

Foundation phase teachers' views of the involvement of male caregivers in young children's education



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Background: Studies in South Africa show a high prevalence of male caregiver absence in the lives of children under the age of 9 years. In this respect, foundation phase teachers are well positioned to provide input and shed light on how schools can contribute towards improving male caregiver involvement in their children's early education.

Aim: This study aimed to explore foundation phase teachers' views of the involvement of male caregivers in the education and development of young children.

Setting: The paper reports on the qualitative phase of a mixed methods study conducted in three township schools near Johannesburg.

Methods: Focus group interviews involving a sample of 17 foundation phase teachers were conducted in three schools. An iterative coding process within a generic qualitative data analysis approach was carried out to articulate overarching ideas and themes.

Results: The results highlight how teachers' taken-for-granted gendered assumptions about the roles of females and males in the education and development of foundation phase children and about the children's care arrangements influence how they communicate with parents, unconsciously alienating male caregivers.

Conclusion: Although teachers had not considered the role of male caregivers in the early years of children's education, they acknowledged that such an undertaking would be beneficial to the learners and the school. Therefore, the authors argue for training aimed at capacitating foundation phase teachers with the essential competencies necessary to galvanise and increase meaningful involvement of male caregivers in the education of learners in pre-service and in-service teacher professional development.

Keywords: foundation phase; male caregivers; father involvement; parental involvement; early childhood education and development.

Introduction

Research highlighting the positive influence of fathers and father figures (male caregivers) on young children's school outcomes in diverse contexts has emerged in the past two decades (Anderson et al. 2013; Jeynes 2018; Meuwissen & Carlson 2015). For example, male caregivers' positive engagement with young children in the United States of America (USA) has been identified as a predictor of enhanced language and cognitive skills development (Anderson et al. 2013) and significant improvements in mathematics outcomes (Curtis, Grinnell-Davies & Alleyne-Green 2017). Numerous studies argue that the absence of a constant adult male role in the early years of a child's life may have a long-term adverse effect on learning and behaviour outcomes (Curtis et al. 2017; Pitsoane & Gasa 2018). A systematic review of literature from 2009 to 2019 (Diniz et al. 2021) also linked male caregiver involvement in young children's lives with higher self-regulation and fewer behavioural problems in the long term.

Despite the instrumental role male caregivers play in children's upbringing and early socialisation, studies in South Africa invariably show a high prevalence of male caregiver absence in the lives of children under the age of 9 years (Khewu & Adu 2015; Mavungu 2013; Statistics South Africa 2021). This situation is worse for black children aged 0–17 years, as 65% live without their biological fathers at home (Statistics South Africa 2021). The fluid structure of South African black families (Ngobeni 2006), traceable to the long history of the migrant labour system, has been identified as a key factor that makes it impractical for a child to have a constant male caregiver throughout childhood (Makusha & Richter 2015).

On the positive side, in South African families, it is common for adult male caregivers such as uncles, grandfathers and stepfathers to assume the role of a father, especially when the biological father is absent (Khwu & Adu 2015; Van den Berg & Makusha 2018). However, little is known about children's male caregivers and their involvement in the children's education and socialisation. In this respect, foundation phase (FP) teachers are well positioned to provide input and shed light on how schools may get male caregivers more involved in their children's early education. Hence, we wanted to gain insights into teachers' views of the involvement of male caregivers in their young children's lives.

School and teacher-driven initiatives to involve parents

Engaging parents and other caregivers meaningfully in their children's education is one of the major challenges faced by FP teachers. It is widely accepted that maintaining a solid working relationship between teachers and parents is necessary to improve the children's learning outcomes (Epstein 1987; Nitecki 2015). Yet, sustained involvement of parents in education remains difficult to achieve as teachers and parents face many barriers in their attempts to work together, especially in disadvantaged communities.

