

Exploring The Perceptions About Male Teachers In Early Grades Across Schools In Nigeria

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Abstract

The early childhood education workforce is highly feminized, with women dominating the field. Around the world, calls have been made for increasing participation of men in the profession so that the gender gap could be reduced. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma associated with men teaching young children. In this study, we explored the perceptions about male teachers of early grades in Nigerian schools. The study used an interpretative qualitative research design with a total of 10 participants (5 parents and 5 teachers) in early grade schools to explore the perceptions of male teachers in early grade schools. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the one-on-one interview and data analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that sociocultural misconceptions cause male teacher attrition in early grade schools. General suspicion, stigmatization, and prejudice are contributing factors that promote gender stereotypes against male teachers in early grades. Such misconceptions contributed to an overwhelming preference for female teachers in early grades. However, a small proportion of participants believe that male teachers are an essential component of early grade schools for gender balance and effective role modeling. The findings suggest an urgent need for greater awareness of the important role of male teachers in early grade schools in promoting both their academic and social development. More effort is also needed to increase the number of in-service male teachers in the early childhood workforce.

Keywords: Early Grades, Early Grades Schools, Gender Stereotypes, Male Teachers, Primary School, Teaching

Introduction

In early grades, men and women have experienced long-standing gender disparities in the workforce (Sullivan, Coles, Xu, Perales, & Thorpe, 2020). Research has shown that the teaching profession is becoming more feminized, with male teachers declining drastically, especially in early grades and foundation levels (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Numerous reports have indicated that the attrition rate of male teachers has been increasing (Sahin, Korkmaz, & Coban, 2018). Women serve in a disproportionately large number of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) jobs worldwide (Brody, 2015; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). It is more common for women

to be employed in ECEC centers than for men (OECD 2014). Researchers found that men are underrepresented in ECEC centers in many European countries, mainly between 1-3 percent. Still, a few notable exceptions, including Norway, Denmark, and Turkey, outperform the average with over 5% (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). The number of male teachers in the early education field is the minority, accounting for less than three percent of all teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2017). In contrast, men make up 20.7 percent of elementary school teachers and 41.5 percent of high school teachers, indicating lower rates of men teaching in ECEC (BLS, 2017). There is also substantial evidence that the number of males teaching in early childhood education centers is drastically low (Mistry & Sood, 2015; Tennhof, Nentwich, & Vogt, 2015).

In Nigeria, the trend is similar. In line with global imbalances in ECEC teaching, Amosun, Ogunniyi, and Funke (2021) provided 2016 statistics showing a growing number of Nigerian female ECEC teachers in some selected states typically outnumber their male counterparts. According to the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2016), there are 89 percent female ECEC teachers in Nigeria, while the male ECEC teachers represent just 11 percent. This disparity could be linked to the traditional roles of females to nurture, care for, and rear children (Garcia, 2014). Gender orientation in traditional African societies has polarized male and female roles, with females being more oriented toward homemaking and child-rearing (Ossai, et al 2021). The social system stereotypes some jobs and careers as masculine while others as feminine (Williams, 2020). A study by Charles and Grusky (2004) asserted that the modern pattern of sex segregation in the workplace is a product of the interaction of two distinct cultural principles. As outlined above, one is the essentialist presumption that men and women have fundamentally different tastes and proclivities, and are therefore best suited to very different professions. A second presumption is that men have more competence, commitment, and suitability than women, thus they are better suited to the positions that require the most human capital. In ECEC, caring is believed to be an innately feminine activity that is intrinsically linked to mothering (Mashiya, 2014). As a result, ECEC is likely to experience extreme vertical gender segregation because men do not prefer low-status, low-paying work. While women who do domestic work more often are willing to renounce financial rewards for the security and flexibility that such work provides, the opposite is true for men. ECEC may offer more opportunities for men to advance into higher-level administrative positions due to more men in management (Warin, 2018). Personal belief systems and social mechanisms can impact gender minorities' well-being and workplace collegiality (Moosa and Bhana, 2017). Women's inclusion in male-dominated fields is hindered by the culture of men's attitudes and expectations. Men in male-dominated communities are more likely to hold occupations and jobs that rely on technical and knowledge-based skills.

