

Foregrounding the Gender Divides in Early Childhood Teacher Education: A Case of South Africa

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ABSTRACT Foundation Phase teaching in South Africa is a gendered phenomenon. Therefore, this theoretical study presented an overview of the gender divides that existed in early childhood teacher education through asking the critical question: "Why are male students reluctant in choosing early childhood education as their teaching specialization in teacher education institutions?" Focus is paid on three arenas that perpetrated the divides and these are: African people's beliefs regarding child rearing practices; attitudes of different stakeholders towards the male teachers of young children; and perceptions of male students who are already in the field of early childhood education. This study also foregrounds the benefits that are attached to the education that incorporated the male teachers in early childhood settings.

INTRODUCTION

A Millennium Development goal (number three) is about promoting gender equality and women empowerment in all sectors of education (Country Report 2013). To achieve this goal, opportunities presented to Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Foundation Phase (FP), are overwhelming. The most of the students who choose to specialize in this field are presented with bursaries to study for the duration of the qualification. While some of the students embrace this opportunity with both hands, others ignore it and even decline the offer. The most bursaries target male students since the country is redressing gender imbalances. Despite this financial assistance, few male students opt for FP teaching as a specialization out of their own will. Only the male students who desperately needed financial assistance or who do not meet the requirements to teach in the upper grades register for Foundation Phase teacher education. This field is, therefore, taken as the last resort by male applicants who intend to be teachers. Foundation Phase in this study referred to the education of young children (Reception Year Class (Grade R) to Grade 3) or five to nine year old children.

Lack of Male Teachers in Lower Grades as a Form of Marginalization

According to the Statistics South Africa (2013), education is first and foremost a human

right; a right that is still denied to millions of children around the world. In 2011, an estimated 57 million children of primary school age were not in school. One of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of children and young people are those who grow up without the care of their parents or whose families are at risk of separation. Children deprived of a nurturing and protective family face a greater risk of marginalization, stigmatization, violence and abuse (Statistics South Africa 2013). Thus, there is a great need for the training of both male and female teachers to equally assist the underprivileged learners.

Gawlicz and Starnawski (2013) discuss five areas of discrimination and marginalization of preschool male teachers: religious dominance, suppression of non-heteronormative sexualities, racism and xenophobia, as well as gender inequality in the case. Gender inequality is prevalent in many countries and South Africa is no exception. Gawlicz and Starnawski (2013) recommend communication and marketization of education as a services sector, stratification and selection of students. These pointed emphasize having proper recruitment strategies that can attract males to FP and also enlighten them on the contribution they can make in the education of young children.

How Males are Viewed in the South African Context

Society has long defined males and females by their physical attributes. Mankind has creat-

ed boxes in which males and females must fit. Traditionally, the male is the provider and holds the power. The women are more submissive nurturers (Mckenzie 2012). In the African culture, males are rarely found or seen in child rearing practices. The young children are associated with females, and so is their education. To achieve a society where both genders are treated equally, African cultural practices need to be addressed. Long ago, according to Shostak (2006), men lived a hunting and gathering lifestyle. Men were responsible for providing meat, making tools and protecting the family, while women looked after children and performed other household chores. Thus, males and females were highly dependent on each other for survival. With this in mind, men are still viewed as the sole bread winners even while females work equally to support the family. This notion tended to shift men away from duties that are associated with child rearing. Curnow (2011) raised a concern that the real worry for many is the huge number of single-parent families and the lack of male role models in children's lives. Nine million or nearly half of South African children are growing up with an absent but living father (Curnow 2011).

According to Blee and Tickamyer (1995), the attitudes that men and women held towards appropriate gender roles have a significant influence on many aspects of marital and family dynamics. They further stated that this influence perpetuates gender differentiated opportunities in employment, politics, education and other areas. If this was not the case, there would be no millennium goal directed towards gender equality in all spheres of education and most importantly in the field of FP. The education sector at large did not encourage the involvement of males in the education of young children in South Africa because of gender roles. Male graduates did not think of taking available jobs in the Foundation Phase because of this mentality. The advent of democracy in South Africa emphasized equality in all walks of life. As a result, the field of FP gained attention and became a development niche area for the country and its stakeholders. FP started to gain the attention of some male students in higher education institutions who realized the benefits of this field.