Various intervention models to engage and build a strong working relationship with parents have been tried and tested by school communities and governments alike. Early examples of these attempts are 'family-school-community partnerships' advocated by Epstein (1987) whilst conducting her research in schools and school districts across the US. These were school-based and school-driven initiatives to engage children's families in six dimensions of school-family-community partnerships that are communication, parenting, learning at home, volunteering, decision making and collaborating with the community. Subsequent school-family or teacher-parent intervention models (Deslandes 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Jeynes 2018) seem largely based on modifications or adaptations of Epstein's original template. Sathiapama, Wolhunter and Van Wyk (2012) stated that major school-family models demonstrate specific common themes, such as the belief that effective family-school partnerships are school based and school driven, conceptualise the family broadly and flexibly, and that parental involvement traverses school and home-based activities.

Schools often experiment with various strategies to involve parents. For example, in a study of a successful initiative to involve parents in a suburban pre-primary school in the US (Nitecki 2015), teachers attributed the success of the initiative to three strategies, namely educating parents about their role in their children's learning; creating a welcoming environment at the school and building 'multidimensional relationships' between teachers and parents. According to Nitecki (2015), multidimensional relationships include both professional and social interactions. However, other studies conducted in the US reveal low rates of parental involvement despite efforts by schools and government initiatives to engage

parents in the American public education system (Malone 2015; Robles 2011).

Given that a significant proportion of parents in South Africa, and other low-income countries, are often poor and may be functionally illiterate (Matshe 2014), low levels of parental involvement in education are to be expected. Despite the argument that some poor parents have legitimate reasons for not applying themselves adequately in their children's education (Abrahams 2013), there is a view that teachers in South African public schools are also not doing much to engage parents and support their participation (Munje & Mncube 2018).

As is evident, schools and teachers have a vital role to play in encouraging parental involvement. Sathiapama et al. (2012) supported this notion, arguing that school policies and behaviours of teachers have a greater influence on the level of parental involvement than family background variables such as the socioeconomic status or the marital status of the parents. Yet, research by Mathwasa and Okeke (2016:235) in South Africa showed that FP teachers' often negative attitude towards fathers prevented them from inviting fathers to partake in the education of their children. Also, it should be noted that South African male caregivers often experience numerous barriers to their involvement in the educational processes of learners in FP, including a lack of education (Munje & Mncube 2018), factors such as financial difficulties forcing them to seek employment far from their families (Mavungu 2013) and feelings of shame and inadequacy because of unemployment (Rabe 2018). However, research indicates that FP teachers often overlook such barriers and inadvertently perceive male caregivers as not showing interest in their children's education (Mathwasa & Okeke 2016; Munje & Mncube 2018).

Other research suggests that many primary schools in disadvantaged communities of South Africa are trying to encourage all parents, including male caregivers, to participate in the educational and extra-curricular programmes that involve their children (Kamper 2008; Msila 2012). However, Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004), Matshe (2014) and Sathiapama et al. (2012) expressed concern about the poor implementation of parental involvement initiatives by a significant number of South African primary schools. This includes poor planning and management of parental involvement initiatives (Sathiapama et al. 2012), ineffective top-down and one-way communication with parents (Matshe 2014) and improper channels of communication which depend on learners as 'reliable messengers' to convey messages to their parents and caregivers (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004). There is reliable evidence in the research (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004) across Gauteng schools suggesting that learners often do not deliver the messages and that parents and caregivers do not always heed the written communications from the school.

Moreover, because of the lack of structures within schools to galvanise parental involvement (Sathiapama et al. 2012), and the unavailability of programmes and initiatives that specifically target male caregivers, including those that can be described as 'hard-to-reach' such as non-resident biological fathers, male caregivers' involvement is likely to remain a challenge in South

African public schools. Mathwasa and Okeke (2016:231) cautioned that there is danger in assuming that most FP teachers in South Africa will 'spontaneously know how to stimulate effective parent or family involvement'. There is also evidence from other contexts that there is a need to provide teachers with training focussing specifically on how to include male caregivers in the education of young children (Ancell, Bruns & Choitiyo 2018). Such training is relatively more available to FP teachers in countries like the US, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (Ancell et al. 2018). For instance, the 'Father-inclusive practice guide' was developed by the Australian Government to help schools and other organisations to support the inclusion of male caregivers such as fathers, stepfathers, uncles and grandfathers in early childhood development programmes (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA] 2009).