Literature Review

Several researchers have identified the barriers facing male teachers of elementary schools. A study by Pleshette-Murphy (2008) found that male early childhood teachers face many challenges. Parents' perspectives about teaching and caring for their children differ significantly (Ho & Lam, 2013). Rentzou and Ziganitidou (2009) report that parents react with fear and suspicion when

discovering their children have male teachers in their classrooms. The parents of young children perceive male teachers as sex predators, abusers, and unqualified to work with children in early grade schools. In addition to the no-touch rule, which restricts males from making physical contact with pupils for fear of false accusations, no such restriction applies to female teachers (Cruickshank, 2019; Cruickshank et al., 2018; Cushman, 2005). This creates a gender equity gap in education, with a bias toward women and different rules and expectations for male teachers. Male preschool teachers raise fears and concerns among employers and parents about gender identification and sexual orientation (Bernard et al., 2000). The most significant barrier to male early childhood teachers entering the field is child molestation (Sargent, 2004). Furthermore, it is claimed that some people believe male preschool teachers have pedophilic tendencies and that this perception serves as a barrier to those who want to teach (Owens, 2010; Sargent, 2013; Smith, 2004). As a result, male early childhood educators are concerned about bias among parents, female teachers, and administrators. Such concerns are valid as parents do raise concerns when a male early childhood educator is responsible for the education and care of their children and prefer their children to be taught by a female early childhood educator (Zhao & Zeng, 2010). It's therefore challenging to give male early childhood teachers a fair assessment of their work because of these stereotypes (Yang, 2015).

Another reason can be attributed to cultural barriers, such as negative attitudes toward men in the field. In this field, Peeters, Rohrman, and Emilsen (2015) report that traditional gender roles affect men's assignment of tasks. Many studies have found that teaching in early childhood has traditionally been associated with women because the work is considered a caregiving role (Tufan, 2018). Culture implicitly assigns the caregiving role to women, resulting in the perception that males are incapable of handling early childhood teaching roles (Koch & Farquhar, 2015). Care and nurturing are seen as society's responsibility on women because of the nature of these occupations (Yang, 2015). For example, many people assume that female teachers are ideal for young children because of their motherhood responsibilities. There is a belief that females should take responsibility over the education and care of young children because rearing and caring for children is viewed as their responsibility (Hedlin & Berg, 2013; Yang, 2015). Society has historically held women to a higher standard of parenting than men, resulting in their recruitment into the early childhood teaching profession (Joseph & Wright, 2016). Unfortunately, it is these perceptions that result in the exclusion and isolation of male ECEC educators Kamberi et al., 2016).

Additionally, teachers' low status and low pay are significant barriers for males in elementary schools. According to Ofojebe (2006), teachers are underpaid, but their pay is also irregular. It is estimated that teachers earn the lowest salaries of all professions in Nigeria, even among doctors, engineers, and other well-paying careers. Teacher salaries show numerous disparities in comparison with other occupations (Nwakpa, 2014). In light of low pay, especially in the early grades and foundation phases in Nigeria, Azubuike (2006) claims that males are discouraged from entering the teaching profession. Since they are often the breadwinner, low

salaries frequently negatively impact male teachers. As a result, they are unable to meet other responsibilities and support their families (Asodike, 2016). The societal respect and regard for teachers complicate the situation. In Jones (2007) and River (2016), societal discourse portrays male teachers as not being true men. Nevertheless, men in the workplace often adopt multiple masculine identities, such as disciplinarian, janitor, man on the job, headteacher, father-figure, technology, math, or sports expert.

Several international organizations have called for men to play a more active role in early childhood education due to concerns about the long-term impact of such gender imbalance. Recent research has shown that adding more male teachers creates a more balanced workforce and helps dismantle gender barriers (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). Bernard et al. (2000) found that male teachers contribute as much to children's development as female teachers. Ahmed et al. (2018) report that female preschool teachers believe male preschool teachers would make excellent role models for male students. Previous research has also shown that male teachers are desirable as role models for boys (Cameron, 2001; Martino, 2008; Skelton, 2003). According to Sumsion (2000), there should be a gender balance in teaching personality traits and gender roles for young children, and teachers should interact with both genders. For children to break the stereotype of women as caregivers, Owen (2003) suggests they should see both female and male caregivers. According to Sumsion (2005), male early childhood teachers can challenge limiting gender stereotypes and give children more choice and opportunity because, as non-traditional males, they represent non-traditional masculinity.

The involvement of male teachers in a child's development has long been considered paramount (Kilgallon, Maloney, & Lock, 2008; Akman et al., 2014; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007). Further, with the rise of single-parent homes, blended households, and multigenerational households, there has been a debate regarding the need for male role models for children, especially boys (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Male teachers must be involved in children's early childhood education to portray positive male role models (Milloy, 2003; Yang, 2015; Sumsion, 2005; Jones, 2009; Mncanca, Ramsaroop & Petersen, 2001). Young children have little contact with men and are only exposed to violent or angry men in the media (Piburn, Nelson & Carlson, 2011). It is especially important for boys to see caring men around them, since the way they see the world will shape their identity.

