

The 'good', the 'bad' and the 'ugly'? Views on male teachers in foundation phase education

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In the context of the foundation phase, where women tend to dominate, the increasing numbers of male students entering teaching programmes for this phase of schooling has generated considerable praise, as well as criticism. This paper explores the views of two first-year foundation phase (FP) student cohorts at a Johannesburg university about male teachers in the FP. Student responses to two open-ended questions formed the data for this study, with qualitative content analysis procedures used to make sense thereof. Findings indicate an uncomfortable tension between the 'good,' the 'bad', and the 'ugly' in student perspectives of male teachers in the FP, where the 'good' is reflected in recognition of the valuable role of males in countering the effects of absentee fathers; the 'bad' in the various reasons provided for male's unsuitability as teachers of young children; and the 'ugly' in the dominant association of males with the perception of a threat of sexual abuse and molestation, much of which is attributed to increased media coverage and public awareness of abuse in schools. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ramifications hereof for teacher education and for the profession.

Keywords: foundation phase teaching; male teachers; pre-service teacher recruitment

Introduction

The title of this paper makes reference to the 1967 Western which portrays an uneasy alliance between three men in a race to find buried treasure. The tension between three protagonists, the 'good', the 'bad' and the 'ugly', in the film is reflected in the findings of this study of student views of male teachers in the foundation phase. It also resonates with the often contradictory arguments in the literature for and against males in the early years of schooling.

The foundation phase (FP) (early primary school, covering Grades R to 4 for learners from approximately 6 to 10 years) has the highest proportion of women working in it (Albesitti, 1993), but a downside of this dominance has led to socially and culturally ascribed roles for women as primary caretakers of young children spilling over into the educational arena. Teaching in the FP is thus often likened to 'child-care'. However in the last decade the number of male teachers in the foundation phase has been increasing steadily (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2011; Sanatullova-Allison, 2010; Trouvé-Finding, 2005). Issues of concern and matters of significance have arisen, with comments from a number of role-players in society entering the public domain (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008).

Evans and Jones (2008) describe how discourses of endorsement as well as threat

are rapidly becoming part of discussions which highlight the essential value of males in providing suitable role models for young children, particularly boys between the ages of five and eight, and in raising the status of the profession in the early grades. Most of the concern appears to revolve around men's (un)suitability as teachers in this stage of young children's learning and development. Of particular concern has been the association of males in the FP with perceptions of sexual deviance and/or exploitation.

As a teacher educator in a new pre-service foundation phase programme which has seen the number of first-time male students increase from 17% of the total headcount in 2010 to 21% in 2012, I was interested in how pre-service FP teacher students view male teachers in this phase of schooling. I also wished to understand what people in their communities convey to them about this issue. This paper reports on the research.

Theoretical framework

Broad sociological theories about gender (Anderson & Taylor, 2009) led to the choice of and integration of Bem's early theory of gender schema (1983) and her later work of enculturated-lens theory (1993) as a framework for this research. Bem's theories (1983; 1993) emphasise the cultural learning of gender and in particular highlight the social and historical contexts as 'lenses' for gender socialisation. In other words, as human beings, socialisation by various agents in society (such as parents, school and the media) leads to schemas or internal cognitive networks about masculinity and femininity which serve both to shape and guide the views of individuals. Thus, over time, to quote Bem (1993:139), the following occurs:

- "the institutional pre-programming of the individual's daily experience into the default options, or the historically pre-cut 'grooves,' for that particular time and place which differ markedly for men and women"
- "the transmission of implicit lessons – or meta-messages – about what lenses the culture uses to organize social reality, including the idea that the distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine, is extremely important"

As individuals in society most people form a view of themselves and the world they inhabit through a gendered 'lens', influencing thinking and actions. In this study, situated in a South African context, where gender roles tend to be strongly reinforced in families and culture, and often systematically reproduced from one generation to the next, I argue that it is probable that most young people will still use gendered cognitive schemas to make sense of their worlds. These lenses will inevitably influence the expected roles of men and women, an aspect sociologists associate with the status or position people hold in society (Anderson & Taylor, 2009). Therefore, the status of being 'male' or 'female' may lead to the development of rigid role definitions and stereotypes for both men and women in society. The consequences hereof are multiple, with the effects being evident in individuals' views and choices about lifestyle,

self-esteem, relationships, patterns of communication and, in the context of this study, in the suitability of men for a particular career role.

