



## Experiences of male early childhood teachers in primary schools and strategies to increase their recruitment

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**Abstract**—Several studies have highlighted how the teaching profession has been dominated by women and how few men are entering the field. The lack of male educators, especially at the elementary school level, exacerbates this problem. This lack of male teachers for young children is a worldwide issue. The gender gap is equally glaring in South Africa, including in the rural areas, where women comprise much more of the teachers than men in early childhood education (ECE). It aims to explore the experiences of male early childhood teachers in primary schools and strategies to increase their recruitment—five primary schools in Thabo-Mofutsanyane District, Free State, South Africa. A qualitative approach using interpretivism with semi-structured interviews and narratives was used to collect data. Five male teachers in ECE participated in the study. Thematic analysis was used. There are few ECE male teachers in rural schools, so this statement calls for strategies to increase recruitment. Through teacher education programmes, male teachers in ECE can conduct public awareness to actively recruit males or men for professions working with young children. Recruiting significant numbers of men, especially in large teacher education programmes, can contribute to the greater acceptability of men as male teachers in ECE. Teacher education institutions can become proactive by instituting a programme to recruit and retain male learners. This paper contributes to the importance of promoting gender diversity and gender balance in the early childhood education field.

**Keywords:** Male early childhood teachers, Narrative approaches, Primary schools, Rural schools

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### I. INTRODUCTION

SEVERAL studies have highlighted how the teaching profession has been dominated by women and how few men are entering the field.

The lack of male educators, especially at the elementary school level, exacerbates this problem. This lack of male teachers for young children is a worldwide problem. Available data suggest that only 3% of early childhood educators in most Western countries are men (Warin, 2018). Only 2% of early childhood education (ECE) teachers are men. This gender gap is equally glaring in non-Western nations like South Africa and China (Francis, 2016). In rural South Africa, women make up much more ECE teachers than men (Mashiya et al. 2015; Msiza, 2020). Most preschool teachers are women since caring for young children has always been viewed as the domain of women (Petersen & Petker, 2011; Petersen, 2014; McGrath, Moosa, Van Bergen & Bhana, 2020; Msiza 2020). Men are less likely to enter the field of ECE because of the widespread misconception that women are better equipped to care for young children. It is not uncommon for males who provide childcare to be viewed with suspicion and to be labelled as gay or as 'not man enough' (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Msiza, 2020). Therefore, these teachers distance themselves from a gay identity as well as from being homosexual (McGrath et al., 2020; Msiza, 2020). Men who deviate from traditional and stereotyped gender performances tend to be ridiculed by other men and women (Brown, 2016; Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Yang & Quadir, 2018). McGrath et al. (2020) analyse the need for male teachers

at four levels; at the child level, they explore the role of schools in developing children's gender and sexuality identities and understandings. Drawing on social cognitive theories, the authors theorise that limited observation of male teachers may result in children's erroneous generalisation of all teacher characteristics as female-specific traits, perpetuating the view that women are better suited to the teaching profession (McGrath et al., 2020, p. 6). The argument is that children's gender knowledge is extended upon observing male teachers demonstrating feminine and masculine traits. Furthermore, children's experiences of positive and diverse male gender representations and their observation of male teachers working with female teachers may assist in repositioning care as necessary for all genders and challenge beliefs about male dominance (Mofokeng & Mukuna, 2023).

At the classroom level, research demonstrates that same-sex dyadic relationships may be closer (Spilt, Koomen & Jak, 2012; Bosacki, Woods & Coplan, 2015; McGrath, 2020). At the organisational level, these authors emphasise the benefits of a representative workforce for interactional experiences, policy development, and outcomes while recognising issues of token visibility polarisation and assimilation.

#### **Background of the study**

In Australia, the early childhood education and care setting includes center-based childcare and preschool services, and the situation is the same in South Africa. The term 'preschool' is commonly used in many countries worldwide, including South Africa, but in South Africa, the term 'pre-primary' is often used instead (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014). According to the South African DBE, pre-primary

