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**Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male Teachers in  
Early Childhood Settings**

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy**

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## DECLARATION

I, Mahudi Magdalena Mofokeng, declare that this thesis entitled "**Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male Teachers in Early Childhood Settings**" is my work, and all sources used in this dissertation are indicated and acknowledged through complete references. This dissertation has not been submitted previously in part or entirely for examination for a degree at any institution.

Signature:

*Mahudi Mofokeng*

Date:

3/7/2024

## **DEDICATION**

**This thesis is dedicated to:**

The Holy Trinity, seated upon the throne.

My children (Kutloano, Kananelo, Bohlokwa Mofokeng)

Late husband (Motlohi Abiel Mofokeng)

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### **Isaiah 45: 2**

"I will break the doors of brass in pieces and cut apart the iron bars."

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ECE: Early childhood education

ECD: Early childhood development

ECCD: Early childhood care and development

ECCE: Early childhood care and education

FP: Foundation Phase

DoE: Department of Education

DBE: Department of Basic Education

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

SA: South Africa

## ABSTRACT

Identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in early childhood education (ECE) settings has brought attention to the teaching of young children, where male teachers expect to redefine themselves among young learners. Research shows that few male teachers have constructed and reconstructed their identities through training in early childhood development. The research was framed using two theoretical constructs: identity theory and social identity theory. The study employed phenomenology, focusing on the commonality of the lived experiences within a particular group to understand the problem in its context in this case, construction, and reconstruction of identity among male teachers in ECE, and provided a comprehensive description of individuals' subjective experience of an event or phenomenon. Phenomenology emphasises that only those who have personally encountered things can convey them to the external realm. The qualitative approach tests the theories and intervention techniques, using the snowball sampling technique to find five participants from 5 rural schools in the Thabo-Mofutsanyane District of the Free State province, with generation of data using semi-structured and focus group interviews. The study recommends recruitment strategies in ECE settings so that young children may be exposed to both genders in these settings. Workshops need to be held for male teachers, to advise them on how to deal with challenges that they will face from society and encourage them to stand firm with their career choice.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education, Male teachers, Identity construction, Early childhood development settings, (Re) construction

## **NON-TRADITIONAL FORMAT AND ORGANISATION OF THE ARTICLE APPROACH THESIS**

The presentation of this doctoral thesis differs from the traditional format as this thesis embraced the article approach instead of the conventional style. Three interconnected articles are presented in Chapter 4. It is essential to note that although the three articles were free-standing for publication purposes, all of them contributed to the thesis and are interrelated and jointly sought to achieve the aim of the study, which is Identity Construction and Reconstruction among male teachers in Early Childhood Settings.

## **PUBLICATION AND SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES DURING STUDIES**









## CHAPTER 1

### ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Background to the study

My experience in early childhood education (ECE) settings mainly involves female teachers, who predominate since ECE is generally a female occupation space (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Women have historically held positions of power in ECE because of the general belief that they are more capable of nurturing than males. This prevents male educators from reimagining themselves as ECE professionals and moving further in their profession (McGrath, 2018; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). The literature shows that the stereotypical ideas of ‘nannies’ and ‘carers’ accompanying ECE instruction are more often connected with women's roles than men's (Petersen & Petker, 2011; Petersen, 2014; McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020). Male educators can be positive examples for boys and families without father figures (Sinclair, 2013; McGrath, 2018; Okeke, 2017). Men who have formed and remade their identities and gender roles according to stereotypes and gendered performances are often mocked by both men and women (Bhana & Moosa, 2017b; Msiza, 2020). All of these elements aid in forming and reshaping male educators' identities in ECE contexts.

ECE refers specifically to the formal and structured education children receive in a classroom setting during the early years of their lives (O'Conner, 2016). This may include preschool and other ECE programmes that focus on developing children's academic skills and preparing them for schooling (Thompson, 2020). Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the “process by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, and socially” (Department of Education (DoE), 2001). It encompasses all aspects of a child's growth and development during this critical period, including their health and nutrition, language and communication skills, emotional well-being, and cognitive abilities (Grady, 2016; Mannik & Smith, 2019).

This study is concerned more with what is happening within ECE. For example, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting in Australia includes centre-based childcare and preschool services, and the situation is the same in South Africa. Preschool facilities are common

in many countries worldwide, including South Africa; however, in South Africa, the term 'pre-primary' is often used instead of preschool (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 them for formal schooling (DBE, 2014: National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12). Internationally, the term preschool is also used to refer to ECE programmes that are designed to prepare young children for formal schooling. In some countries, preschools may also be called nursery school, kindergarten, or pre-kindergarten (Thompson, 2020). Some programmes assist children in acquiring school readiness by developing learning-related skills such as expressing thoughts and adapting appropriate behaviours before starting school (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017; Warren, Thomas & Zhou, 2018). In Canada, early childhood care and development (ECCD) is a strategy and the element that takes action to develop the potential of children below the age of five years (Nilsen & Steen-Johnson, 2020: 2). In the United States of America, 'early childhood education' refers to the period from a child's birth to their preschool years, before entering school (Alvarado, 2020). Alvarado advocates that ECD is a crucial period in children's lives because it allows them to learn how to interact with others, including peers, teachers, and parents.