Research methods

This paper reports on the views of FP teachers from three schools in three focus group interviews during the qualitative phase of a mixed methods study. The purpose of the main study was to explore the level of involvement of male caregivers in the family and school lives of FP learners in a township near Johannesburg. The focus group interviews with teachers were conducted to understand what can be learned from FP teachers about the involvement of males in the education and development of young children in more depth. We used the following research question to guide our investigation:

What can be learned from FP teachers about the involvement of male caregivers in the education and development of young children?

Ethical considerations

We obtained ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg (Ethical clearance number: Sem 1 2019-067) and approval from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education to conduct the research in public schools. Written consent was also obtained from FP teachers. The three schools had a combined total of 22 teachers in FP, and all were female. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to all the FP teachers in each school. A sample of 17 FP teachers gave consent to participate in focus group interviews. This sample, comprising six teachers in the first school, four teachers in the second school and seven teachers in the third school, was considered sufficient to address the objective of the study. The focus group interviews gave participants the opportunity to engage in a meaningful conversation that is of interest to them (Marshall & Rossman 2006) and the opportunity to describe their personal experiences of the issue at hand (Munje & Mncube 2018). To facilitate the focus group discussion, we used a semi-structured interview protocol (Marshall & Rossman 2006) that asked focused questions but still encouraged discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view (Rubin & Rubin 2005) in a conversation-like open discussion (Munje &

Mncube 2018). Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis.

To analyse the data, we undertook a generic qualitative approach (Creswell 2009; Ivankova & Stick 2007; Tesch 1990), which is an iterative coding process that builds from the bottom (raw data) to the top (interpretation) (Creswell 2009). We began this process by reading through all transcripts to 'get a sense of the whole' (Tesch 1990). We then carefully went through each interview transcript and made a list of all recurring ideas, labelled as codes, next to the relevant segments of the transcripts (Ivankova & Stick 2007). For example, recurring comments such as 'most parents who stay with children are women' and 'you often find that there's only a mother at home' were transposed into the code: 'Women mostly primary caregivers'. We grouped similar codes (e.g., 'absent father', 'single mother-headed home') and gave the resulting larger provisional coding category a unifying phrasing (e.g. 'children's living and care arrangements mostly in the hands of female caregivers') (Creswell 2009). We undertook this iterative process of data classification until all data belonging to each category were 'assembled in one place' (Tesch 1990). This enabled us to start looking for recurring overarching ideas and patterns, and resulted in the identification of the three themes presented next.

Findings

The three themes presented address teachers' views on some of the key issues influencing the extent of male caregivers' involvement in the education of FP learners in three township schools. We found that complex challenges affect the participation of male caregivers in the education of children in their care. Notwithstanding, there is also a small proportion of male caregivers who, despite the challenges discussed, commit themselves to be involved in their children's early education.

Teachers' gendered assumptions about foundation phase education constrain engagement with male caregivers

Whilst the teachers report a general lack of parental involvement in the three schools, the involvement of male caregivers may be constrained by the teachers' taken-for-granted assumptions about the roles of females and males in the education and development of FP children. With respect to the former, Teacher A3 said: there are 'very few parents who care and make follow-ups about matters concerning their children's schooling. But most of them are not cooperating at all'. This is despite teachers initiating 'communication with parents. We send out letters, we do a lot of things as teachers, we also try phone calls but as my colleagues have already said nothing seems to work' (Teacher, school A, participant number 3).

However, it would seem that parents mostly respond to invitations to general parent meetings with extremely limited individual engagement with teachers to discuss specific

learner issues. Teacher F1 reports that more engaged parental involvement only occurs when 'there is a problem like a learning barrier'.

