

Positioning Male Teachers In the Foundation Phase In South Africa: A Case of One Education District

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Abstract

Observation and literature confirmed that men are unduly scarce in the count of foundation phase (grade 1 to 3) teachers in South Africa and the few that are presented as foundation phase teachers are often criticized and ridiculed with the argument that foundation phase teaching is for women. Therefore, the study sought to understand gendered ideologies in order to address the issue of missing male teachers in the foundation phase, which is currently considered to be feminized. Using Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory, the study explores the perceptions embedded within gender issues and how these influence the appointment of male teachers in the foundation phase in the Amathole Education District of the Eastern Cape Province. A qualitative approach was adopted, and a case study research design was employed where six participants (three males and three females) were purposely sampled and interviewed. Data were analyzed using content analyses where some themes emerged. The study revealed that most males are unwilling to work with younger kids, while the study also confirms their roles as very important in the development of younger kids. The study concludes that male teachers' positive influence cannot be underestimated; hence the government should devise a way to motivate male teacher educators toward the world of work in the foundation phase.

Keywords: *Male teachers; Feminization; Foundation Phase; Gender Stereotyping*



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INTRODUCTION

Parents play a vital role in their children's education, but they are not the only ones who have an impact. Teachers also play a crucial role in supporting and shaping young minds. Teachers act as surrogate parents in many ways, providing care and guidance during the school day. This is especially important for learners who do not have supportive adults at home. The foundation phase level of education is crucial for children's development, and all teachers – both male and female – play an essential role in ensuring that every child has the opportunity to succeed (Kim, 2018; Sumsion, 2005). By nurturing young minds and providing support, teachers help create a foundation for a lifetime of learning. It is believed that male and female teachers play different but complementary roles in the education of young children. Male teachers tend to be more authoritarian, while female teachers are more nurturing (Amosun et al., 2021; Moosa & Bhana, 2017). This is not to say that one is better than the other but that each offers a unique perspective and set of skills necessary for a well-rounded education of learners in the foundation phase. The Foundation phase is primary education focusing on grades 1 to 3, and the ages of learners/children are between 6 and 9 years.

Despite this complementary role of both genders in the foundation teaching space, the space seems dominated by female teachers who may have left students with skills from only female teachers.

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This is in line with the argument that the field of early childhood or primary education is one of the most female-dominated occupations (Sumison, 2005). In Finland, it is reported that the proportion of male teachers teaching in primary schools is 10%; in Germany, it is 4%; and in the United States (US), only 2% (US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2014). When it comes to reasons for the low number of males in primary schools, one of the most prevalent is gender prejudice and stereotyping with beliefs that teaching young children is a woman's job, which may explain why there are few male teachers (Cheryan et al., 2014). In the same vein, Speizer et al. (2008) argue that a lack of public acceptance is due to perceptions about the unnaturalness of males doing routine tasks and the stigma of male involvement in child abuse. The majority believe that primary school teaching is a less appealing profession for male instructors, and it is characterized as uninteresting, time-consuming, unpleasant, or needing a great deal of patience (Ravhuhali et al., 2019).

A study conducted in Trinidad and Tobago revealed that there are fewer male teachers in primary schools due to lower public confidence in males. The perception is that teaching in the primary phase is the role of the females since it is more about nurturing the child (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). Similarly, Lingard (2018) reported that in the Central African Republic, females dominate the primary phase. Lingard further asserted that in the 21st century, the presence of male teachers in children's early education is important. However, culture and stereotypical mindsets prevent men from venturing into primary school teaching as educators. Martin (2017) reveals that in many African countries, males play a pivotal role in nurturing their biological children; however, when it comes to schooling, there is so much mistrust of men around children at an early age in society.

In South Africa, the foundation phase runs from Grade R to Grade 3, with learners ranging in age from five to nine years old (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; DBE, 2014). A foundation phase teacher normally teaches all the subjects in a grade (Morake, 2014). A study by Sayed and McDonald (2017) asserts that in South African schools, both male and female teachers are desperately needed in the foundation phase. Meanwhile, Mashiya (2014) claims that, traditionally, few males have been involved in early education, but this is beginning to change as more men enrolled in higher education schools and teacher training programs.