In Zimbabwe, the attention is on early childhood care and education (ECCE), which is essential as it prepares children to understand and act in the environment (Nyamukapa, 2016). In Nigeria, ECE is labelled pre-primary education, that education is given to children in an educational institution before they enter 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. The area of intervention was captured in the definition of ECD as "an umbrella term which applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially" (DoE, 1995: 33). As a result, the definition is a broad one. It may not adequately cover the overlapping nature of the care and education of children from birth to four. A Government Gazette document in the Republic of South Africa shows different ECE policies (2016). Section 91(1) of Children's Act 38 of 2005 defines ECD as the "emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, and social and communication development of children from birth to school-going age". The Education White Paper 5 on Childhood Education (DoE, 2001:2) 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 foundation for later lifelong learning.

In understanding ECE from different perspectives in different countries, little has been said about male teachers in ECE. As a result, identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE remain focal points, as females dominate in ECE settings. Society has deemed that this sector should be dominated by female teachers (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Male teachers who have constructed their identities proclaimed that they are not soft and feminine and distance themselves from a gay identity as well as from being homosexual (McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020). Men who deviate from traditional and stereotyped gendered performances tend to be ridiculed by other men and women (Brown, 2016; Moosa & Bhana, 2017; Yang, 2018). However, solid evidence suggests that many parents or guardians are concerned when their young children are assigned a male teacher (Yang, 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: 6). The argument is that children's gender knowledge is extended upon observing male teachers demonstrating both 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.

At the classroom level, given the research demonstrating that same-sex dyadic relationships may be closer considering boys when male teachers are in ECE, same-sex does make an impact, and boys have male teachers as their role models (Spilt, Koomen & Jak, 2012; Coplan & Woods, 2015; McGrath, 2020).

At the organisational level, they emphasise the benefits of a representative workforce on interactional experiences, policy development, and outcomes while recognising issues of token visibility, polarisation, and assimilation.

Finally, at the societal level, more excellent male teacher representation can help challenge constructions of masculinity and stereotypical gender roles beyond workforce 'balance' justifications.

McGrath and Van Bergen (2018) argue that the participation of diverse men in teaching may help to promote acceptance of alternative masculinities, while destigmatising the involvement of men in the lives of young children. Men who have constructed their identities in ECE not only encounter the expectation that they are to contribute something, but they may also face questioning and opposing discrimination (Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin & Vogt, 2013; Heikkila & Hellman, 2017). Consequently, those male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE found themselves being discriminated against with a protective attitude toward children by female teachers and so-called 'no touch policy' guidelines for physical contact between male teachers and children (Munk, Larsen & Leander, 2013; Hedlin, Aberg & Johansson, 2019). Worldwide, male teachers are present in the ECD workforce, but in low numbers, and this lack of male teachers has raised concerns about children's learning, particularly for male children (Hwang & Fitzpatrick, 2021), based on the theory that male teachers likely function as role models for male children and connect with them more effectively.

There is widespread awareness that the lack of male teachers is more likely to adversely affect male children's learning and development (Martino, 2008; Deese, 2017; Moreau & Brownhill, 2017). According to Hwang and Fitzpatrick (2021), there is a popular idea that male teachers are more effective at disciplining boys; therefore, parents and teachers call for more male teachers, citing their belief that male teachers can serve as disciplinarians (Carrington & Sinclair, 2013; McGrath, 2017). Mathwasa and Sibanda (2021) argue that the growth and development of children is not complete if children do not experience a comparable range of models of masculinity and know what it means to be a boy or a man in their gender identity development; hence, the need for a gender-balanced workforce to provide children with a wider variety of role models. There is also a notion that schools need male teachers who can act as father figures for fatherless children, but this lacks empirical backing and appears incoherent regarding the temporal nature of child- male-teacher relationships and various cultural norms (Hunter, 2019; McGrath, 2020; McDonald, 2020). Literature on fatherhood notes that many fathers play no part in their children's early lives (Okeke,

2017). According to Rentzou (2017: 202), "more male teachers would encourage more paternal involvement, make schools more father-friendly, would encourage fathers to feel more comfortable participating in ECE settings." Mncanca, Okeke, and Fletcher (2016) have noted that absent fathers constitute one of the most significant factors adversely affecting ECE.

South Africa has experienced great difficulty attracting and increasing fathers' active participation in various ECE initiatives (Khewu & Adu, 2015). In addition, some challenges are faced by male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE since many parents or guardians are concerned when their children are assigned a male teacher because society has a perception that ECE teaching is a woman's job; complaints of child abuse, sexual harassment and lack of male peer groups have been cited as major factors contributing to the lack of male teachers in ECE (Drudy, 2008; Petersen & Petker, 2011; Mashiya, 2014; Yang, 2018). In conducting this research on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE, this study will contribute to children being exposed to male teachers and a move away from the societal perspective of the ECE setting being a place of employ only for women.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Considering the shortage of male teachers in ECE in South Africa and an increase in single-parent, fatherless households, those male teachers who are encountered serve as positive role models for young children in their classrooms. Therefore, the problem to be addressed in this study is identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. Male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE feel burdened by the limitations imposed on them due to societal bias, including scrutiny for homosexuality and fear of false accusations of child sexual abuse (Martino, 2008; Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; McWilliams, 2018). Therefore, there is a lack of male teachers in ECE because of society's unfounded belief that teaching in this stage is predominantly female (McWilliams, 2018; Msiza, 2020). As a result, few male teachers in ECE in South Africa.