Literature review

Historically, there are a number of reasons for the preponderance of women teachers in the FP, including issues of economic development (Cushman, 2005), the position of women in society, cultural definitions of masculinity, and the value of children and childcare (Cunningham & Watson, 2002).

The dominance of women in the FP has generally carried negative connotations, with associated notions of 'childcare' and 'women's work' (King, 2005; Thornton & Bricheno 2008). As a result, a general perception is that the teaching of young children is less serious and valuable in educational terms and this has led to a decline in the status of the profession.

Another popular opinion is that primary school teaching is not regarded as a suitable career choice for men, with international research (Skelton, 2009) pointing to the former being viewed as a 'soft option'. Where men are involved in education at this level it is often because they are deemed effective disciplinarians, good with sport, or there to occupy a management position (Evetts, 1990). Research in South Africa indicates that there are generally more male managers or principals in primary schools than women (Moloi, 2007; Moorosi, 2007), which entrenches the idea that men 'lead' and women 'teach' in early primary education.

In an African context the impact of cultural factors, particularly related to the role of women in childrearing, also dissuades men from teaching the FP (Mukuna & Motsotso, 2011). Generally, in sub-Saharan Africa, even as many education systems are rapidly undergoing change, with increased access to education, this has not been matched by increased male enrolments in early childhood education (see Wallet, 2006). A South African study reveals that teaching in the early grades is often accompanied by simplistic images of FP teachers as 'nannies' and 'caregivers,' both of which are generally associated with a woman's rather than a man's role in society (Petersen & Petker, 2011). Such factors contribute to negative cultural associations which classify women as more suited to raising children and thus teaching in the early grades.

There is also substantial literature which indicates that the sexuality of men in early childhood education is often viewed with suspicion (Martino & Berill, 2003). Men who want to work as elementary school teachers thus risk being classified as homosexuals or paedophiles (King, 2004, 2005; Martino, 2008), and this view is often accompanied by a strong demonising discourse (Jones, 2007). It is factors such as these that effectively limit the number of men who choose to enter FP teacher education programmes (Cunningham & Watson, 2002).

A body of literature (Evans & Jones, 2008) also argues for increasing the number of men in the FP owing to the detrimental effect of the dominance of women in the

early schooling of male pupils in particular (Bleach, 1998; Johannesson, 2004). Arguments include providing young boys with appropriate role models (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008); ensuring that the teaching force is reflective of the balance of genders in society (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997); breaking down gender stereotyping by providing young children with male role models for teaching as profession (DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997); and presenting a substitute 'father-figure' for those children with absentee fathers (Gamble & Wilkins, 1997).

As a result, research in some contexts, such as the United Kingdom (UK), indicates that parents may now be far more willing to accept men working with young children (Sargent, 2001). Also, in countries such as Finland, New Zealand and Canada, governments have been promoting recruitment strategies that target men into primary school teaching programmes. However, there is little evidence that this has had the desired effect of increasing the number of men in this field (Skelton, 2009). In other international contexts where the education systems are characterised by transformation similar issues have prevailed. For instance, a recent study (Akman, Taskin, Ozden, Okyay & Cortu, 2013) of parents' views on the appointment of male teachers in Turkish pre-schools indicates that parents of these children are becoming less concerned about whether their teachers are male or female. The authors however caution that traditional perspectives on child-raising and the view of pre-school teaching as women's work in Turkey still dominate.

Overall, both international (Carrington, 2002) and national (Petersen & Petker, 2011) studies report that male and female students are motivated by positive reasons to enter early childhood education, such as the enjoyment of working with children, the conditions of service (for example, index-linked pension and career prospects), and because they want to make a difference to the lives of young children. There are however few studies in an African and South African context about how the presence of males in the education of young children is viewed by students or their communities.