Method

Design

The current study used a qualitative research approach (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). Qualitative research explores and understands the meanings people assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Hennink et al, 2011). Interpretative research design is an approach to qualitative psychological research with an idiographic focus. It aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Usually, these phenomena relate to experiences of some personal significance. It is generally recommended that

qualitative methods be used to gain insight into the depth and complexity of phenomena (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2017). In these schools, information concerning parents' and stakeholders' opinions of male teachers was gathered, and it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the contributing factors to the decline of male teachers. It is assumed that opinions from the parents and teachers represent how male teachers are perceived across early grade schools in Nigeria.

Participants and Sampling

The researchers employed the convenience sampling method to select five parents (comprising of 3 mothers and 2 fathers) and five female teachers from one early grade school in Nsukka, Nigeria. In convenience sampling, participants are gathered wherever the researcher can find them, and typically wherever it is convenient for them. Participants are not selected according to any inclusion criteria (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

Data Generation Methods

Three open-ended questions were used to elicit data from both the teachers and parents during the data collection process. Participants were asked a series of preliminary questions based on their perspectives, and these include: i) Have you encountered a male teacher in early grade classrooms? If yes, tell me about your experience? ii) Would you prefer a male or female teacher teaching children in the early grades? Why do you say so? (iv) How do you feel working alongside a male teacher (question for the teacher)? How do you feel if your child was taught by a male teacher in the early years? (Question for parent). Further follow-up questions were asked to help the interviewer better understand the situation.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

A thematic content analysis approach was used to analyze the data for this study. Inductive coding was used to identify male teachers' barriers to enrolling in early grade schools. To cluster codes and form consistent themes throughout the personal interview, we identified patterns across the codes and reflected on the underlying meaning. This was done to draw attention to the most critical issues and similarities and differences between participants. Throughout the six phases of thematic data analysis, all data were presented and analysed in accordance with Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) prescriptions for establishing trustworthiness. The phases are as follows: Phase 1: Researchers become acquainted with the data; Phase 2: Generating initial codes; Phase 3: Finding themes; Phase 4: Reviewing themes; Phase 5: Defining and naming themes; and Phase 6: Producing the report. By observing these phases in this study (Nowell et al., 2017). We went through the data set line by line, reviewing each group's data and generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg to conduct this study. Participants were given a consent form to sign before the interviews began. The informed consent form described the study's purpose and methodology and

the benefits to participants and how their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality would be protected.

Findings

Three themes are presented to address the perception of male teachers in early grades across schools in Nsukka Urban area, Nigeria. We found that male teachers were generally perceived as failures in the eyes of society if they joined this sector. Moreover, there was a general perception that it was against the norm to have male teachers in early grade classes. Notwithstanding, a small proportion of participants believe that male teachers are an essential component of early grade schools for gender balance and effective role modeling.

Sociocultural misconceptions lead to attrition of male teachers in early grade schools

Even though most of the participants acknowledged a severe shortage of male teachers in early grades classrooms, they believed that it is "abnormal, unacceptable and a misnomer" to find a male in the job of early care. Some parents felt that early grade teaching is meant for women who do not have substantial family responsibilities and care less about social status *"Since the salary of teachers is low, most men are breadwinners in their families and ... the salary of teachers is not enough, they (teachers) opt for other well-paying jobs. It is almost normal not to find a male teacher in early grade schools in this city"* [P10]. Other cultural and societal motives drive the continued attrition of male teachers in early grade classrooms. It is clear from the participants' responses that society accords very low respect for males who work in early grade schools. *"There is a very low respect for males who teach in early grade schools"* [P2]. The data also points to the negative views held by society of men who teach in early grades, describing them as failures and letting the family and community down. Such a view is supported by participant 8 who asserts that *"it is also abnormal for a man to choose early grade teaching as a career in the present economic situation"*. *"More so, the society perceives male early grades teacher as a failure and never-do-well. I feel the job is for us women. Men should just go for what they want in other well-paying fields of endeavor"* [P6].

Apart from the low regard that the society has for males in early grades, it is also a general belief by most participants that the career of early grade teaching is more suitable for women who they believe are more disposed naturally for the task. *"I prefer my fellow women in early grades because they are more suitable for the job. They are well composed and endowed with the skills for taking care of children. Men cannot take the pains of nurturing children"* [P1]. A teacher-participant also opined that "most male teachers have difficulty in managing children who are disruptive, they are very strict and impatient with children". Such a view implies that men do not have the attributes to teach in the early grades, a belief also supported by female teachers as follows: *"men are too serious for this job. They lack team spirit and tend to behave in a way that suggests that they are too impatient with children"* [P7].