Moreover, it seems that many children do not reside with their biological parents but instead with a grandmother, who whilst providing a solid structure for many children (Munje & Mncube 2018) presents an additional layer of parental involvement for teachers to consider. A teacher describes it as such:

'... most children stay with their grandparents; the parents do not stay with their children. That could be the reason we have problems with parental involvement. Sometimes when you call a parent you find that gogo [*grandmother*] is unable to come to school, even though you gave the child a letter in order to call the parent. The child will give the letter to ugo and ugo cannot read, then as a teacher you find yourself having a problem ... with parental involvement.' (Teacher, school B, participant number 3)

Despite limited overall parental involvement, the participants do report greater participation of mothers and grandmothers in comparison to fathers or other male caregivers. For example, Teacher A2 said:

'[T]hose few who are involved, most of them are women. When it comes to men, it is very rare to find men who respond even to invitations we send for meetings.' (Teacher, school A, participant number 2)

A similar view was also held by Teacher C1 who noted: 'it is the mothers and the grandmothers mostly, only few fathers ... it's only 5% of men who attend meetings'. They also added that the few men who attend meetings appear to be out of their comfort zones, assuming that women and not men will understand much of what is discussed. Such a view was expressed by Teacher B2 who stated:

'Even when you see a man in the meeting, it is like he is not comfortable. I think the things discussed in the meetings seem like women's stuff to them. I think it makes them look like they are not smart enough when they attend those meetings.' (Teacher, school B, participant number 2)

Teachers' gendered assumptions of females as the main caregivers of young children may unconsciously exclude male caregivers and seem to influence their conversations with the learners about the role of such males in their lives. The following comments from the interviews best capture this:

'... when we talk to the children we ask, "where is your mother?"' (Teacher, school A, participant number 2)

'No, it does not cross our minds [*to talk to the learners about their fathers or ask about the fathers*] because ... [*eh*] sometimes maybe if you have given the learner something [*schoolwork*] and then if that learner has done that [*work*], you don't enquire whether it was the father or the mother who assisted the learner. Sometimes you just take it for granted that the mother assisted, as long as that activity has been done.' (Teacher, school A, participant number 1)

'I can say we don't think about the fathers, as long as the mother is there it's fine. We normally don't ask about the fathers or whatever. When you talk with the learner you just say, "where is your

mother?" You don't talk about the father.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 1)

It would seem that the teachers themselves still construe the care for young children as 'women's work' (Ravhuhali et al. 2019). Such a view may contribute towards very gendered ideologies that shape their view of men's roles in the lives of young children (Bhana & Moosa 2016). In this way, they could also indirectly be sending a message to learners that teachers view their fathers as invisible. All the FP teachers confirmed that they have likely neglected to reach out specifically to male caregivers. For example, Teacher B3 who is a Head of Department (HoD) explains that 'I just want to say now that you've mentioned it, I think it would be a good idea to invite fathers specifically, but we have never thought about it'. These gendered ideologies are apparent in how they see male teachers in the FP, best captured by the following excerpts:

'We also get surprised when we see a male teacher in the Foundation Phase, we go to the principal and tell the principal that maybe you can swap [*meaning replace the male Foundation Phase teacher with a female Intermediate Phase teacher*], because we are not familiar with a male teacher in Foundation Phase ... we are not comfortable about the male teacher in the Foundation Phase.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 1)

'I think people who care more and are more patient with young children are female teachers compared to male teachers in FP. As you know some children come to the FP while they are still young or not fully independent, some can relieve themselves in the class. So, us as female teachers we end up being also mothers to these children.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 3)

The teachers seem to have some understanding of the challenges of their mindsets in this regard and Teacher C2 emphasised that the change needs to start at teacher education institutions:

'The mentality that FP is for females only too is not right. But it starts from the colleges where we are trained to be FP teachers. There are no males there, so obviously from there we all go to the FP as female teachers because it starts there at the college.' (Teacher, school C, participant number 2)

There is recognition that the involvement of males in the FP may begin to address the challenges learners experience in the Grade 4 year onwards where there are more male teachers:

'... in Grade 4 they start to encounter male teachers for the first time, they start to feel tense and are not expressing themselves freely. They have never interacted with male teachers before Grade 4. But if they are taught by male teachers in Foundation Phase, they will just flow.' (Teacher, school B, participant number 2)

Children's living arrangements may impede or promote the involvement of male caregivers

Teachers' assumptions about the children's living and care arrangements may be possible reasons for the mostly uninvolved input of male caregivers and influence how teachers communicate with children's parents; these communications may inadvertently exclude male caregivers.