Bhana et al. (2019) and McGrath et al. (2020) affirm that in South Africa, one in five primary school teachers is male. This aligns with a global trend in which males are more likely to instruct teenagers than young children. As a result, there has been an international emphasis on the scarcity of male instructors for little children. This assertion is supported by Ravhuhali et al. (2020), who, in South Africa, attitudes regarding male foundation phase instructors reveal a range of sentiments about men who teach in the foundation phase. Because the foundation phase is compared with childcare, Mashiya (2014) reports that male teachers practising in the foundation phase face a wide range of hostile environments from teachers, parents, and certain learners. The study confirms that male pre-service teachers are more comfortable teaching pupils in the higher grades, according to Bhana and Moosa (2016), who note that male pre-service instructors have a higher status than those teaching Grades R or 1. Thus, there is a severe deficit in positive influences by male teachers in the primary education setting, which constitutes motivation to explore how male teachers could be positioned in the foundation phase in the Eastern Cape. In order to understand this, the place of gender schema theory is imminent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sandra Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory was developed to explain how various gender stereotypes form cultural and societal belief systems. The theory posits that as children are born, they

are indoctrinated by their society's distinction between male and female. As they grow and mature, they learn to adopt various gender roles that are prescribed by their culture. However, these roles are often in conflict with each other, leading to tension between the sexes. Gender Schema Theory provides a framework for understanding these tensions and can help to raise public awareness of the contradictions that emerge in various social institutions (Bem, 1981a; Bem, 1981b). By increasing understanding of these issues, Gender Schema Theory can help to promote gender equality. Furthermore, people learn at a young age what each gender's job entails, according to their culture and society. Even if there are distinct societal distinctions in terms of the formal roles assigned to males and females, Bem (1981b) confirms that adult responsibilities are based on sexual orientation.

Furthermore, gender roles are assigned to children in their early years as part of their socialisation. Children had to change their behaviours to adhere to socially acceptable and anticipated gender norms in their society. Most significantly, children are expected by their culture and community to develop sex-based specific talents and self-concepts based on societal expectations (Bem, 1981a; Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). Individuals appear driven by their inherent biological imperatives or natural tendencies and behaviours. These trends and actions are intuitively accepted in various societal and cultural traditions, which are seen as proper standards of living. In the long run, being male or female significantly influences gender-based responsibilities that are considered rigid and desirable in society (Petersen, 2014).

From the above, we argue that gender schema theory is a cognitive framework that helps us to understand how people learn and organize gender-based knowledge in their minds. The theory posits that children develop mental schemas about gender roles, which are then used to interpret and categorize new information about men and women (Bem, 1981a). Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study because it enables the researchers to understand gender-based roles, connections, and disconnection in society. However, understanding gender inequality in the foundation phase through gender schema theory sheds more light on the cultural and stereotypical culture of gender imbalance in foundation phase teaching and teacher education. Based on this eye-opener, this study sought the foundation phase teachers' perceptions towards repositioning male teachers into the foundation phase education system in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. This indicates that there is a need to reposition male teachers in the foundation phase as they are an important resource that can help change stereotypical views of women's role in society. In addition, we argue that male teachers positively impact the teaching and learning process and can play an important role in changing gender norms and roles in society.

Research Question

Based on the above lacuna, the following question was raised to guide the study: What are foundation phase teachers' perceptions about positioning male teachers in the foundation phase?

RESEARCH METHOD

This section discusses the methods that were adopted to implement this study. The method comprises the adoption of an interpretive paradigm, qualitative research approach, case study research design, the participants, data collection method and analysis, and ethical issues.

Research Paradigm

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm to understand gender paucity and a phenomenon in the current foundation phase of education in South Africa. The researchers believe this paradigm is

relevant to this study because it helps explore and understand the issue from different social and cultural perspectives (Günbayi & Sorm, 2018; Wilson, 2017). This paradigm also allows the researchers to collect data from various sources, including interviews (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). With this paradigm, the researchers gained a better understanding of the issue and its impact on the foundation phase of education in South Africa.

Research Approach

In order to implement this, the qualitative research approach was considered relevant because it would give an insight into the different aspects that needed to be taken into account when designing the study. This included understanding the research problem from the participants' perspective and generating new ideas about the problem (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Qualitative methods were also used to collect data about the potential solutions to the problem and how these could be implemented in the study. The advantages of using a qualitative approach included the development of a more in-depth understanding of the problem, as well as the ability to generate new ideas about potential solutions (Grant & Kara, 2021). Qualitative methods often rely on small-scale studies, which can limit their generalizability (Carminati, 2018). Nevertheless, the use of a qualitative approach was considered to be advantageous for this particular study.