The inquiry

Two student cohorts ($n = 230$), enrolled in the first year of a four-year Bachelor of Education degree (Foundation Phase) consisting of male (31) and female (199) students, average age 20 years, at a Johannesburg university were the participants in this study. The students comprised mostly African females (170) with a number of African males (30). There were a small number of white (22), coloured (4) and Indian female (3) students and one white male student. There were no Indian or coloured male students in the groups.

The students were asked to express their opinion about how they viewed male teachers in the FP. They were also asked what people in their communities conveyed to them about male teachers in this phase. In asking the latter I wished to find out how the views of the communities those students came from or lived in would resonate (or

not) with their own views. The following two open-ended questions were posed:

1. *What are your views of males teaching in the Foundation Phase?*
2. *What do people in your community tell you about males teaching in the Foundation Phase?*

Students' responses to the questions formed the data for this study, and qualitative content analysis procedures were used to make sense of them (Merriam, 1998). This entailed first coding individual student responses, then clustering the codes into a number of categories which were allocated names reflective of their content. Thereafter the categories were collapsed into themes from which I was able to identify pattern/s, which form the basis of the findings (Charmaz, 2003; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). In the findings, participants are identified through reference to a number assigned to the student in the data sets followed by the year in which the student was in the first year of study when data were generated. Where multiple students have expressed the same ideas up to two students in each group are identified for brevity.

Ethical considerations

To address ethics in this research I worked in accordance with the prescribed set of procedures of the University. Thus, students were informed of the purpose of the research and signed consent forms as voluntary anonymous participants.

Findings

The findings indicate a troubling tension between the 'good,' the 'bad' and the 'ugly' in views of male teachers in the FP. The 'good' reflects about 5% of students' views that male teachers can serve as role models and father figures for young children with absentee fathers. The 'bad' makes reference to the stereotypical view that males, because they are considered to lack the characteristics associated with caring for young children, are unsuitable as FP teachers (approximately 15% of students held this view). The 'ugly' reveals the presence of an association between males and the threat of sexual abuse and molestation, with the majority of student views reflecting this stance.

'The good': A positive view of male teachers in the FP

Few students felt that males in the FP were good, with an indication that the many young children with absentee fathers needed men as role models: "... *many children ... do not have a father at home*" (17, 2010) and "*they provide a father figure and role model*" (29, 2010).

Others referred to the lack of discipline in young learners owing to absent fathers and felt that more male teachers in the FP might counter this. For example: "*Having a male teacher in the foundation phase is a good thing because some learners who don't have a father figure at home need them for discipline*" (38, 2010).

Some students ascribed the presence of male teachers in the FP to an "*increase in dignity*" (42, 2011) and to better management in the primary school. This may be

ascribed to the view that male teachers are associated with more effective discipline and an ability to provide leadership in difficult circumstances. For example: *“The community think that males will bring a much better change in the FP because they know how to overcome challenges and circumstances”* (63, 2011).

The issue of the safety of young children and other teachers while at school was also highlighted; with some students indicating that there would be a *“greater sense of security [at primary schools] with a male teacher on the premises”* (46, 2011).

‘The bad’: Males not suited to the needs of young children

The majority of the students highlighted their communities’ traditional and often stereotyped views of childrearing: *“... men know nothing about raising children”* (25, 2010). Some specifically made reference to the issue of culture, by indicating: *“In the black culture children are raised by their mothers not their fathers”* (16, 23, 2010; 5, 9, 2011). This view may be partly ascribed to how the role of the FP teacher is perceived; it appears to stem from a view that the FP teacher is mostly concerned with raising children and/or child-minding, and not understanding the role of the FP teacher in terms of demanding cognitive development. Most also indicated that male students were unsuited to the FP as they lacked *“the communication skills to work with young children”* (32, 2010). Again, this may be linked to identification with mothers or females as the primary interacting individual in the lives of young children.