Due to recurring events where young children are raped, there is a grossly exaggerated suspicion of pedophilia; a fear that it is not safe

to leave children alone with men because some men are sexually attracted to young children. This has led to some parents not entrusting male teachers with their children.

Attitudes Towards Male Foundation Phase Students

The percentage of the male teachers in early childhood education is very low when compared to female teachers. In the United States only 2 percent of pre-school teachers are male, while in Germany it is 4 percent. The reasons given for the small number of males in early childhood settings are lack of public acceptance, lack of pay and promotional opportunities, the stigma of male involvement in child abuse, and the conflict over the 'naturalness' of males performing basic care tasks (Clyde 1994: 9).

The number of males in formerly female dominated occupations is expected to rise in the future in countries such as Germany, the US and Turkey (Sobiraj 2011: 799; Sak 2012: 586). This means that there is likely to be an increasing number of male student teachers in the Foundation Phase teacher education program. Research on attitudes towards male Foundation Phase student teachers in South Africa is lacking, although, international research document attitudes towards males in predominantly female occupations such as teaching in the Foundation Phase. Reviews of international research on this topic can be found in Sobiraj (2011: 98) and Sak (2012: 86). Research on male Foundation Phase students as well as practicing male Foundation Phase teachers is needed to highlight the effects of working in a predominantly female occupation and how this impacts on the teaching and learning of male Foundation Phase student teachers (Ching-Sheue and Kun-Chung 2010: 38) as well as their later job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Sobiraj et al. (2011) reported on several international studies that explore the psychological health of men in non-traditional occupations. During their research they questioned female employees in female dominated occupations, including male teachers in German pre-schools about their attitudes towards the male role and additionally asked the men they were working with for a self-evaluation of their psychological health, including depressive moods and job satisfaction. The study assessed specific attitudes

toward the male role and in particular masculinity ideology. The masculinity ideology is defined as a set of beliefs and expectations about what men are like and should do. According to this normative perspective, men face cultural standards for being a man (Sobiraj 2011: 799). Males in female dominated professions have to carry out stereotypically female tasks and display feminine attributes, that is, violate traditional expectations of masculinity ideology. Thus, men in non-traditional occupations who do female tasks might experience conflicting expectations. The study found that the attitudes of female colleagues towards male anti-femininity were directly related to heightened depressive moods and lowered job satisfaction in male colleagues. The depressive moods are negative indicators of psychological health. When the stressors at work are high, the job satisfaction also decreases (Sobiraj 2011: 800).

Sak et al. (2012) reported that one factor that affects the entry of pre-school male teachers to the sector of Childhood Education is the views of female colleagues. They found that most female pre-school pre-service teachers agreed that there should be more male pre-school teachers as they believed male teachers were innovative and problem solvers. Male teachers were also thought to be better disciplinarians, encouraged creativity and organized physical activities Sak (2012: 588). Further, the male pre-school teachers were thought to act in a more professional and objective way, possibly because they were seen to be less sensitive. Female pre-service teachers also stated that male teachers supported the development of the children's social and emotional skills by offering a different role model and preventing bias against male teachers. These female pre-service teachers also believed that boys preferred to play with male teachers. The negative views given by some of the female pre-service teachers in this study were that they felt that male pre-school teachers did not actively choose to work in a pre-school, or that males were not good caregivers. One respondent felt that if she was a parent of girls, she would prefer not to have her daughter taught by males Sak (2012: 589). Scouller (2013) found that in New Zealand there was still public concern over the disproportionate number of male teachers coupled with anxiety around the involvement of men with young children. Female teachers felt that an active media campaign should be undertaken

to make the general public aware of the benefits of male pre-school teachers Sak (2012: 589).