Research Design

The case study research design was adopted for this study to provide in-depth views of having males in the foundation phase. The case study allowed for an exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the participants in relation to the research question (Houghton et al., 2015; Pacho, 2015). This type of research design is also well suited to inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, as was the case with this study. Furthermore, the use of a case study enabled an exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, providing a rich and complete understanding of the issue under investigation (Lindgreen et al., 2021). The case study also has limitations, such as its potential for bias and lack of generalizability. However, these limitations are outweighed by its strengths, making it an ideal choice for this type of research.

Participants and Participant Selection

The participants for this study were purposively selected in order to get a diverse group of opinions who are also affected by the phenomenon under study (Campbell et al., 2020). Six teachers from six different foundation phase grades in the Amathole East Education district in the Eastern Cape province were chosen. Three males and three females were selected to get a balanced representation. All the participants were currently teaching in the foundation phase. This was important because the researcher wanted to get the opinions of active teachers dealing with the issue first-hand. We arrived at six participants because of the limited male teachers in the study location. The limited number of participants is based on the argument that participants in the qualitative case study should be determined based on the information available from each participant to address the objective of the study (Vasileiou et al., 2018). This is supported by Malterud et al. (2016 p. 1753), that "the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower number of participants is needed. Since the selected participants hold the needed information, the number becomes appropriate for the study. And by getting a range of perspectives, the researcher could paint a complete picture of how foundation phase teachers in the Eastern Cape province feel about their current working conditions.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview is a widely used research method in the social sciences. Its flexibility allows researchers to collect detailed data on a wide range of topics, while its structure ensures that key topics are covered (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenike, 2021). This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants by asking a question to seek their perceptions about male teachers' availability in the foundation phase. All the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission and later transcribed. This allowed for a detailed data analysis, which was then used to answer the research question. The use of semi-structured interviews proved to be an effective way to collect data in this study.

Data Analysis and Ethical Consideration

Data were subjected to content analyses. This was later confirmed as a set of codes that sought to identify, connect, and label data. The codes were subsequently subdivided into bigger categories that could be observed in the data. The themes (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020; Kuckartz, 2019) were formed by grouping the data into relevant themes. These themes were used as subtitles to group the findings. Themes are crucial in content analyses because they allow the researchers to structure and make sense of the data (Lindgren et al., 2020). By grouping codes that relate to similar topics or ideas, themes can help reveal patterns and relationships that would otherwise be difficult to see. During the data analysis, male teachers are coded as MT1, MT2, and MT3; female teachers are coded as FT1, FT2, and FT3 in order to protect their identity in line with research ethics.

However, in line with ethical considerations in research, the researchers obtained permission to conduct this study from the education district office, the sub-region of Amathole East Department of Education, the participants, and the researcher's university. Before participating, we made certain that the participants' ethical responsibilities in connection with their dignity, rights, safety, and well-being were considered. Before participation, issues related to voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the research's benefit to the participants were addressed in-depth to allow them the option of giving informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, with or without explanation or prejudice. To safeguard truthfulness, a clear disclosure regarding the researcher's background allowed for a degree of openness and trust that assured honesty from the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, emerging findings from the interviews are presented and discussed. The themes emerging from the findings are used as headings to organize the findings. The three male teachers are coded as MT1, MT2, and MT3; female teachers are coded as FT1, FT2, and FT3. The two major themes are centred on male teachers' perceptions of teaching in the foundation phase and female teachers' perceptions of teaching in the foundation phase.

Male Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching in the Foundation Phase

There is an indication that male teachers are not enough in the foundation phase because most men are not interested in being associated with responsibilities that have been associated with women by culture or societal beliefs. Also, some teachers consider teaching young kids very stressful and require a lot of patience. It has been a long-standing perception that female teachers are better suited for primary school teaching. However, this view is gradually changing as more and more fathers are becoming stay-

at-home dads and taking on responsibilities that were once considered the domain of mothers. This is supported by the MT1 statement:

MT1: *"No one forced me to be here; I am here because I wanted to teach small kids and not older children because I like them. They are not cheeky like high school children... I've always wanted to teach the small ones because I want to be their role model..."*

This further confirms that many men are now pursuing careers in early childhood education, realizing that they have a lot to offer young children in terms of guidance and support (Warin, 2018). On the contrary, most male teachers found teaching in the selected school not interesting and were only there because fate found them there and seemed uncomfortable with their job. The statements below shed more light on the argument.