education is provided to children in the year preceding Grade 1 and is intended to prepare the child for formal schooling (DBE 2014 - National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12). In the United States of America, early childhood education (ECE) is a term that refers to the period from a child's birth to their preschool years before entering school (Alvarado, 2020). In Zimbabwe, attention is paid to early childhood care and education, which are essential as they prepare children to understand and act on the environment (Nyamukapa, 2016). In Nigeria, ECE is labelled pre-primary education or that education given to children in an educational institution before entering primary school (Owijori & Gbenga-Akanmu, 2021). The start of democracy in South Africa in 1994 led to the reconstruction of the ECE to deal with past inequities. A Government Gazette document shows different ECE policies (2017). Section 91(1) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 defines Early Childhood Development (ECD) as the "process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, and social and communication development of children from birth to school-going age" (Republic of South Africa, 2006). The Education White Paper 5 on Childhood Education (DoE, 2001, p. 2) mentions several compelling arguments for investing in ECD, among others, the fact that the early years are critical for the development of the potential of human beings, as this period is a pillar of the foundations for later lifelong learning.

There are many studies on ECE, but little research has been done on male teachers teaching at primary schools (Bhana, Moosa, Xu & Emilsen, 2022). Notwithstanding their motivation to teach in primary schools, a significant concern for such male teachers is the public perception that men are more likely than others to abuse children (Barnard et al., 2000; Sanders, 2002; McNay, 2001; Mashiya et al., 2015; Msiza, 2020). Public suspicion is a pull factor discouraging men from becoming primary school teachers; as a result, children especially those without male figures in their homes - are deprived of having male role models, and the boys in most primary schools are dominated by female teachers (Joseph & Wright, 2016). Many men in this profession often navigate administrative places to escape public scrutiny (Barnard et al., 2000). Sanders (2002) indicated that male primary school teachers often find it necessary to defend their career choice to family members, friends, and female counterparts with whom they work. Male teachers are uncomfortable teaching in primary schools because they do not want to be associated with duties related to 'nannies' and 'caregivers' that are generally believed to be appropriate for women and not men (Petersen & Mashiya, 2014; Msiza, 2020). If a man chooses to become a primary school teacher, immediate questions are often raised, especially about their sexuality and issues around child abuse and molestation (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Skeleton, 2003). Therefore, male teachers can sometimes be isolated and intimidated by female colleagues, who often doubt that a man can do the job effectively in terms of nurturing and caring just because he is a man.

It is so embedded in society that men do not work with children, while females do (Cole & Plaisir, 2021). Given these negative factors, how can we increase and recruit more men in our primary schools? With few male ECE teachers in primary schools, how can we establish strategies to recruit more of them? Public recognition of outstanding male ECE teachers in primary schools and male lecturers in ECE undergraduate degrees should attract males into ECE primary schools (Rentzou, 2017; Skeleton, 2009; Svodziwa & Raymond, 2016). Research by Jones (2009) has also shown that advertising focusing on male involvement in ECE promotes the profession and reduces stereotyping. Advertising could include images of male role models on leaflets, posters, and television commercials (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). Imazeki and Goe (2009) suggest that urban and rural district schools should be more competitive when recruiting the best educators. A partnership between higher education institutions and ECE has been highlighted as a critical strategy to better prepare teachers for urban and rural ECE settings (Imazeki & Goe, 2009). Rentzou (2017) suggests that policies should be implemented to recruit males to ECE settings and sustain and support them during their HEIs studies. Society must change its

stereotypical perception of attracting females to teach young learners, which may encourage men to ECE so young learners can benefit from having male and female teachers (Louw & Tshelane, 2022).

#### **Self-concept theory Ackerman (2018)**

The self-concept theory defines who you are and what can influence your relationships and personal growth and development (Ackerman, 2018). Your sense of who you are and what you can become professionally may shape your self-concept. Self-concept formation commences in early childhood and continues throughout an individual's existence; however, the period between early infancy and adolescence is the most formative for self-concept. At two years of age, infants begin to distinguish themselves from others. Children are aware that they are distinct individuals by the ages of three and four. At this age, a child's self-image is primarily descriptive, founded primarily on physical traits or concrete details. However, children are becoming more aware of their abilities, and by the age of six, they can express their wants and needs. In addition, they are beginning to identify themselves in terms of social organisations.

Children between the ages of seven and eleven begin to make social comparisons and contemplate how others view them. At this age, children's self-descriptions become increasingly abstract. They recognise that their characteristics exist along a continuum, as they describe themselves in terms of abilities rather than concrete details. For instance, a child at this stage will begin to perceive himself as more or less athletic than others instead of simply being muscular or not athletic. At this stage, the ideal self and self-image start to form. The self-concept formed during adolescence typically serves as the foundation for the remainder of one's existence. People experiment with various roles, personas, and selves during adolescence. Adolescents' self-concept is influenced by their accomplishments in areas they value and by the responses of those they respect. Adulthood can be characterised by increased self-esteem and a more robust sense of self if success and approval are present.