The views of the female teachers on why they thought males entered the ECD profession are highlighted in studies by Sak (2012) and Scouller (2013). Most female teachers felt that males entered into pre-school teaching as there were opportunities in early childhood education as the importance of this phase was on the increase. Some female teachers felt that males work in the pre-school setting as a path to other work such as research assistant, academician, counselor or administrator (Sak 2012). Scouller (2013) viewed that female student teachers in Zealand and Australia indicated that they felt that male teachers were transient workers in the field of ECD. Reasons why male primary school teachers in New Zealand entered this career are given by Scouller (2013), while Ching-Sheue and Kun-Chung (2010) found that Taiwanese male pre-school teachers chose this field as they hoped to open a pre-school business or because the course content was easier.

Clyde (1994) cautioned that bias by incumbent early childhood workers (entering and exiting female student teachers) against male colleagues does not bode well for increasing the number of males in this sector, as it is difficult to change entrenched positions held by people. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2010) revealed the challenges faced by young men when they joined the field of FP. One participant stated: "*Changing my major from engineering to teaching was easy because I felt passionate about teaching. Friends, however, gave me confused looks when I told them*" (NAEYC 2010: 6). However, parents and young learners were happy to have a male teacher in the FP setting.

Perceptions of Male Students about Foundation Phase Teaching

The teaching of young children has long been dominated by women and there has been a low level of males choosing to teach in primary teaching (Drury 2008). Seeing that the number of males choosing to teach in the Foundation Phase is still low, the aim of this section is to review literature on what other researchers have found to be some perceptions that males have towards Foundation Phase teaching.

Seifert (1986) investigated reasons for low male involvement in Childhood Education. One of the reasons given by respondents was the very low salaries and working conditions which made the males look elsewhere for employment. In addition, a study by Rodriguez (1997) found low wages would make Childhood Education male teachers leave the profession. The findings of Cooney and Bittner (2001) in their research revealed that the participants were worried that as sole bread winners in their families, the low salary was going to put their spouse and children in jeopardy. Another reason for low male involvement in Childhood Education was the gender bias. This is about their (males) suitability as compared to their female counterparts. Men saw primary teaching as “a woman’s job, considered as unattractive, boring, hassle causing, stressful or requiring too much patience” (Drury 2008: 312).

Research also revealed that males felt isolated or discriminated upon as a minority in a female dominated field. Sumsion (2000: 90) wrote about male Childhood Education teachers facing the challenge of negotiating what he calls their “*otherness*”, which is how they differ from or resemble their female counterparts. Cooney and Bittner (2001) observed that male students felt that they were isolated and uncomfortable to talk with female colleagues about their classroom issues. Sumsion (2000) stated that the scarcity of men in early years settings is a perception that men who choose to work with young children are homosexuals or pedophiles. Research by Santiago (1999) showed that respondents had one troubling factor which was about people accusing the male teacher of being a child molester.

Research on the perceptions given by males on Foundation Phase teaching showed that there are positive as well as negative aspects that can either attract or deter males from choosing to teach in this phase. Positive responses were their willingness to teach if they were offered an internship position in an early childhood school; the experience of working with young children would be helpful in training them as future dads, the love and enjoyment of working with children, and a desire to contribute something of value to this age group (Santiago 1999). The inclusion of men in Childhood education programs has garnered considerable attention over the years. Some men entered the field because

of an increased interest in further involvement in early childhood programs. This has contributed in recruiting males in teaching the Foundation Phase program. Another possible reason why men teach in the Foundation Phase is that male staff wanted to be treated equally in everything, including rules, expectations, and personnel policies.

Male teachers find it easy to adapt and to work with young ones. Male staff wants to be able to work with young children without their motives being questioned and without being placed under constant scrutiny by administrators, other teachers, and parents for possibly being gay or a pedophile (Sargent 2002). Men want to have the right to express their beliefs and opinions about various aspects of the profession without being accused of trying to take over the field. Children who have father figures involved in their education are more likely to: get better grades; have better verbal and problem solving skills; do better on achievement tests; demonstrate a higher tolerance for frustration, and are more likely to have positive peer relationships (Allen and Daly 2007).