It was also discovered that most parents are not comfortable with their children being taught by male teachers in early grades *"It is no longer news that child sexual abuse is common in the society today, I will not enroll my child in a class taught by a male. For me, males lack the qualities required for the job" [P3]*. Here, P3 expressed very strong views about their distrust of male teachers, linked to child abuse cases prevalent in their context. The participants believed that young children might be prone to sexual abuse by male teachers who are often viewed as predators. Several factors were identified as the major causes of stereotypes against male early grade teachers. These factors range from suspicion of sexual abuse stigmatization to false prejudice against males in the profession of early care. *"I prefer female teachers to male teachers for so many reasons. I detest male teachers who come close to young children because most of them are sexual predators"[P7]*. In another opinion, Participant 2 expressed concern about *"the rampant cases of sexual abuse by adult males on minors. It is so disturbing. Pedophiles are everywhere"*. Similarly, another parent highlighted that male teachers are not needed in early grade schools due to *"the prevalent cases of child sexual abuse. Men are more likely to abuse children sexually than women. It scares many of us from enrolling kids in classrooms where men teach" [P5]*. Such views and suspicions have resulted in the stigmatization of males entering early grade teaching and can serve as a deterrent for males intending to join the teaching profession specifically because they want to teach in the early grades.

Overriding preference for female teachers in early grades

The majority of the participants reported an overriding preference for female teachers in early grades classroom. They expressed their aversion for male teachers in early grade classrooms. In general, participants believe that females have natural endowments such as patience, passion for teaching, empathy, flexibility, care, and compassion which makes them more suitable for the job of early care. The following excerpts supports these vies:

"I would prefer a female teacher to teach my child in early grades because it involves other responsibilities other than just teaching. Women will do better in taking care of these kids who are naive and young" [P1]. According to Participant 3, *"the job needs empathy and meekness which most men don't have"[P3]*; *"male teachers do not have what it takes to teach in an early grade school. Children in early grade schools are still very tender and young and need care and nurturing and it is women that can do it". Kids can be naughty and men can hardly cope with their naughtiness. In fact, women are more preferable for this job" [P4]*. *"I believe that teaching in grade schools like this one needs female teachers who are compassionate and caring, they will better deal with children more than the male teachers. It's natural" [P5]*. *"Early grade classrooms are not meant for males. Teaching at the level of early grade is supposed to be strictly for females" [P7]*.

It is evident from the findings that most male teachers are perceived as lacking these qualities, making them unsuitable for the teaching responsibilities in early grades. Moreover, these views indicate that male teachers' lack compassion and empathy, qualities they believed men do not

possess. Moreover, it appears as if there is some form of gatekeeping by parents and teachers with a view that it is “*strictly for females*”, and that men have no place teaching in the early grades. Childcare is considered the responsibility of women, and is one of the most prevalent stereotypes against the involvement of men in early child care. This is clearly evident as a participant opines that “*the societal prejudice and stigmatization push them away from the job*” [P9].

Although the positive role of male teachers in the early grades was outlined in the data, their contribution was limited. In line with this, a participant described male teachers as having rich skills for teaching but not for nurturing thus, “*they do well in teaching job but are not usually good at nurturing of children. They are impatient with children and often get fed up easily. They also have unique teaching skills and hardly get tired easily*” [P4]. In general, the participants' views about male teachers in early grades is based solely on the false and unfounded sociocultural belief that they are not suitable for the job without any empirical basis. The participants stated that gender stereotypes in individuals' minds are the most significant impediment to gender mainstreaming in early grades classrooms. As prejudices evolve, stereotypical mental images can contribute significantly to the process. Stereotypes are over-simplified mental images that people form about situations, phenomena, and objects. Women are viewed as caregivers and nurturing

Discussion of Findings

Not many studies have been conducted on the perception of male teachers in early grade schools in Nigeria. The current study investigated the perception of male teachers among stakeholders in early grade schools in Nigeria Overall, the participants reported a negative view of male teachers in early grade schools. It was apparent from the interview that the number of male teachers in the schools across the study area is drastically low. Specifically, it was discovered that the participants see male teachers in early grade schools as unsuccessful, inappropriate and people with low social status. This has affected the rate of enrolment of males in the profession. These emerging themes provided clear illustrations of how male teachers are perceived in the field of early childhood education. Earlier studies in other countries have also identified similar attitudes and perceptions towards male teachers in the early childhood education and care workforce (Peeters, Rohrmann, & Emilsen, 2015).