In particular, there was a belief that men *“lack the empathy required to teach very young children and the ability to care and love for young children which is associated with working in the FP”* (33, 2010). Male students were regarded as having *“no patience”* (36, 49, 2010; 16, 32, 2011), and *“possessing few nurturing traits and being insensitive and thus unable to teach young boys and girls...as well as a female would”* (29, 2011). The traits of patience, empathy, care and nurturing are characteristics often associated with women and this may be the reason males are perceived as unsuitable.

About a fifth of the students in the study described males as *“rough and violent”* (21, 26, 2010) and *“cruel”* (58, 2010; 89; 2011), and expressed the view that exposing young children to this kind of behaviour *“will turn young impressionable children into aggressive bullies”* (25, 2011). Men were also described as having *“a lot of power and many children are scared of the ‘father figure’ so the public aren’t comfortable with men in the FP”* (44, 2011). These views could be attributed to the students’ own histories of male role models in their personal or school lives and culturally accepted character traits associated with males.

Many students questioned the commitment of males to the profession: *“men are lazy and not committed to their work”* (45, 2010), and the needs of learners in the FP. Some indicated that it was based on their experiences of male teachers in their own schooling and other male figures in their social environments. Another common view was that men *“belong in the higher phases, such as the intermediate, senior and FET phases”* (56, 2010; 13, 39, 2011) or that they should *“become principals not FP*

teachers” (37, 39, 2011). This was accompanied by utterances such as “*male teachers are common in high school because the learners there are grown...needing a stronger disciplinary hand*” (39, 2011) and “*high school is what people think males should be involved in, with bigger children where they can be more firm*” (13, 2011). These ideas could spring from students’ own socialisation in the schooling system, where there is an absence of males in the FP or where most leaders are men. It could also be attributable to their own recent experiences as high school learners in which male teachers traditionally take responsibility for enforcing discipline. Students also reported that their communities view male teachers as wanting to be in the FP because they are “*scared of facing real challenges from the learners in the upper phases*” (56, 2010), emphasising the view that the FP is regarded as a ‘*soft option*’ in education.

‘The Ugly’: Males do not belong in the FP because of associations with the threat of sexual abuse

Most views associated the idea of male teachers in the FP with child and/or sexual abuse. Some mentioned highly publicised cases in the media about crimes against children, and their impressions that most were associated with males, as the basis of their views.

“I think it [the FP] is not for them...children will be beaten and if not molested or harassed because that is what men or most men are known for...violence and abuse!” (36, 2011).

“...the public in South Africa seem to think that due to the current state of abuse in the country their children are not safe especially around male teachers ... justified for thinking this way as most child abuse is carried out by male offenders” (10, 2011).

Yet others referred to frequent reports about child abuse as the origin of their fears, with some reference to students’ own knowledge or experience of a history of abuse of young girls by male teachers in schools:

“The other reason that causes me doubt about male teachers in the FP is the increasing role of male teachers sexually abusing girls ... because some male teachers are bad news when it comes to girls. In some schools you find situations where a male teacher has raped an eight-year-old girl at school...” (1, 2011).

“Recently, in schools there were so many cases where girls were sexually abused by male teachers at different schools” (11, 2011).

Students also cited general unease and an unwillingness to accept male teachers in the FP on the part of their communities, indicating that this view stemmed largely from an increasing number of media reports about physical and sexual abuse of children in the country. These are some of the more expressive verbatim extracts:

“...They [community members] are not interested in males teaching in the foundation phase ... it could be a bias and a mindset people could have developed because of the stories about paedophilia and rape in the news” (14, 2011).

“Others are afraid because of the sexual abuse of children they watch on TV or

read about in the newspapers” (54, 2010).

“The community might have a problem due to the fact that many male teachers have been associated with a stigma of raping and molesting kids. So for parents to trust again and send their kids to male teachers will always distress them” (24, 2011).

“... it is difficult for parents in my community to accept male teachers ... parents say that their children are not safe around their male teachers because of sexual abuse” (28, 2011).