Male students enter the field because they wanted to explore new things. According to Lamb (2000), other males enjoy working with young children and are motivated by desire to be a positive role model, such as those who taught and guided him through life. Males bring more active movement, entertainment, and rough and tumble play to the way they interact with their own children and the way they interact with children in a program (Lamb 2000). Men want specific ideas about ways to be engaged and involved with children. Learners in the Foundation Phase are usually controllable, observant, easily disciplined and respectful. It shows that male students, whether they are fathers or not, are more likely to become involved with the Foundation Phase child when opportunities to do so are provided for them. They want strategies that will not intimidate the children or put them in defensive situations.

The number one issue for everyone who works in the early childhood field is for all early childhood teachers to receive adequate pay and benefits (Sargent 2002). Men who enter this program will also want to benefit from improvements as they also have an interest in seeing the phase evolve.

Benefits of Incorporating Males in the Education of Young Children

Over many centuries the teaching of young children has been the domain of female teachers. Some scholars call it the feminization of childhood education (Wardle 2012). Often “feminization” is used in an evaluative sense and carries the implicit message that the greater the female presence, the greater the likelihood of a “feminine” ethos and culture, and the more likely it is to discriminate against males (Skelton 2002). It is generally assumed that the predominance in numbers of women teachers in primary schools is regarded as having produced pedagogy and school cultures that favor girls and alienate boys in various ways.

The assumption that males are not suitable for early childhood education is a consequence of the sociology of education which equates Childhood Education with motherly care. Clark (2009) has written an illustrative paper on the inclusion of fathers in early children’s literacy programs. The present study focused on the changing behavioral patterns of British fathers where social expectations are high for fathers to spend time with their children. A conceptual context is created that male teachers, as fathers would do, become role models, especially, for male learners. Clark’s above statement proved that the benefits of a society that puts increased pressure on male teachers to be part of the early education process of a child tends to create an environment where children have male role models similar to their fathers even whilst at school. Clark (2009: 34) concluded that “men may be discouraged if early childhood and literacy are feminized”. It could bring feelings of inadequacy on men as fathers and as teachers in early childhood.

The above statement by Clark (2009) can be argued that with the modernizing of the education system, male to child bonds have come to be seen as a very necessary part of the growth of children. Allen and Daly’s (2007) research proved that children with a more significant male presence at school and at home tend to do better at achievement tests, get better grades and have better verbal and problem solving skills, among many other improvements. This increased male presence can be a source of pride for male role models as their increased presence has directly affected the development of a child. Liter-

ature shows that male teachers hold differing and contradictory views on themselves as “role models”. Some male teachers express irritation, annoyance or disappointment at being seen as “special” or being expected to be a “role model” (Maylor 2009: 7). This is supported by Sumsion’s (2000) research that found evidence that male teachers welcomed the chance to be a (non-traditional male) role model and others again welcomed the opportunity to be a (compensatory) male influence, that is, providing pupils with a father figure, or injecting a sense of humor into the classroom.

Recruitment drives for male teachers in FP should not be based on assumptions that men have been excluded from primary teaching because they are not made welcome and/or put off by the predominantly female workforce and that the way to encourage them is to emphasise their uniqueness and how much they are needed to “rescue” boys. The recruitment drives may help in the defeminization of schools. Lu and Jones (2010), and Pruett and Cowan (2009) research proved that an increased male presence in the education process tends to erode the social stigma that limits fathers’ involvement in things like volunteering in school events. With more males being openly accepted by schools as teachers for young children, more fathers will find it more interesting to participate in the development of children. Essentially, a new social norm will be established.

