the profession to men, and reducing negative stereotyping. Proper attention should also be paid to appropriate orientation strategies for prospective students to assist them in making informed decisions regarding their choice of specialisation. Male student teachers should also be encouraged and educated about strategies to cope with criticism so that they will be resilient when facing challenges with their career choices. Having male teachers together with female the Department of Education will have considered gender equity and sustainable development of ECE settings.

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