Many of these views are premised on the assumption that male teachers are inherently not to be trusted around young girls and that they must have an ulterior motive in wanting to become FP teachers. These point to another aspect reflected in the data, namely, that male teachers wanting to work in the FP may not be clear about their sexuality and are likely to face derision from other males. In part, this may be attributable to gender socialisation in society, with FP teaching generally understood as being associated with women.

“... people think that the males in the FP of teaching are homosexual because they want to work with small children. I think that they are teased a lot by other men. Some even go as far as calling them gay” (109, 2011).

“People say that there's something wrong with the males that want to work with small children. They think that they might be perverts or maybe gay because it is a career choice related to women” (115, 2011).

Discussion

Both a review of the literature and the findings of this research indicate that there is still evidence of a gender gap in terms of who is deemed suitable to work in the FP. In this study the influence of cultural and social myths about the roles of men and women in terms of early childhood education and leadership are pervasive and entrenched in the minds of young teacher education students themselves as well as in the public domain. Thus, it seems as though most young people (and the communities in which they live) still use gendered cognitive schemas and lenses to make sense of their worlds (see Bem, 1993).

Firstly, there is a myth that teaching young children is primarily women's work; associating teaching in the early grades of school with notions of *'childcare'* and *'babysitting'* effectively ensures that these socially and culturally ascribed roles for women underrate the cognitive demands of teaching in the FP and thus cement the belief that women are associated with undemanding jobs in education. In this study this is evidenced by the utterances of students who draw on cultural beliefs about childrearing practices to support their views that male teachers do not belong in the FP.

Secondly, by overplaying the importance in the early education of children of characteristics such as sensitivity, empathy, intuition, care and the ability to be accommodating, characteristics which are traditionally ascribed to women, women are effectively typecast as most suitable for this stage of education while males are

rendered unsuitable. This is reflected in the comments by the participants in this study that the higher grades are more socially acceptable as a career option for them personally, a notion also prevalent in the literature in this area (Sanatullova-Allison, 2010). Cushman (2005) argues that pervasive beliefs in society and the teaching profession that suggest that men are less capable than women of caring for and educating young children have a number of detrimental effects, from hiring decisions to teacher education programmes, and even affect career counselling, all of which become major barriers to men choosing to pursue a career in the education of young children. These aspects are similar to what can be found in many education systems undergoing change around the globe (see, for instance, Wallet, 2006).

Another area of concern is the view that men in FP are associated with a sense of security, discipline and leadership. This is once again reflective of a widespread view that women's work in education is teaching while men's work is providing leadership. This is in line with research in the South African and African contexts which indicates the under-representation of women in education management (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Moorosi, 2007). Such patterns of gender socialisation are very difficult to change, especially if they have been established from a young age through students' own experiences as learners in a female-dominated primary school environment, and from being exposed to culturally held viewpoints that regard FP teaching as women's work. It would appear that students subscribe to rigid role definitions of what constitutes males work and what constitutes females' work in education, in line with the theoretical frame of lens-enculturation theory.

However, what is most significant from this small study is how students reported on the link between male teachers in the FP and the perceived threat of sexual abuse. As teacher educators we cannot discount the importance of the influence of sexual abuse and rape in schools, particularly of young children, on the views of students and their communities. In the South African context a number of researchers highlight the negative effects of the widespread sexual harassment of girls, including violence, sexual abuse, and assault by male learners and educators in schools (Prinsloo, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2001).

For some African countries, such as Zambia, the burden of providing for the existing needs of basic education appears to be overriding concerns about instituting a programme for early schooling and an insufficient educational budget. For contexts such as these, transformation in education is not about the male-female dilemma in the education of young children but in the provision of adequate education for all children in the country (Thomas & Matthew, 2009). For South Africa, however, there is growing recognition of the importance of FP education to the education system as a whole, and this is reflected in the drive to increase the numbers of FP teachers in the country, particularly those who are able to teach in an African language. As a country we should be concentrating on action to mobilise for recognition of the value of FP teachers, regardless of their sex. However, the gravity of the findings of this study points to prevailing negativity around male teachers in the foundation phase; this cannot be

discounted in the drive to increase numbers. There is a need for a concerted effort on the part of teacher educators and civil society to work together with role-players such as the Department of Education (DoE) and professional bodies, such as the South African Council of Educators (SACE), and teacher unions, to counter the negative views of male teachers in FP. There is also a greater need to address gendered notions of what constitutes women's and men's work in society and in education, and in teaching in particular. For teacher educators this can partly be achieved through teacher education programmes which address student teachers' perspectives towards gender roles and provide strategies for countering the fall back into "familiar gendered patterns of behaviour" (Coulter & McNay, 1993:410).