As a core of personality, this theory is set upon a person's perceptions about himself: the collection of characteristics, attributes, qualities and deficiencies, capacities and limits, values, and relationships. It is relevant to this study because it reflects what ECE male teachers perceived and what others said about them. It is beneficial for these teachers to reflect and understand themselves with other teachers who teach higher grades. It reflects their expectations of others and the characteristics and accomplishments of others. This theory helps to develop the individual through interactions with the environment. As male teachers are in a setting where female teachers dominate, they must not allow female teachers to set expectations for them and feel isolated or experience an inferiority complex. ECE male teachers must not limit themselves in doing their job just because their qualities are being questioned by society and other teachers in higher grades. Likewise, ECE male teachers need not pressurise themselves to be accommodated by society or the environment to influence their decision to become male teachers in primary schools. The ECE male teachers in primary school should not allow their characters to be labelled as weak or not manly enough because they have chosen a career dominated by women.

## **II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

This study aims to explore ECE male teachers' experiences and determine strategies that may increase their recruitment in primary schools.

## **III. METHODS**

### **Research approach and design**

This article presents an interpretive qualitative case study of five ECD male teachers from rural areas in Free State. According to Brandon et al. (2018), a case study examines an individual situation and investigates a person, professional, occasion, or group of people. This

research design turns participants' observations into practical information for accessibility to readers. Case studies are efficient when the sample size is small. This study adopts an interpretive paradigm that permits an in-depth review of an existing or new phenomenon while maintaining meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Rashid et al., 2019). It further allows flexibility in collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, elaborating on, or refocusing research questions while simultaneously identifying and dealing with validity threats (Bouncken, Qiu, Sinkovics & Kürsten, 2021).

### Participants

Five male ECE teachers participated in this study. They were purposively selected from five rural schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District in the Free State, South Africa, an available and convenient location for public primary school schools. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009, p. 79) defined purposive sampling as selecting participants based on specific characteristics that qualify them to be holders of data required for the study. All participants may express their experiences and understanding of how to increase the recruitment of male ECE teachers in rural primary schools.

### Research instrument

This study used semi-structured interviews to generate qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews can be face-to-face or telephonic (Doyle, 2020). During the interviews, participants must speak freely about complex themes and promote two-way dialogue (Cycle, 2019). This method was suitable for this study as it dealt with more than a few open-ended questions and required follow-up queries to glean more information (Adams, 2015). Open-ended questions involve understanding each group member's independent thoughts, feelings, and beliefs regarding the subject matter (Adams, 2015). Hence, open-ended interviews can be time-consuming as participants are not limited in how they respond to questions. The questions were related to the experiences of male ECE teachers and the strategies that might increase their recruitment in primary schools. The semi-structured interview sessions were each administered within forty-five minutes.

### Data collection

The researcher went to five different primary schools in rural areas in Thabo-Mofutsanyana District with a letter of permission from the Department of Education and ethical clearance from the university research ethics committee (number UFS-HS 2023/0399) and met with the principals. The researcher explained to the school management the purpose of the research and how the school would benefit from the study. The researcher also explained that the names of participants would not be mentioned, and pseudonyms would be used. Male teachers from five different schools were teaching in ECE. The researcher met with the participants, who were given a consent form to complete. They participated voluntarily and knew that they could withdraw at any stage should they wish to do so. The researcher spent two months collecting data from five male teachers, one from each of the five schools. Semi-structured interviews were held after school so that teaching and learning would not be disrupted. The participants were asked questions and could express their views without restriction. Probing questions were used to gain rich information from the five male primary school teachers.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis used Atlas to identify partners or themes in the qualitative data. ti software to recode the data. Creswell (2013) highlighted that the researcher organises the interview data and creates the codes. The interview transcripts were collected, transcribed, edited, and coded to look for commonalities (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher chose appropriate codes and continuously compared the data acquired to explain and clarify findings (Sangasubana, 2011). The researcher reviewed the data repeatedly to build labels to establish meaning from the information extracted from the participants using open coding (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher analysed the context and techniques employed and the linkages between the open codes. Afterwards, the researcher identified keywords and interview