In particular, male caregivers may be excluded when teachers have limited information about the children's care arrangements and assume that mothers are the only active primary caregivers, as Teacher C2's comment suggests:

'... you as the teacher, you send the child home with a letter informing parents that there is going to be such and such meeting. The parents do not come. Then one day you see the mother, and she says to you, "no the child was not with me, he was with his father that week."' (Teacher, school C, participant number 2)

The teachers explained that they know that many FP learners in the township live with single mothers and that most learners do not have a biological father at home. Teacher B2 best captures these views:

'... most parents who stay with children are women. You often find that there's only a mother at home, and she stays with the children as a single parent, the father is not present. Where you will see a father coming to school it is when they stay together [*the mother, father and child*]. But when the child stays with the mother, and by the way most of them stay with their mothers, hence you see mostly the women.' (Teacher, school B, participant number 2)

To the best of the teachers' knowledge, most of the learners did not have a constant adult male caregiver who plays a supportive role in their lives, and they thus felt it was not possible to engage the male caregivers in children's learning and other activities at school. Teacher D2 explained:

'Most children here stay with single mothers and sometimes their grannies ... even if you want to reach out [*to fathers or male caregivers*] as a teacher you won't get them. The child in the class will tell you, 'Ma'am I don't know my father.''' (Teacher, school D, participant number 2)

None of the FP teachers made reference to non-biological male caregivers (i.e. uncles, grandfathers and other social fathers). When asked about this, the teachers pointed out that they have had very few experiences with other male caregivers beside the children's fathers. This suggests that non-biological male caregivers did not play a significant role in the educational programmes of young children in the studied population. However, this finding contradicts a significant segment of the scholarly literature on fatherhood in South Africa, which holds the view that non-biological male caregivers or 'social fathers' are in fact playing a significant role in the education and upbringing of young children (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes 2012; Richter & Morrell 2006; Van den Berg & Makusha 2018). More than 70% of the residents in Thembisa Township, where this study was conducted, are below 35 years and classified as youth (Statistics South Africa 2011). This might explain why teachers had few interactions with grandfathers and other non-biological male caregivers.

The teachers also highlighted the demographics of the parent population as a risk factor for the living and care arrangements of the learners as well as for the extent of male caregivers' involvement in the children's education. In the three schools, the parents of FP learners were aptly described as comprising predominantly young people in their twenties and thirties.

Teacher A1 described the parents as 'boyfriends and girlfriends' and explained that 'there are few families whereby it's a full family with both parents and the kids'. The teachers observed that the young and unmarried parents were unlikely to stay together as a couple with their children. Teacher E3 explained that 'some of the children know their fathers, but as the parents are not married the children stay at their mothers' homes, even if the mother is not a good parent'.

Because many parents of FP learners live apart and are often not in fixed relationships, Teacher C2 was of the view that many children 'have no stable home' with most FP learners living in impoverished and overcrowded township settings with little evidence of a constant male caregiver. The children's living conditions were described as follows:

'You find that there is a yard with seven rooms. So, this child stays with the mother in one of the rooms, the child's siblings [*not biological siblings*] are children of neighbours who rent other rooms in the same yard. So, you might find one mother in that yard coming to school to collect five reports, because she collects for the neighbours as well.' (Teacher, school B, participant number 2)

The teachers also noted with concern the prevalence of mothers' gatekeeping practices aimed at preventing fathers from being involved in their children's lives. Teacher G3 raised this concern: 'you find a child does not have stationery or school uniform because the mother refuses to speak to the child's father' (after a breakup). A recent study by Slavin (2020) highlighted endemic gatekeeping by mothers in South Africa which contributed to the rising number of children without fathers and the attendant developmental risks. The study found that 'both mothers and their extended families often acted as gatekeepers preventing fathers from actively participating and engaging with their children' (Slavin 2020:44). As Teacher D3 observed: 'Sometimes these children discover as they grow up who their fathers are, so the mothers are to blame for some of these problems'.