Arguments such as these can be linked to international comparative studies in contexts such as Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and many Latin-American countries where education systems are rapidly undergoing change. These studies outline that investing in high-quality FP education has both short- and long-term benefits and shows a proportionate increase in the numbers of enrolments in FP education. However, Wallet (2006) indicates that within this context the availability of education institutions, in particular teachers for the growing numbers of learners, are becoming problematic. Also, bearing in mind that the gender composition of teacher workforces will inevitably, to some degree, reflect national norms, traditions or economics (Wallet, 2006), in almost all countries studied the proportion of female teachers at the lower levels of primary school is higher than that reported at its higher levels. There were a few exceptions, such as Comoros, Papua New Guinea, and Pakistan, where 50% or more of pre-primary and primary teachers are male. Perhaps in the context of this international comparison what is required is a shift from *who* is teaching to *how effectively* learners are taught and provided with the resources for high quality teaching in the early grades.

Certainly, despite the general findings of this study, my own and my colleagues' experiences of working with male students in our programmes are of enthusiastic and committed young men strongly motivated to make a contribution to the education of young children in South Africa. Perhaps it is through the example of a growing group of brave young men such as these, willing to counter the negativity associated with male teachers in the foundation phase, that public opinion can begin to change. Perhaps what are also needed are more positive stories of male teachers serving as exemplary teacher models to counter the many negative images in the minds of young people, such as the university students with whom this study was conducted, and their communities. For teacher educators this study shows how vital it is for the teacher education curriculum, discourse and practices to work towards dispelling gender stereotypes so that teacher students learn how to address gender socialisation in their classrooms. In this way, teachers as agents of socialisation of young children can play their role in promoting less rigid and stereotypical roles for men and women in society.

Conclusion

In many professional fields, including education, in South Africa there is a growing

trend towards a more equal balance in the numbers of men and women. However, one area in which this is not happening is in foundation phase teaching. It seems that entrenched and dated notions of the teaching profession as women's work, particularly in the FP, are still prevalent in society and among students in teacher education. This is generally similar for comparative international studies of education systems in transformation. Despite advances in education systems in many parts of the world it appears that FP education continues to be bedevilled by stereotyped and traditional gender roles and the perception that education at this level is still women's work. As more evidence-based research on the best performing education systems and how they have succeeded becomes available, it is clear the emphasis has shifted to the *high quality of teaching provided by teachers* and not to whether the teachers are male or female. This prompts a re-examination of issues such as the gender of teachers and is emphasised in the National Institute of Education's Singapore (2008:8) entreaty that two important factors to be considered in this quest for high quality teaching are those of "changing teacher demographics" and encouraging the entry of a "non-traditional pool of applicants." Of importance in global discourses of education systems in transformation is that there is no single issue to be considered in educational reform, but rather it is clear that it comprises a host of intersecting issues such as the cultural, economic, social and political dimensions of what constitutes teachers' work. In the context of the focus of this paper, the gender of teachers in the early education of children becomes just one of many issues to be considered.

This paper has highlighted both issues of concern and matters of significance in terms of male teachers in the FP. It is issues such as these that reflect the challenge facing us as teacher educators, teacher professional bodies and society in general in South Africa. We need to convey the message that males have a role to play in FP education. In addition, teacher professional bodies and teacher unions also have a role to play in ensuring that there is increased professionalisation in the field, so that it becomes an issue of competence rather than gender and its accompanying associations that determine the value of a foundation phase teacher.

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