MT2: *I did not want to be a foundation teacher...for me, it was because I was not admitted in my first choice, so this was my second choice when I applied to university ... I chose education because I wanted to be employed soon rather than staying at home ...I don't think I am comfortable teaching these young ones, they need a **lot of time and patience**. They are very active, always playing in class, and not attentive to stuff like that...*

MT3: *I don't think I like being here; even my other colleagues can see I don't want to be here ... maybe just for a few years. I don't think I have the skills to deal with these kids. While working, I will study Law so that I don't stay here.*

MT2 and MT3 shared similar views. Findings indicate that two of the three male teachers were discontented with their role as foundation phase teachers. Several reasons were attributed to choosing the foundation phase. When asked about their decisions to work as foundation phase educators, one teacher stated that he wanted to be a teacher, while the other two male teachers reported having made changes or adaptations to earlier career plans. The percentage of participants and their statement shows that men are not interested in working with younger kids due to factors such as stereotypes, stress from the kids, and their nature which seems time-consuming. However, this is not far from the societal belief that females are responsible for taking care of kids at home and in society. A recent study showed that men are less likely than women to want to work with young children (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Mashiya, 2014). However, these findings confirm the societal belief that women are the only ones who can or should care for children. This study provides a valuable argument that gender stereotypes can impact men's career choices and highlights the need for more gender-inclusive policies in the childcare industry.

Female Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching in the Foundation Phase

The perception of female teachers based on the interview confirms that male teachers are not interested in teaching in the foundation phase, which leaves a vacuum in teaching and learning in primary schools. This is evidenced in the participants' statements below. Also, the slowness with which young ones learn, especially when they are expected to sit still and listen to a teacher for long periods, often results in frustration and poor performance. As a result, many male teachers are not interested in working with students in the foundation phase (Moosa & Bhana, 2017). Other views were shared by the participants, which complement the above argument.

FT1: *When you ask them, you will see that these young ones are not challenged in terms of being ill-disciplined or misbehaving like older students in high schools, so I wonder why the males are not interested in teaching them.*

FT1: *These young ones need patience which may not be in the person of male teachers. Most parents think the foundation phase needs patient teachers, and males do not have patience; hence they prefer female teachers.*

FT3: *Some SMT members and the community do have fear about male teachers. Most parents think FP needs patient teachers, and males do not have patience.*

FT2: *Yes, males play a big role because they are "father figures" to fatherless learners and even those who have fathers. When they see a figure of authority, then they behave well.*

The above female perceptions also showed that the problem is wider and had made some parents believe that male teachers are not good at taking care of kids; hence they prefer female teachers to be in charge of their kids. According to the statement by FT2, the perception confirms that male teachers are not interested in teaching in the foundation phase, leaving the fatherly place vacuum in teaching and learning in primary schools. This indicates a need for both male and female role models in primary education, as children need positive role models of both genders during their formative years. While some may argue that any qualified teacher can provide a good role model, research has shown that children benefit from having both male and female role models in their lives (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Mills et al., 2004). This is also in consonance with the recommendation that male teachers should be encouraged to take opportunities to teach younger kids (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Green et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to encourage more men to enter the field of primary education in order to provide children with a well-rounded education.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the perceptions of foundation phase teachers' towards positioning male teachers in the foundation phase. From the above analysis, the role of male teachers in the foundation phase is important and would make a complete foundation education system for younger kids. We also argue that male teachers, like their female counterparts, play a dual role as father figures to the learners in the foundation phase in a female-dominated environment. Therefore, male teachers are important for the development of young children and should be encouraged to take on such responsibilities. Male teachers bring a unique perspective and set of skills to the classroom, which is essential for the development of young children. Their positive influence cannot be underestimated, and this study provides valuable insights into the importance of their role in the foundation phase. Therefore, the study concludes that the role of male teachers in the foundation phase is important, and government should devise a way to motivate male teacher educators in the world of work in the foundation phase.

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