## **1.3 Rationale for the study**

The experience that I have had in my 28 years in ECE is that most of the teachers are female, even in management positions in schools. Hence, ECE is perceived as dominated by females and has

long been regarded as a female occupation space (Petersen, 2014; Mashiya, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Society trusts women to teach young children because women are considered more nurturing than men. Society deems men who wish to join women in ECE as potential child molesters and not 'real men' (Hunters, Riggs & Augoustinos, 2017). Msiza (2020) posits that men teaching in ECE construct identities that proclaim that they are not soft and feminine; therefore, these teachers distance themselves from a gay identity and being homosexual. Ratele (2015) and Msiza (2016) posit that male teachers in ECE construct their identities by situating themselves as parents, leading fathers to the children in the classroom. It has been found that traditional gender roles are seen in ECE, with male teachers teaching senior grades in the foundation phase (Grades 2 and 3) and the lower grades, like Grade R and Grade 1, being seen as suitable for females.

#### **1.4 Theoretical framework**

For the theoretical grounding of the study, I adopted two theories that I find relevant, namely identity theory and social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). I chose these two theories to explore identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in an ECE setting since they explain the identities of male teachers (Stets & Burke, 2000: 224). These theories would assist me in exploring how male teachers in ECE view themselves within society and adjust to the roles deemed appropriate for females in ECE and how they identify themselves in terms of other male teachers in different levels of education. Delahaj (2020: 660) states that social identity theory posits that individuals must protect their social identities through favourable groups to preserve their self-esteem. I will ask the male teachers questions about how they identify themselves. The male teachers will explain how they operate in a society that believes working in ECE is a women's career and how they protect their identities and preserve their self-esteem.

#### **1.5 Research questions**

##### **1.5.2 Main research question**

The main research question guiding the study on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings is: How can male teachers' identities be reconstructed in ECE settings?

##### **1.5.2.1 Research sub-questions**

The following are the research sub-questions:

1. How do male teachers perceive themselves in constructing and reconstructing ECE settings?
2. How do male teachers construct and reconstruct their identity in ECE settings?
3. What factors influence the construction and reconstruction of male teachers' identities in the ECE setting?
4. What constraints hamper male teachers' recruitment as career professionals in the ECE setting?
5. Why do male teachers construct and reconstruct their identities in ECE?

## **1.6 Research aim and objectives**

### **1.6.1 Aim of the study**

This study explores identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings.

### **1.6.2 Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the perceptions of male teachers in their identity (re)construction in ECE settings.
2. To explore how male teachers (re)construct their identity in ECE settings.
3. To determine the factors influencing the (re)construction of identity by male teachers in the ECE setting.
4. To determine the constraints hampering the recruitment of male teachers as career professionals in the ECE setting.
5. To understand why male teachers (re)construct their identities in ECE.

## **1.7 Overview of research methodology**

### **1.7.1 Research paradigm**

The study draws from the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bonache & Festing, 2020). Interpretivism implies that truth and reality are created, not discovered. As a result, it is impossible to know reality as

human senses always mediate it. I adopted this paradigm because it will allow me to discover reality. I intend to find or explore identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in the ECE setting. The literature shows that interpretivism is socially constructed with participants and considers their cultural backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, and professional identities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bonache & Festing, 2020). As male teachers are working in early childhood settings where female teachers dominate, I will be able to perceive how male teachers as individuals interact with other individuals and society that ascribe meaning and names to different social phenomena.

### **1.7.2 Research approach**

A qualitative research approach will be used in this study as it is an organised method of describing people's experiences and internal feelings (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). Qualitative research provides a thorough and deep overview of a phenomenon through data collection and presents detailed descriptions using a flexible research method. I find this approach very relevant to this study because I meet with the participants and obtain the detailed information that I need on how they have constructed and reconstructed their identities as ECE teachers. Furthermore, since this method is flexible, it enables me to find participants who are not easy to come into contact with.

### **1.7.3 Research design**

This study adopts a phenomenological research design, an approach to qualitative research focusing on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 1998, 2013). The best criterion to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of the human experience common to a group of people. This research design is relevant as it allows me to interview male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE. How do they identify themselves in the space regarded as for women only in ECE settings? Using a phenomenological research design, I can build the universal meaning of the events, situations, or experiences and better understand the phenomenon. Using phenomenology, I may understand the lived experiences of the male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE.

### **1.7.4 Data collection**

I used semi-structured interviews and a focus group as data collection methods that rely on asking questions with a predetermined thematic framework (George *et al.*, 2022). Gray (2009) sees semi-structured interviews as non-standardised and often used in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews allow for probing of views and opinions, where respondents may expand on their answers. The semi-structured tool allows me to develop a set of leading questions to ask; as a result, I am in control of the conversations taking place and obtain the opinions of male teachers in ECE settings. I also explore how they perceive themselves compared to other teachers teaching in higher grades. They reveal how they teach young children according to their lived experiences. Using a focus group will assist the researcher in understanding how they identify themselves in a sphere dominated mainly by female teachers. Male teachers who have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE may be viewed as ‘not man enough’, but also as not having ‘soft hearts’ like the female teachers (McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020).

### **1.7.5 Selection of participants**

This study used the snowball sampling technique. This technique is relevant for the study because snowball sampling is extensively used for conducting qualitative research with a population that is hard to locate (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This sampling technique involves primary data sources nominating other potential data sources to participate in the research study. Snowball sampling, or the chain-referral method, is based purely on referrals, and that is how a researcher can generate a sample (Ramrathan, Grange & Higgs, 2017; Matthews, Bialocerkowski & Molineux, 2019). The researcher will consult with the DBE in the Free State Province to assist with the location of the schools in Thabo-Mofutsanyane District that have male ECE teachers. The researcher contacted one male teacher about the research and the process by being referred to other male teachers. I hope to have ten male ECE teachers as participants, or at least five. As the researcher would be working on a delicate phenomenon, male teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences. I interview them using semi-structured interviews coupled with focus groups and research tools that are simple, versatile, and low-cost (Adejimi, 2010).