However, the teachers did describe instances where male caregivers made extraordinary efforts to participate in their children's education after a divorce or separation (which, according to the teachers, often resulted in some fathers being denied access to their children). The school became a meeting place to reconnect with their children:

'Sometimes a mother does not let the father see the child after breaking up ... So, the father comes to school to the child and explains his situation to the class teacher. And you can see that the father and the child are very happy to see each other.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 3)

A similar observation was made in a different school:

'[M]aybe the father and the mother are separated so when the father wants to see or to give the child money for lunch ... it is then that you can see the father.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 1)

There were also a few instances when teachers engaged meaningfully with male caregivers. Teachers spoke of these men with a sense of appreciation, describing how they went above and beyond the teachers' expectations of parental

involvement. Teacher A1 stressed that 'there are some men who are fully involved in their children's education', sometimes without much support from a female partner. Teachers described different scenarios. First was when the children live in a relatively stable home with the father present, with Teacher C2 indicating that 'if you see the father of the child coming to school, you will often find that the child stays with his or her father'. There were also a few cases where the father frequently interacted with teachers, with Teacher A1 noting, 'I only knew the father; I didn't know any mother'. Teacher D2 concurred, stating that some FP learners stay with their fathers' mother (the paternal grandmother), and explained that in such cases 'you find that the father is the one we communicate with most of the time'.

A second example was of children who lived with a male as a primary caregiver; these were few and far between. Teacher A3 described one such case. The class teacher described the young boy as 'very clean ... you can never tell that he stays with his father only. When I ask the child, "who washes your clothes?" he says, "it's my father"'. Teacher C1 also described a different child as 'coming to school every day clean, with a packed lunch and pocket money ... the father was doing everything'.

The teachers were not clear on what motivated some men to be more caring and supportive fathers than others in seemingly similar circumstances. The following comment is pertinent:

'Sometimes you can find a man who is very involved and very supportive and responsible, then you discover that he is not even a stepfather or biological father of the child, perhaps he is an uncle. So, I think these things just happen, there is no formula really.' (Teacher, school A, participant number 2)

However, some of the teachers did refer to male caregivers' lack of educational opportunities in their own youth as a motivator for assisting their children:

'You do find a father who did not go to school at all. He will tell you that you know what Ma'm I do not know these things [*the schoolwork*], I did not go to school. I will ask my neighbours to assist me. I don't want this child to be like me.' (Teacher, school C, participant number 2)

Teachers recognise the positive role of males in young children's education and development

Although teachers had not considered the role of fathers in the early years of children's education, they acknowledged that such an undertaking would be beneficial to the learners and the school. In particular, the teachers believed that increased involvement of male caregivers would improve learner discipline and learning outcomes. The following examples from the teachers emphasise the need for the support of male caregivers in the lives of young children:

'... fatherly support, be it from a grandfather or an uncle ... Because at times especially in the case of the boys, it becomes very difficult for them. Having a father-figure far away from them, for challenges they can face in the future, it becomes very difficult. There's this stage where a boy-child ends up ignoring [*the authority of*] the mother ... What's going to happen to his

future? We just wish fathers can be more involved, I don't know how possible that is.' (Teacher, school F, participant number 1)

'Men do have a role to play in a child's life, especially boys. For example, boys look up to their fathers, uncles and even their stepfathers. And if the relationship is good, you can tell the difference, you can pick up that this child has a male figure who has an influence over his or her life. But those cases are rare in this community, however, we cannot run away from the fact that men do play a role especially when it comes to boys, and they do have an impact in their life.' (Teacher, school A, participant number 2)

'As long as there is a father figure in the house the behaviour changes and you can see that this child is well mannered because of this.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 2)

Although only one participant commented about this, the role older male siblings assume in their homes when there is no adult male caregiver is worth mentioning. A teacher explained how:

'[S]ometimes the single mother gets assistance from the older boy child, and you see this child taking the role of the father. If there is an older brother at home, they resume the duties of the father, and the situation gets a little bit better. And this tells me that the father is needed in the life of a child.' (Teacher, school D, participant number 2)

Discussion

Teachers' gendered assumptions about the involvement of male caregivers in the education of FP learners did to some extent influence their thinking and engagements both with parents and male FP teachers. Teachers seem to preface the role of females as nurturers, a mindset that aligns with the historical feminisation of the early years of schooling and that continues to create 'gendered differences' (Shannon 2019). In this viewpoint, females are positioned as best suited to being caregivers and FP teachers whilst males are rendered unsuitable (Bhana & Moosa 2016). An example of such gendered assumptions from the data is teachers' somewhat surprised, yet pertinent, remarks about children cared for by fathers, 'coming to school clean with a packed lunch'.