questions that played a role in developing the codes. In addition, new taxonomies were generated based on the theory behind this study. The next step related to searching for themes, which were developed with the help of codes and categories from the literature review and the comments of the male ECE teachers. The researcher reviewed themes, identified commonalities in the information, and used a database to create a table. Finally, the researcher wrote and triangulated the results to evaluate the information and draw conclusions. The study ensured compliance with credibility and trustworthiness, and the research accurately portrays the topic being examined. This process includes establishing rigorous research protocols, collecting data systematically and standardised, and using reliable and replicable data analysis methods. Trustworthiness and credibility guarantee that the study results may be relied upon for sound decision-making and reliable inferences. The results should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited sample size (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

### Ethical considerations and approval

Ethical considerations ensure that researchers do not cause any harm to their subjects (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001). Approval was obtained from the University of the Free State ethics committee (ethical clearance number UFS-HSD 2023/099). The Free State Department of Basic Education granted permission to conduct this study, and an approval letter from the school principal was provided, allowing access to the school premises, and conducting interviews with the participants. This study ensured that participants' rights to anonymity and privacy were respected and the dual tenets of doing no harm and doing good were adhered to. The necessary precautions were taken for the participants' safety, and all ethical guidelines were followed. Participants were not coerced into participating in the study (Oppenheimer, Meyvis & Davidenko, 2009), and all signed consent forms demonstrating their voluntary approval to participate. Their identities were kept anonymous by assigning them numbers (ECD male instructors 1 to 5). Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage whenever they felt uncomfortable, with no detrimental effects to themselves.

## IV. RESULTS

### Experiences of male ECE teachers in rural primary schools *Experiencing an inferiority complex*

The results showed that being male teachers in ECE could cause an inferiority complex, as most teachers are females. Other teachers in higher grades and society question the sexuality of male teachers, asking questions such as 'Can you work with young children?'. The male teachers must prove themselves to show that if female teachers can do it, they can, too. The male teachers had to deal with questions regarding whether they were soft, nurturing, and caring compared to the female teachers, all of which put pressure on the male teachers:

*... now that I am coming in, it created that inferiority complex, and inferiority complex does not come only within but even from external forces; people from around when you deal with kids see you differently from other men ... (Participant 1)*

*... people from around when you deal with kids see you differently from others; they tend to think you might not be man enough, being half man or half woman ... (Participant 3)*

*... female teachers will ask questions like can you work with children ... (Participant 2)*

### *Male teachers have no voice*

The results suggested that male teachers in ECE have no voice. Whenever male teachers have a situation in class, the female teachers will always encourage the male teachers to call them to come and assist, and they ask if the male teachers can work with young children. Having few male teachers resulted in them not being taken seriously. As a result, male teachers had to work hard to prove themselves to the female teachers so that they could voice themselves when there was a need:

*... as male teachers, we are not taken seriously; when we voice ourselves, they do not take us seriously because we are the minority ... (Participant 4)*

### **Dominance of female teachers**

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

... because we are the minority... (Participant 4)

... I must attend the workshop, the female teachers will ask me if I am at the right place, they become shocked to say what do I want at this place... (Participant 2)

... I had to work with their [females] experiences, who have worked with kids for a long... (Participant 1)

### **Mistrust of male teachers**

The results revealed that male teachers who are teaching in ECE are mistrusted. The teachers mentioned they experienced challenges as they were not allowed to touch the children. Some male teachers highlighted that they relied on female teachers whenever there was an issue. Male teachers were not trusted owing to the prevalence of men in society who are child abusers, and they were told not to touch the children. This becomes challenging because when working with children, they may touch the teacher, who may be in trouble in that space. Having more female teachers than males indicates that men are not trusted, even though the Department of Basic Education is now trying to address this imbalance in this ECE setting:

... Female teachers would tell me if a girl child had a problem, I must call the female teachers, and they could not trust me ... (Participant 2)

... I was told to call for a female teacher because I am a male teacher... (Participant 4)

... the Department does not trust male teachers because if not, there would be an equal number of female and male teachers; we all know how to teach children in the ECE ... (Participant 2)

... If the child comes to a male teacher asking for help, it is like males are incapable of doing that... (Participant 3)

### **Insecurity**

The male teachers feel insecure about teaching in ECE. They are questioned whether they have soft hearts like female teachers, and other male teachers laugh at them and say they are only playing with children. However, these male teachers cannot play with the children because they are male, and if they play with the children, they feel insecure. The method of teaching and learning in ECE is through play. Male teachers need to develop activities that suit the level of these children, and as a result, become insecure about what they are teaching:

... the first thing is that female teachers mostly dominate ECE; they are regarded as suitable for teaching in this setting, which is not true ... (Participant 2)

... what comes with being a male is being rough, not gentle, so dealing with children is [for] females because females are delicate, soft, and understanding ... (Participant 3)

... other male teachers are insecure about playing with children; as a result, they cannot meet all the needs of the children ... (Participant 1)

... the big issue is to feel small; I feel it is unacceptable to be in ECE ... (Participant 5)

### **Scary situations**

The results indicated that male teachers feared teaching in ECE. They were asked whether they could teach young children, which was a horrific or scary moment for the male teachers. In addition, it was regarded as unsuitable for male teachers to play with the children, but the method of teaching and learning in ECE is through play. Male teachers have a commanding voice, and as a result, children may become scared; as one teacher mentioned, he will find the children become quiet and stop moving in class. He sometimes lets them move around the class to make them feel accepted:

Being part of this setup, I would say it has phases; when I joined myself, it

was scary because I found myself in females ... (Participant 1)

... my experience was horrific; every day I had to go to work, it was like I was going to a place that I did not know... (Participant 1)

... I also play games with them, but with other teachers, it is a problem because they become scared to play with children, and in ECE, the method of teaching and learning is through play ... (Participant 5)

### **Male teachers as potentially abusive**

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

... I will show these children that not all men are abusive (Participant 3)

... I feel like I am a person who can change this thing of being men are abusive, and as an ECE teacher, I will show these children that not all men are abusive; they can be supportive and gentle and can have a relationship with male teachers. There is hope... (Participant 4)

... you need to create a positive environment so that they may be able to engage with me... (Participant 5)

### **Male teachers are considered authoritative**

The results showed that male teachers were considered authoritative in teaching in ECE. They do not repeat themselves when giving instructions, and their classes are disciplined compared to female teachers. Male teachers elaborated that the children sometimes become so quiet that they must try and make them feel comfortable in their classroom:

... I do not need to repeat myself when giving instructions; as men, we have commanding voices ... (Participant 2)

... my perception about this field is that if female teachers can, why cannot male teachers do it? (Participant 1)

### **Being labelled**

The results demonstrated that male teachers had been labelled as teaching in ECE:

... they think you might not be man enough, being half man or half woman ... (Participant 1)

... there was a gap, male teachers needed to play a role, early childhood education is not for only women ... (Participant 4)

It seems that teaching in ECE is considered acceptable for women but not for men. Male teachers who have constructed their identities are considered half-men and are not taken seriously by other male teachers teaching in higher grades. For these reasons, male teachers must break the stereotypes.

### **Breaking gender barriers**

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

... now, we are breaking the gender barriers and coming in by doing the job even better than female teachers (Participant 1)

... and I understand teaching as a job irrespective of being a male or female ... (Participant 2)

... it is because I love children and decided to do BEd Foundation to understand how young children learn ... (Participant 2)

... I love children; it could not be a challenge in teaching in ECE ... (Participant 4)

### **Capability**

The results showed that male teachers could teach in ECE and do the job better than female teachers. Male teachers do have a love for children, and they see results as they teach the children. The love of children developed when these male teachers went for their practicals. They are capable of teaching in ECE and wish to do so, understanding

that the children are very young and must be loved:

... to opt for ECE [as] the lessons went on, then I realised there is nothing wrong with becoming a male teacher in ECE ... (Participant 5)

... doing the job even better than female teachers... (Participant 1)

... I see myself [as] capable because I love young children and can see results. I teach Grade 2, and I am the only male teacher... (Participant 4)

... I do not have a problem teaching young children; I can understand the level of these children ... (Participant 5)

#### **Passionate about teaching in ECE**

Male teachers are passionate about teaching in ECE and can work well with children. When children come back from being on holiday, they will tell stories. Being sincere and driven by passion, male teachers will listen to the children. One of the male teachers teaches Grade 2 and is very passionate about working with young children. This teacher mentioned that the principal asked him about moving to the intermediate phase, and he refused because his qualification is for ECE:

... I am a teacher like female teachers, and I have passion for early childhood and work well with young children ... (Participant 4)

... I am very proud of teaching young children ... (Participant 2)