### **1.7.6 Data analysis**

I adopted thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data. This study employed the following three steps related to Clarke and Braun's (2017) guidelines. There are three that I am going to follow. In the first step, I organised the data, defined the codes, and read through the data to gain a general sense of the information. I then reflected on the available information. Step two involves developing the categories and code. I use open coding, look at the data, and read the data repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants. This involves looking at the relationships among the open codes; in other words, I will look at what influences these connections and what conditions precipitated them to occur, including the context and the strategies used to accomplish. The last step involves developing themes and sub-themes when coding the data. I mark passages and group them according to patterns that emerge from the research literature and the responses of the male teachers in ECE. I check if the themes emerge from the data collection and tabulate the data according to the themes.

### **1.7.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are regarded as a critical issue in educational research. Researchers need to ensure that research is conducted correctly before entering the research site (Basit, 2010: 56). One of the significant ethical issues is the need to seek permission from the relevant authorities before collecting data. The researcher will apply for approval from the DBE and ethical clearance from the University of Free State as prescripts when collecting data. After permission has been granted, the researcher will invite the participants by letter to attend an initial visit to the schools. During the initial school visit, the researcher will explain all the documents relevant to the study and unpack how the sessions unfold. The researcher will also clarify how the volunteer male teachers will benefit from the study. It will be emphasised that the principles of privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and protection of their rights will be ensured.

#### **1.7.7.1 Ensuring trustworthiness**

##### **a. Credibility**

Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) explain that a study's credibility is determined when readers are confronted with experiences they can recognise.

Credibility addresses the fit between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them. Furthermore, credibility asks how congruent the findings are with reality; using credibility, the researcher would seek to understand how the conclusions reported reflect some typical experiences of the participants.

#### **b. Dependability**

To achieve dependability, researchers must ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). When readers examine the research process, they can better judge the dependability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking also helps ensure dependability, where the researcher shares the findings with participants, and they attest to the results.

#### **c. Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are derived from the data, which requires the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and variations have been reached (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It also confirms that the review methods used by participants, supervisors, and colleagues are valid.

#### **d. Transferability**

The study was contextualised, and the scope was limited to a rural environment and male teachers in one of South Africa's ECE schools. This means that the findings and conclusion of the study may not be generalised to another context. However, it is possible that the findings can be transferred to another context; transferability in qualitative research simply means the extent to which a result of a particular study could be applied in another situation (Kynge, Kääriäinen & Elo, 2020).

### **1.8 Delimitation of the study**

The sample of this study is limited to five male ECE teachers in ECE schools in the Thabo-Mofutsanyana District in the Free State. The findings of the study could not be generalised, but instead were restricted within the context of five schools in the Free State Province. The participants are appropriate in this case for a phenomenological study to elicit rich and detailed responses.

## **1.9 Value of the study**

The lack of male teachers in ECE is inseparable from the need for more male teachers to serve as positive role models for young children's development. Male teachers in ECE add a different perspective to the teaching profession and may influence how teaching is regarded (Johnson, 2008). Male teachers are essential in breaking traditional stereotypes of male work, positively impacting the ECE setting by broadening perceptions, improving staff dynamics in ECE, and contributing to gender equality in teaching.

## **1.10 Definitions of key concepts**

The following section presents definitions of the operational concepts used throughout the study. These definitions will be gained from different instruments, namely books, policies, and a literature review of articles.

### **1.10.1 Male ECE teacher**

Social construction is about what it means to be a male and masculinity, seen in the context of particular times and certain places. These constructions "change over time according to context and dominant discourses" (Kenway, 1995: 61). This study explores how male ECE teachers have constructed their identities and identify themselves with other male teachers teaching in higher grades. This study refers to any male adult responsible for a group of children in a classroom or specialising in other disciplines in fulfilling the role of a teacher (Phajane, 2014).

### **1.10.2 Identity of male ECE teachers**

Fearon (1999:2) states, "An 'identity' refers to either a social category, defined by membership rules and characteristics attributes or expected behaviours, or socially distinguishing features that a person takes special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential". This study wants to understand how male ECE teachers identify themselves in a sector in which female teachers dominate. In other words, how do they perceive themselves?

### **1.10.3 Construction**

Constructing teacher identity is a dialogic, relational, dynamic, and socio-historically situated process, which implies the discursive construction of meaning about oneself as a teacher and the

profession to which one belongs (Solarie & Ortega, 2020). In this study, male teachers have constructed their identities. The study explores the experiences of male teachers in ECE as they have constructed their identities.

#### **1.10.4 Reconstruction**

Reconstruction of professional identity tends to be the outcome of an interface between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional context in which they function daily (Batista, Queiros & Limerick, 2014). The concern is about those male teachers who wish to join or choose this career, while other male teachers in higher grades do not take them seriously or regard ECE as suitable only for female teachers.

#### **1.10.5 Early childhood education**

Early childhood education (ECE) is a comprehensive approach for children from birth to nine years of age, with the active participants of their parents and caregivers (DBE, 2001). This stage is crucial for children, and teachers must be conscientious, as children should be exposed to education that will inspire them to become lifelong learners.

### **1.11 Structure of this thesis**

Chapter 1 provides the introduction and orientation of the study. It also presents the background of the study, the problem statement, the rationale of the study, and the theoretical framework. The research questions and objectives of the study are discussed, as well as the research methodology.

Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review that was carried out to understand the identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings.

Chapter 3 presents the qualitative research methodology and design of this study.

Chapter 4 presents the three articles developed from this study for publication in relevant peer-reviewed journals:

- Experiences of early childhood male teachers in primary schools: a self-concept approach – for submission to the *South African Journal of Childhood Education*,

- Construction and reconstruction of identity by male teachers in early childhood education will be submitted to the *International Journal of Early Childhood*, and
- Male teachers' narratives: teaching experiences in early childhood education will be submitted to the *Journal of Studies in Social Science and Humanities*.

Chapter 5 discusses the main findings and recommendations which emerged from the study.

## CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW ON MALE TEACHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Introduction

This study explores the identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in early childhood education (ECE) settings. Theories pertinent to male teachers in ECE will be discussed: identity theory, which is explained by Stryker (1980), and social identity theory, which is explained by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Further discussion in the literature review on male teachers in ECE settings centred on the objectives of the study, which are:

- To explore the perceptions of male teachers in their identity (re)construction in ECE settings.
- To explore how male teachers (re)construct their identity in ECE settings.
- To determine the factors influencing the (re)construction of identity by male teachers in ECE settings.
- To determine the constraints that hampered male teachers' recruitment as career professionals in ECE settings, and
- To understand why male teachers (re)construct their identities in early childhood education.

### 2.2 Theoretical framework

A research study must be constructed within a theoretical framework. Theories provide a language to describe 'how' or 'why' something operates in the way it does (Johnson & Christensen, 2007: 7). The theoretical framework gives the researcher some choices that set down the study's intent, motivation, and expectations. Tamene (2016) defines a theoretical framework as an empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and psychological processes at various levels that can be applied to understanding phenomena. Therefore, a theoretical framework is essential in research because it guides a researcher to think around the theory used in the research and then process results within this framework. Furthermore, a theoretical framework guides how the research will be conducted, determining what phenomena to measure and which statistical relationships to look for. I wanted to explore how male teachers identify themselves in ECE settings; identity theory and social

identity theory helped provide an analytical lens and served as a guide to make sense of the data generated. Trepte and Loy (2017) stated that social identity theory posits that individuals must protect their social identities through supportive groups to preserve their self-esteem. Hence, male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE, where most of the teachers are females, must protect their social identities through supportive groups to preserve their self-esteem regardless of the community and other teachers teaching in higher grades.

## **2.2.1 Identity theory (Stryker, 1980)**

### **2.2.1.1 Background to the theory**

Stryker developed the identity theory in 1980, the goal of which was to understand and explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviours. Identity theory attempts to make the concepts of society precise and self-researchable and organise these concepts as explanations of specified behaviours (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This theory originated from the origins and distress of identity disruption (Burke, 1991). The primary purpose of this theory was to specify how the meanings attached to various identities are negotiated and managed in an interactive structure (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Similarly, some identity theorists focus on how identities relate to one another, given their likelihood of being brought into situations and how central or essential they are to individuals. They discussed how identities relate to role performance (or behaviour), affect (feelings), physical and mental health (such as stress, anxiety, and depression), self-concept (such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity), and social structure (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Stryker and Burke (2000) emphasised that identity theory categorised the self as an occupant of a role and incorporated into the self the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance.

### **2.2.2.2 Relevance to the study**

Identity theory is relevant in this study because it helps to understand the person as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural agent who influences the structure of society and is influenced by the social system (Burke, 1991). It is helpful because the male teachers could explain how they view themselves in ECE settings compared to the community and other male teachers teaching in higher grades. It is relevant to the study as it could help to understand what society says about the male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities by teaching in ECE. Teaching in

ECE is often accompanied by simplistic images of ECE teachers as nannies and caregivers and generally associated with a woman's rather than a man's role in society (Petersen & Petker, 2011; Msiza, 2020). Furthermore, this theory is suited to this study as it allows an understanding of how teachers perceive themselves regarding society's beliefs on gender roles. In addition, identity theory made mention of functions that are embedded in one or more of a variety of groups that provide context for the meanings and expectations associated with the role. It allows an understanding of what male teachers perceive as their roles and functions in ECE among female teachers. It helps to understand factors that influenced male teachers to choose ECE as a career labelled a woman's job.

Islam (2014) begins with the premise that individuals define their identities concerning social groups and that such identifications protect and reinforce self-identity. Therefore, male teachers who have (re)reconstructed their identities could define their identities against the creation of group identities that involve categorising one's in-group concerning an out-group and the tendency to view one's group with a positive bias vis-à-vis the out-group. This theory might allow the male teachers in ECE to identify themselves with a collective, depersonalised identity based on group membership and infused with positive aspects. As a result, male teachers must show positive features that they can teach in ECE and deliver the expected results (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Stryker (1980) mentioned one commitment component: the number of female teachers connected by possessing a particular identity to whom male teachers are connected. The male teachers in ECE should have the same commitment component, a similar element to that of female teachers: having a soft heart toward children (Msiza, 2020).

According to Coss (2014), identity theory consists of a particular role identity, which fulfils the role's expectations, coordinates and negotiates interaction with role partners, and manipulates the environment to control the resources for which they are responsible. Thus, the social identity theory complements the abovementioned theory because male teachers are social agents who represent a specific group in the ECE settings.