Teachers' gendered assumptions of females as the main caregivers of young children is problematic for many reasons. Firstly, such stereotypical/discriminatory views may serve to discourage males from taking a greater involvement in their children's lives (Mashiya et al. 2015). Such attitudes also contribute to the poor uptake of male teachers in the FP (Bhana & Moosa 2016; Petersen 2014). Secondly, it could also contribute towards shaping how children view the role of males in their lives, especially in the early years. We are of the view that the early years of schooling are the opportune time to promote gender equality (Piburn 2006:19) as it supports practices that emphasise male and female involvement in children's upbringing. The early years can be used as an ideal opportunity to (Piburn 2006):

[R]evolutionise the value that the next generation places on male nurturing behaviour ... and come to expect male involvement as a natural course toward gender equality for all the worlds' children. (p. 19)

Teachers' gendered assumptions also highlight the importance of changing teachers' mindsets about parenting roles and practices. If fathers' involvement in the lives of children is to be improved, it is important to identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers towards male involvement in the FP of schooling (Ansell, Bruns & Choitiyo 2018; Fletcher 2008). This will serve as a basis for understanding how to address teaching strategies and practices and the unconscious message FP teachers send young learners about the role of males in their development. For example, teachers could include pictures of nurturing males on classroom walls, selecting story books that portray the diverse roles of men in the lives of young children, which include being cared for and nurtured by fathers, father figures and male early childhood educators (Piburn 2006:19). In this way, children can come to expect nurturing, caregiving and early years teaching as typical behaviours associated with both males and females.

Teachers' view that most learners did not have a constant adult male caregiver who plays a supportive role in their lives is not a new finding in South Africa. According to the Living Conditions Survey (Statistics South Africa 2021), 65% of children aged 0–17 years do not reside with their biological fathers. Furthermore, Statistics South Africa (2021) highlighted that 'black African children were less likely to stay with their biological father compared to their peers in the other population groups', mainly white people and Indian. It would be important for teachers to not work with previous patterns or assumptions but to gather accurate information of who their learners are, their backgrounds and their primary caregivers. One way to do so would be to regularly update profiles to include learners' background information and their living arrangements as the notion of a nuclear family unit in most South African homes may not include male caregivers.

Based on the Living Conditions Survey (Statistics South Africa 2021), many more black children are thus affected and at greater developmental risk as they tend to experience both high levels of household poverty and the absence of fathers in their lives. The combined impact of these challenges may have serious implications for their educational outcomes and other childhood developmental milestones. Research (Allen & Kelly 2015; Awopegba, Oduolowu & Nsamenang 2013; Msila 2014) shows that psychosocial challenges such as poverty, abuse, parental neglect and harsh parenting can lead to socioemotional problems, including childhood stress. One of the major psychosocial barriers to young children's learning and holistic development in South Africa is neglect from their biological fathers (Van den Berg & Makusha 2018). Therefore, it is vital that learners from these households have some form of male caregiver involvement in their lives. This could take the form of increasing the number of male teachers in the FP, bringing in intermediate phase male teachers to interact more with learners in the FP or including other male parents/figures in interactions with young children in the school context.