For instance, Dogutas (2021), in his study on gender stereotyping in the eyes of preschool teachers and teacher candidates in Turkey found that male teachers in early grades faced gender stereotypes more than their female counterparts. The study further highlighted that male teachers in early grade schools encountered several difficulties in the profession, including prejudices from children's parents. Similarly, research by Baris (2013) showed that female preschool teachers have negative attitudes towards male preschool teachers. Ahmad et al. (2018) also examined the Jordanian mothers' and female preschool teachers' perceptions of men working in preschool and found that mothers agreed that children gain diverse experiences when taught by males or females. Similarly, the result of the present study corroborates the findings of other studies that found that male teachers in early grades serve as role models and play significant roles in the classrooms of

early care (Anlıak & Beyazkürk, 2008; Temiz & Cin, 2017; Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2012). Though these studies indicate general bias against male teachers in early grades, it is not unexpected that the degree of stereotype may vary in Nigerian contexts, given the difference in sociocultural dynamics.

Our finding that there is an overriding preference for female teachers in early grades is in line with other studies which reported that male teachers are generally perceived as unsuitable for a career in early grades (Şahin, Korkmaz, & Çoban, 2018; Dogutas, 2021; Tennhoff, Nentwich & Vogt, 2015; Akman et al, 2014). The attrition of male teachers in early grade schools leads to very serious gender imbalance in the early care workforce and will continue to be a constraint for males who may wish to join the career (Brody, 2015). Consequently, the low percentage of men providing childcare may be due to the widespread belief that men are unsuitable for it (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). On the other hand, adding more male teachers creates a more balanced workforce and helps break down gender barriers (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). For instance, children who were taught by both male and female teachers will likely develop a more balanced views about gender roles and work-place relations while imbibing thought patterns devoid of stereotypes.

The present study also identified barriers relating to suspicion, stigmatization, and prejudice, which induce gender stereotypes against male teachers in early grades schools. Participants indicated that male teachers are potential sexual predators and should not be allowed to work in early grade schools. This is in line with (Penn, 1996; Dogutas, 2021; Scrinzi, 2010; Moosa & Bhana, 2020), who indicated that male teachers are perceived as sexual predators who might prey on young children. Other studies have also revealed that male teachers of young children face suspicion and risk of being labeled as pedophiles (Bars, 2013; Moors, 2010). In fields such as early childhood education, men who work as caregivers are feminized, while they are also sexualized. Thus, male caregivers are often accused of sexual abuse (Scrinzi, 2010), whereas female caregivers are portrayed as desexualized (Hrenjak, 2013). The issue is particularly troubling for male teachers of young children since they are expected to maintain frequent close contact with children they teach (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). While this finding may be rampant in the Nigerian context, literature also indicates that it is a global challenge. The increasing daily occurrence of sexual molestation of children across the countries, especially by males, creates stigmatization against males who work with children. We found that stigmatization arising from suspicion is among the barriers to gender mainstreaming in the early childcare workforce.

Recommendations and practical implications of the study

The findings of this study have implications for early childhood education administrators, teachers, parents, school proprietors, and government officials. Plans and support systems are needed for in-service and pre-service male teachers in the early grades schools. By doing so, they may feel more confident about pursuing the career. A programme should be organized to sensitize in-service early childhood educators on the importance of eliminating gender stereotypes against males in early childhood education. There is a possibility that this could reduce stigmatization of male

school teachers. There is a strong need for profound awareness that focuses on reducing stereotypes and stigmatization of male teachers in early grades in order to increase the number of males enrolling in early childhood education. To prevent allegations of sexual abuse, teachers can also be given orientation on the ethics and conduct of early childhood teaching. Parents should also be given orientation to change their views about male teachers in early grades because not all male teachers are pedophiles. In addition, the government should provide incentives to pre-service teachers to encourage male enrollment in early childhood teacher education programs.

Conclusion

Findings from the current study suggest that female early grade teachers and parents have a negative perception of male teachers. Few participants felt that having male teachers in early grades gives children a more diverse education. A major limitation of this study was the small number of participants. As a result, we discourage generalizations and comparisons that are extensive. According to our research, both parents and female early grade teachers perceived male early grade teachers negatively because of numerous barriers arising from the sociocultural context. Some participants, though few, emphasized the vital role male teachers play in early grade schools. The enrollment and retention of males in the career would be increased with support from parents, female early grade teachers, school administrators, employers, and the government.

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