## **2.2.2 Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)**

### **2.2.2.1 Background of the theory**

The social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. This theory originated from the minimal group of paradigms that demonstrated people's inherent desire to distinguish themselves from others based on their group memberships and willingness to sacrifice absolute rewards and maintain relative superiority over members of other groups (Harwood, 2020). Tajfel and Turner (1979) believed that individuals should define their identities concerning social groups and that such identifications work to protect and strengthen self-identity. Hogg and Williams (2000) attempted to apply cognitive grouping phenomena to social groups. Cognitive grouping involves judgemental accentuation. Mental categories increase the salience of distinguishing features between types, exaggerating category differences, which means that male teachers will have to protect their classes from being judged because they have chosen ECE as a career and exaggerate category differences. In contrast, male teachers are only considered good with sports or occupy management positions (Petersen, 2014). Social identity theorists assume that individuals' identities are based on the social groups they belong to and their traits (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Scheifele *et al.*, 2021).

#### **2.2.2.2 Relevance to the study**

The social identity theory is suited to this study due to the existence of social groups; this principle could explain society's perceptions towards male teachers compared to other groups. As a result, male teachers get the opportunity to protect their identities in ECE, as often their sexuality is viewed with suspicion, or it is held that they are homosexuals (Martino, 2008). This theory helps an understanding of social identity construction and reconstruction for male teachers in ECE settings. It helps male teachers understand how to manage challenges, protect their identities, and enhance their self-concepts against negative out-group characterisations in their communities. Similarly, through self-categorising social identity theory, the individual's identity forms through belonging to a social group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). The social identity theory is relevant because it opens the minds of male teachers to express themselves about the female-dominated environment, to protect themselves from being scrutinised and stigmatised as not having as soft a heart as females towards children. Furthermore, male teachers in ECE will explain how they feel about being in social groups that perceive ECE as having a low status. This theory helps male teachers to construct their social identities and fulfil the expectations of the role of ECE teachers as the environment and society expect.

### **2.3.1 Perceptions of male teachers in their identity (re)construction in ECE settings**

Many scholars have demonstrated how male teachers perceived their identity (re)construction in ECE settings (Brody, 2015; Pirard, Schoenmaeckers & Camus, 2015). For example, Brody (2015) explored the construction of masculine identity among men who work with young children from an international perspective. Brody's (2015) findings revealed that charisma, initiative, daring, playfulness, and attention to the children's needs could be considered teachers' masculine identities. Perez (2019) pointed out the feminisation of the teaching profession, where male teachers comprised a small percentage of the total population of teachers. Scholars reported various benefits in identity (re)construction among male teachers in ECE; for example, Zhang (2017) indicated that male teachers' presence in ECE is advantageous for children in providing a role model and offers another world perspective for children from a single-parent family. Others support that male teachers feel like influential role models to their children and help children learn that males are brave and strong and also have a gentle and caring side, which helps break the arbitrary gender role of traditional culture (Perez & Wang, 2017; Msiza, 2020). Tennhoff, Nentwich and Vogt (2015) stated that the inclusion of male teachers in the classroom might place more emphasis on masculinity when learning materials and activities associated with masculinity are being explored or taught. Huber, Vollum and Stroud (2000) suggest that male teachers might be more likely to meet the needs of boys from boys' perspectives and experiences and help increase boys' academic engagement and learning interest. Moving beyond the influence on child development, the increased presence of male teachers in early childhood settings may also help balance the number of male and female teachers (Cushman, 2007; Foster & Newman, 2005) with the potentiality to improve social dynamics and relationships in the workplace (Jensen, 1998) and meet the needs of the ECE field in terms of professionalism with masculinity (Tennhoff *et al.*, 2015). Msiza (2020) indicated that the identity of a disciplinarian is another common one imposed on male teachers in ECE, and there is an expectation for male teachers to serve on disciplinary committees (Brown, 2012). In considering the context of South Africa and, more significantly, the history of violence, it is essential to involve and engage men who have chosen ECE to transform the gendered contours of teaching (Bhana & Moosa, 2016).

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: 6). The argument is that children's gender knowledge must be extended upon observing male teachers demonstrating both 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.

At the classroom level, given the research demonstrating that same-sex dyadic relationships may be closer (Spilt, Koomen & Jak, 2012; Coplan & Woods, 2015 & McGrath, 2020) as boys will feel accepted as they will have male teachers with same-sex and as a result, it will be easy for them to have male teachers as their role models. At the organisational level, they emphasise the benefits of a representative workforce on interactional experiences, policy development, and outcomes while recognising issues of token visibility, polarisation, and assimilation. Finally, at the societal level, more excellent male teachers' representation can help challenge constructions of masculinity and stereotypical gender roles beyond workforce 'balance' justifications.

McGrath and Van Bergen (2018) argued that the participation of diverse men in teaching might help to promote acceptance of alternative masculinities while destigmatising the involvement of men in the lives of young children. Rentzou (2017: 202) stated that more male teachers would encourage paternal involvement, make schools more father-friendly, and encourage fathers to feel more comfortable participating in ECE settings. Absent fathers constitute one of the most significant factors that affect ECE adversely (Mncanca, Okeke & Fletcher, 2016). Okeke and Nyanhoto (2021) argued that male ECE teachers are becoming increasingly necessary in schools across South Africa because of the dramatic departure from the traditional nuclear family structure, and there is a corresponding need for male role models in ECE and other phases of teaching and learning.