Emerging Issues

Significant issues have emerged from the literature. It is alarming that there are still very few males who are involved in FP not in South Africa alone, but across the globe (Scouller 2013). FP is still a female dominated field (Skelton 2002) as it is generally assumed that the predominance in numbers of women teachers in primary schools. What is important to note is that there are children who are coming from broken families; such children who are deprived of a nurturing and protective family face a greater risk of marginalization, stigmatization, violence and abuse as stated in the Statistics South Africa (2013). Therefore need arises to have gender balanced staff in schools so that those learners feel accommodated, therefore, there is a great need for the training of both male and female teachers to equally assist the under privileged

learners. One cannot shy away from the fact that there is a huge number of single-parent families and the lack of male role models in children's lives really worrying (Curnow 2011). This acute shortage of men in FP is a perception that men who choose to work with young children have a questionable personality, for instance some are believed to be homosexuals and pedophiles (Sumsion 2000).

Some men are fond of working with young children. Sumsion (2000) stressed that male teachers welcome the chance to be a role model to learners in the early grades. This attitude is worth promoting and as a result more fathers will find it more interesting to participate in the education of FP learners. Male to child bonds have come to be seen as a very necessary part of the growth of children as the literature states (Clark 2009). Involving male teachers in the education of young children is vital. Proper recruitment strategies are needed to attract male applicants to join the Foundation Phase. It is also important to note that many potential applicants for Foundation Phase teaching programs believed that Foundation Phase teachers are paid less than other teachers of higher grades. It is therefore important to raise awareness about salaries because out of ignorance many students shy away from this field. Many males are discouraged by the stigma that is attached to male teachers working with young children and negative acts that are associated with that, namely pedophilia and homosexuality, resulting in parents not trusting male teachers. Appreciation of male students by those in teacher education could contribute a great deal. The way issues are handled should not intimidate those who are training as FP teachers. Lecturers tend to exaggerate things, making male students doubt the field they have chosen. One other benefit would be to activate sports from a young age. In South Africa, children start sport activities like soccer once they are at the Intermediate Phase. It is advisable that sport is developed in young children. Teachers welcomed the chance to be a (non-traditional male) role model and others again welcomed the opportunity to be a (compensatory) male influence that is, providing pupils with a father figure or injecting a sense of humor into the classroom.

The benefits of involving men in the education of young children are highlighted by Allen and Daly (2007) who in their research study

proved that children with a more significant male presence at school and at home tend to do better at achievement tests, get better grades and have better verbal and problem solving skills, among many other improvements. To boost the performance of learners in schools, higher education institutions should make it their priority to enroll more of male students so that learners are not deprived of this opportunity.

CONCLUSION

To bridge the gender divide in the field of early childhood education, there are some issues that should be taken into consideration. There is an urgent need to deconstruct the gender roles and dissect all it entails. Gender roles are a social construct. What men should and should not do needs to be rethought and reconceptualized. Thereafter, gender roles should be reconstructed in a convincing way that will emphasize the involvement of males in the education of young children, benefitting children that lack a father figure. This will surely deplete the walls of marginalization and gender divides.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ Proper recruitment strategies should be put in place by teacher education institutions.
- ♦ Detailed orientation programs could shed light to the applicants, who are potential students wishing to specialize in the FP so that they make informed decisions.
- ♦ To ensure the redressing of gender inequality in the Foundation Phase, male graduates should be given first priority where there are vacant positions. It is already stated that there are benefits attached to the involvement of males in young children settings. A society that includes male teachers in the early education process created an environment where children have male role models.
- ♦ When male students are brought on board, proper training of students who are already in the system is a necessity. In addition, honing students' sports skills is vital at a young age so that they are able to excel when they enter the field. It is important that they showcase what is believed to be the lacking skill in female FP teachers. The literature stated that most male teachers for young children have strength in coaching sporting activities.

- ♦ There is also a need to shift away from the mindset that equates Foundation Phase teaching with motherly care, when professionals in this field are regarded as child minders. This thinking results in males shying away from the field. There should be colloquium where these issues are discussed to shed light to those who still believe that FP teaching is for females only.
- ♦ There is a need to organize colloquia so that the importance of male in Childhood education is threshed out.
- ♦ Given the benefits of male involvement in Childhood education, there is a need to increase the intake of male students in higher education institution.

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