... I love them so much they even want to tell me stories ... (Participant 5)

... and at times, I will be asked if I want to go to intermediate to teach, and I can't entirely agree because I love being an ECE teacher ... (Participant 3)

#### **Supportive of the children**

Male teachers support the children because they can even assist young children who report that the male teacher helped them when they messed up. Male teachers can listen to children's stories about what was happening at their homes:

... I will show these children that ..., but male teachers can be supportive... (Participant 3)

... the child will have messed up, and as a male teacher, I will have to assist the child, and when she arrives at home, she will report that the male teacher helped her ... (Participant 4)

... children are always happy they touch here and there, and one can come in the morning and tell you what was happening at home... (Participant 5)

... some men can also care for their children even better than those taken care of by females, but like you are saying, that myth continues from home to school... (Participant 1)

... I am satisfied to be in ECE because now I know how to teach these children, with three years in this field... (Participant 3)

My perception about this field is that if female teachers can, why cannot male teachers do it? We also have women doing what men predominantly did (Participant 1)

... I am exemplary in teaching in ECE with female teachers, and I have learned much from them... (Participant 4)

#### **Role as a loving father**

The male ECE teachers develop a love for young children and have a relationship with them. They become like a parent to these children, especially those exposed to a single gender at home. It is crucial to have both genders in the ECE setting. Male teachers elaborated further that children will want to tell stories, and boys are pleased to see male teachers because they can associate themselves with male teachers. As a result, male teachers are teachers like the children's father. We need to move away from gender roles when teaching in ECE; it is not true that female teachers are the most suitable teachers for ECE:

... I am also a parent to these children, and I love working with children, and I understand them... (Participant 2)

... some children are from homes with no father figure, and when they are at school, they are exposed to different genders... (Participant 5)

... I went for the practicals, then developed the love for children,... in teaching young children... (Participant 5)

#### **Proud of themselves**

The results showed that male teachers were proud of themselves and their career choice. Male teachers got inspired when they went for teaching practical before they got their qualification, which is where they saw that teaching young children is not a problem.

... I am very proud of teaching young children ... (Participant 2)

... I am optimistic about being a teacher in ECE because now I feel like single parents raise a parent and other children... (Participant 3)

... I went for the practicals, ..., and now I am pleased in teaching young children ... (Participant 5)

## V. CONCLUSION

This study found that male teachers had negative experiences, such as not being trusted to assist children whenever they messed themselves up and having to rely on female teachers by calling for their assistance. When female teachers attended workshops, they would be unsure about the male teachers and ask if they were in the right place. When female and male teachers must discuss some issues, female teachers will tend to ignore male teachers by talking about other things, and male teachers will feel like they are voiceless and not taken seriously. They are being labelled and questioned regarding their sexuality and career choices (Bhana et al., 2022). The results indicated that male teachers feared teaching in ECE since they were questioned whether they could teach young children (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Skeleton, 2003).

This study found that male teachers also had positive experiences. They could break the gender barriers in ECE. They were satisfied, capable, passionate, supportive, and caring about teaching in ECE. They were role models and played the role of loving fathers in ECE. They were proud of themselves and happy to be working in ECE. Male teachers have broken gender barriers by prioritising their love of children, which is crucial in seeking employment in the ECE sector (Mashiya et al., 2015; Perez, 2019). In this way, men have decided to teach in ECE and actively challenge and disrupt the symbolic gendered image of it being women's work (Brody, Emilsen, Rohrmann & Warin, 2021).

As a result, male teachers in ECE can conduct public awareness to actively recruit males or men for professions working with young children through teacher programmes.

## VI. CONCLUSION

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

ECD practitioners are adults teaching young children from zero years to four years of age. When these children are five years old, they transition to primary school. In this process, few or no male teachers teach in ECE. The male teachers who have joined ECD have entered a field mostly occupied by female teachers. Male teachers teaching in primary schools are not taken seriously, and their gender is being questioned as they have joined the space that female teachers mostly dominate. As a result, there continue to be few male teachers in ECE. Those male teachers who have decided to work with female teachers have experience working in a primary school and should be encouraged to develop strategies for recruiting male teachers to teach in ECD. This is necessary to bring equity to this field and expose young children to different genders, which provides a male role model and a father figure for those children without fathers. Some male teachers are loving and caring and can teach in primary schools if the DBE implements recruitment strategies to bring about equity and remove gender bias.

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