### **2.3.2 Male teachers' (re)construction of their identities in ECE settings**

There are many studies on ECE, but little research has been done on male teachers. Studies focused on the negative aspects of career choice (Jodan, 2011; Mashiya, 2014; Msiza, 2020). Jordan (2011)

indicated that some men gained support from teachers, family members, and close friends to pursue careers in early childhood. Most other studies reported men's fears and challenges in their professional careers (Yang, 2018; Spence & Clapton, 2018). Notwithstanding their motivation to enter the ECE profession, a significant concern for male ECE providers is the public perception that men are more likely than others to abuse children (Barnard *et al.*, 2000; Sanders, 2002; McNay, 2001; Mashiyah, 2014; Msiza, 2020). Public suspicion is a pull factor away from teaching positions at the early childhood level. Many men who remain in the profession often navigate to administrative places to escape continual public scrutiny (Barnard *et al.*, 2000). Sanders (2002) suggested that male ECE teachers often find it necessary to defend their career choice to family members, friends, and female counterparts with whom they work. The low status ascribed to ECE has been identified as another reason so few men enter the profession. Male teachers are uncomfortable teaching in ECE 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 in society (Petersen & Mashiyah, 2014; Msiza, 2020). If a man chooses to become an ECE teacher, some immediate negative thoughts, especially about the man's sexuality, and questions about child abuse and molestation often arise (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Skeleton, 2003). Thus, society can view a male teacher negatively, and the community of female teachers can also be against male teachers. Male teachers can sometimes even be isolated and intimidated by female colleagues, who often doubt that a man can do a job effectively regarding nurturing and caring just because he is a man. Having few male teachers in ECE is accompanied by the misconception that ECE requires minimal skills and competencies (Bernard *et al.*, 2000). Some agree that the low status of ECE may be one reason for the low salaries paid to persons working in the field (Cooney & Bittner, 2001).

Despite societal misconceptions, male early childhood educators seek the opportunity to work with young children without being placed under constant scrutiny by administrators, other teachers, and parents for possibly being gay or a pedophile (Fagan, 1996; Neugebauer, 1999; Sargent, 2002; Mashiyah, 2015; Msiza, 2020). Carrington and Skeleton (2003) suggested that such individuals can positively contribute to the school's ethos through their role as mentors. Male ECE teachers can bring a lot to ECE settings if society allows them to do their job and does not treat them as caretakers doing all kinds of repairs. Male teachers are not there to substitute for female teachers

but to create healthy and diverse activities and personalities for their female colleagues. Male teachers do a lot of physical activities, unlike female teachers, who prefer casual games and many rules (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). A family environment encompassing both female and male ECE teachers is necessary to provide good development in ECE. Several authors (Brownhill, 2014; Jones, 2007; Erden, 2011) have challenged the question of male early-years teachers. Brownhill (2014) criticised the existence of positive male role models, stating the ambiguity of that phrase. Men exhibit different individual and professional characteristics, and one can hardly talk about the overall population of men serving as positive role models.

Some authors are concerned with the safety of children and the possible abuse of children by men (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). Jones (2007) analysed female teachers' opinions on including men in the early years of teaching. Female early-years teachers emphasised the possibility of child abuse by men and would not hire a male teacher - not only for the sake of men but not for their own sake and that of other female teachers. The traditional role of females as mothers and protectors is seen here. Erden, Ozgun, and Ciftci (2011) showed that society still considers teaching a female profession. When it comes to factors affecting male teachers' choice of career, female ECE teachers state that their main reason is the possibility of advancement to a higher position as administrators or assistants. Thus, men usually work as ECE teachers until they find "a path to other work" (Sak, Sahin & Sahin, 2012: 589), so their aim is career progression.

Advertisements and television programmes should inform society and parents about the role of male teachers in the ECE classroom. Looking through the many articles, the "need for male teachers" and the "benefits of male teachers" are identified (Okeke, 2021), and all identify the problem of male teachers being underrepresented in ECE. Peeters (2007) briefly explains how the European Union influenced the policies in attracting men to be teacher. When a man becomes an ECE teacher, he meets contradicting messages on being a role model, being a man, and being nurturing, but not being too feminine and too nurturing and not 'too much of a man' (Fordice & Nielsen; Skeleton, 2003; Martino, 2008). As Martino (2008) and Jones (2002) noted, men are exposed to the conditions they feel would be suitable; they should act according to what is expected from them and what others think or feel is right. However, those expectations often contradict each other (Fordice & Skeleton, 2003; Martino, 2008; Msiza, 2020). It is evident that contamination is

suggestive of men who earn less, teach, work with young children, and are expected to take on feminine values (Bhana, Moosa, Xu & Emilsen, 2022).

### **2.3.3 Factors influencing the (re)construction of identity of male teachers in ECE**

Perez (2019) investigated the lived experience of male ECE teachers. The theme was the burning passion when participants expressed their love for teaching children, influencing them to become and stay on as ECE teachers. Xu and Waniganayake (2017) also stated that male teachers' love of children is the most significant reason for choosing to be ECE teachers. Prioritising their love of children is crucial in seeking employment in the ECE sector. Mashiya (2014) expressed that the increasing importance of ECE resulted in more opportunities in this field, encouraging men to enter the profession; however, being an ECE teacher requires a passion for teaching children.