Another area of concern is the methods used by teachers to interact with parents. From the data, the general form of

communication used is letters sent home with children, a very static form of communication. One way in which schools are addressing communication challenges with parents is using the D6 Communicator, a software application designed to simplify school–parent communication with mobile devices. The disadvantages are that it still remains a one-way form of communication and needs the relevant technology for access. Teachers must receive ongoing in-service training to equip them with skills to initiate sustainable school–family partnerships that can benefit schools and learners (Munje & Mncube 2018). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how, through necessity, alternative forms of communication between schools and parents in real time can be utilised very effectively. An example is the cross-platform messaging and voice-over-IP service of WhatsApp. Teachers created WhatsApp groups to communicate with parents (Taylor 2020). This platform has many advantages, such as minimal data use and low-technology functionality, and enables multidirectional communication between parents and teachers and between parents themselves. It is also possible that such a direct messaging service may enable communication in multiple languages that help in understanding and can improve involvement levels. Moreover, in addition to scheduled parent–teacher meetings spread throughout the year, home visits by teachers to support vulnerable children, school visits by parents and parent–teacher conferences (Matshe 2014) are also recommended as ways to improve parental involvement in the education of young children. In recognising the need to support the parenting skills of those from poor, semi-literate households, weekly newsletters can be an essential source of information. These could, for instance, address how to engage children in learning during routine home tasks, give tips for parents to assist with homework and setting schedules and environments for the home, convey advice about the importance of male role models in young children's lives and the types of activities they could engage in, as well as effective ways of managing discipline in the home environment. The data confirm that the male caregiver's physical absence in the home does not necessarily translate to non-involvement in children's development. As Richter et al. (2012:2) explained, 'many fathers support their children and remain in contact with them despite living apart'. The emphasis here is that involvement is measured not by the physical presence of the male caregiver in sharing equally in the responsibilities of child caregiving but instead is concerned more with quality of involvement (Campos 2008).

An area that does require addressing is teachers' attitudes about the role of males in the lives of young children. Thus, whilst teachers do see the positive role that male figures may have on young children, it seems to comprise mainly a disciplinary role. Some studies confirm behavioural and emotional problems experienced by adolescent boys with strained father–son relationships in the early years (Pitsoane & Gasa 2018). However, we argue that the role of male caregivers in the lives of young children is not limited to instilling discipline. The impact of the nature and scope of male caregivers' involvement in children's development can also be observed in cognitive competencies; the most cited amongst

these pertain to school outcomes for language and mathematics (Curtis et al. 2017). Here the influence of male caregivers on educational outcomes of black learners in the US found that learners who reported feeling close to their father figures and regularly communicated with them about schoolwork achieved better results in language and mathematics compared to their counterparts (Curtis et al. 2017). Studies have also described male caregivers' interactions during play with children as tending to be physically challenging, with high intensity and excitement. Meuwissen and Carlson (2015) suggested that because this kind of interaction encourages exploration, risk taking and independence, it is a vital context for character building and the refinement of competencies such as endurance, curiosity and motivation.

Conclusion

The early childhood education sector has primarily emphasised young children's needs for care and nurturing, above other aspects associated with their learning needs (Bhana & Moosa 2016). Bhana and Moosa (2016) argued that the emphasis on care and nurturing, rather than learning, has created a way of thinking that equates early childhood education with motherly care. In this study, FP teachers too seem to equate childhood education with motherly care. Such taken-for-granted gendered assumptions about the role of females and males in the education and development of FP children may have contributed to some extent in alienating male caregivers. Although teachers had not considered the role of male caregivers in the early years of children's education, they acknowledged that such an undertaking would be beneficial to the learners and the school. In this respect, the authors argue for training aimed at capacitating FP teachers with the basic competencies necessary to galvanise and increase meaningful involvement of male caregivers in the education of learners in both pre-service and in-service teacher professional development. This could take the form of a short-learning programme, workshops or an informative guide aimed at equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills on the importance of male caregiver involvement in the lives of young children as well as tools on how to purposefully engage and support male caregiver participation in school meetings and other school activities. Here, we believe that teachers have a vital role in changing gendered ideologies. To do this, we need to begin by first changing teachers' attitudes, beliefs and gendered assumptions about the role of caregivers, both male and female, in the lives of young children.

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Authors' contributions

M.M. collected and analysed the data, reviewed the literature and wrote the original draft with the ongoing contribution

and supervision of S.R. N.P. wrote the discussion, edited the final draft and supervised the project.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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