Consequently, passion is the influence that motivates male teachers to stay in their profession despite the challenges they encounter and stops them from throwing their hands in the air and giving up. Jordan's (2011) study indicated that some men obtained support to pursue the profession from teachers, family members, and close friends. Another factor influencing the construction and reconstruction of male teachers in ECE is their willingness to teach if offered an internship position in an early childhood school. The experience of working with young children would help train them as future fathers and imbue the love and enjoyment of working with children and a desire to contribute something of value to this group (Santiago, 1999; Mashiya, Kok, Luthuli, Xulu & Mtshali, 2015). Some men entered the field because of an increased interest in further involvement in early childhood programmes (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015)). Another possible reason why males teach in ECE is that male teachers want to be treated equally in everything, including rules, expectations, and personnel policies. In addition, male teachers entered the field because they wanted to explore new things. According to Lamb (2000), some males enjoy working with young children and are motivated to be positive role models, like those who taught and guided them through life. Males bring more active movement, entertainment, and rough-and-tumble play to the way they interact with their children and the way they interact with children in a programme (Lamb, 2000). Male teachers influence teaching in ECE because the children are usually controllable, observant, quickly disciplined, and respectful. Allen and Daly's (2007) research proved that children with a more significant male presence at school and home tend to be better at achievement tests, get better

grades, and have better verbal and problem-solving skills, among many other improvements. Petersen and Petker (2011) and Mashiya *et al.* (2015) report positive reasons for male teachers to construct their identities in ECE, such as the enjoyment of working with children and the conditions of service, and they want to make a difference in the lives of young children.

Men who decide to teach ECE can actively challenge and disrupt the symbolic gendered image of women's work (Brody, 2021). Warin (2018) states that some men accrued male-controlled benefits by prioritising academic success and professional identity over children's emotional well-being. Men in ECE have reinforced the hegemonic system of male power despite having crossed the gendered boundary that distances men from working in what is considered a traditionally feminine ECE profession (Wood & Brownhill, 2018). Christophersen, Elstad, Solhaug, and Turmo (2015) identified five dimensions of motivation to become teachers in ECE. These include extrinsic, intrinsic, achievement goal, charitable, and disillusioned. Extrinsic motivation relates to contributory motives or desires often driven by materialistic rewards, such as benefits attached to teaching, such as salary, vocation, or other external bonuses. In South Africa, Van Broekhuizen (2015) argues that extrinsic motivation is a pull factor. These outside factors include, among others, the full-cost Funza Lushaka bursaries and the immediate absorption of these recipients into schools upon completing or attaining their qualifications. Eren, Ravhuhali, Mashau, Lavhelani, Mudzielwana, and Mulovhedzi (2019) observed that some students are primarily influenced by their high school results and not necessarily their inner drive to become ECE teachers. Armstrong (2015) argues that many motivating factors influence an individual to become a teacher within the outside dimension. This author highlights that there are not many working hours in teaching, and there is flexibility and job stability. Comparing extrinsic factors with intrinsic motivation is based on personal enjoyment, interest, or pleasure of education and all the activities connected to the job and driven by inherent satisfaction or the joy of teaching (Armstrong, 2015). Roness (2011) found that prospective female teachers show traits of intrinsic motivation, as they often equate education at the ECE level as a motherhood role to young children. Achievement goal motivation is about looking at one's task performance and comparing that with what someone is doing. Christophersen *et al.* (2015) note that achievement goal motivation has to do with the need of an individual to earn respect based on particular skills that they exhibit, ensuring that they are valued in society. Christophersen *et al.* (2015) further argued that some individuals regard teaching as a socially

valuable and essential profession. In contrast, disillusion motivation is about the negative feeling that can arise during teacher education training or when student teachers are engaged in teaching practices and experience first-hand the realities of school environments, causing them to intend to leave the teaching profession later (Ravhuhali *et al.*, 2019).

#### **2.3.4 Constraints that hampered male teachers' recruitment as career professionals in the ECE setting**

It is essential to note that recruiting male teachers faced constraints in the ECE setting. Some scholars even found it so difficult to recruit them that they were non-existent in some preschools (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). Worldwide, women have dominated ECE. Public confidence in women - as they have been considered more nurturing than men - hinders male teachers who anticipate pursuing careers in ECE (Mathwasa & Sibande, 2020). Gender imbalance has been noted in ECE and lower primary schools, where teachers have been female skewed with a conspicuous absence of men in the setting (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). Okeke and Nyanhoto (2021) state that challenges of low status, low salaries, perceptions of ECE teaching as a women's job, potential complaints of child abuse and sexual harassment, and a lack of male peer groups have been cited as major contributing factors to the lack of male teachers in ECE (Drudy, 2008; Petersen & Petker, 2011). Gender highlights women's roles and responsibilities about those of their male counterparts, and this has broader implications for how men and women may want to perceive their economic roles, say, within the ECE setting (Moses, Admiraal & Berry, 2016; Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2011). Alongside gender and sexuality, robust social and economic processes shape constructions of masculinity based on the avoidance of care and the feminisation of ECE as women's work (Brody, 2015; Xu, Wari & Robb, 2020). Beyond this conceptualisation, focusing solely on recruiting men to diversify the ECE workforce has been critiqued. It is based upon a restrictive male or female gender binary that disregards gender identities falling outside a gender binary (Mohandas, 2022). Public recognition of outstanding male ECE teachers and male lecturers in ECE undergraduate degrees should attract males into the ECE setting (Rentzou, 2017; Skeleton, 2009; Svodziwa & Raymond, 2016). Research by Jones (2009) has also shown that advertising that focuses on male involvement in ECE tends to promote the profession and reduce negative stereotyping. Advertising could include images of male role models on leaflets, posters, and television commercials (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021).

Furthermore, reviewing ECE legislation to ensure that it offers equal rights and opportunities to both men and women and safeguards both sexes and children, for example, by encouraging open-plan environments in the ECE setting, is crucial. Some women and parents believe that male teachers must not be left alone in class with children (Joseph & Wright, 2016; Okeke, 2017). Jordan (2011) suggests that more affirmative descriptions of men in childcare roles are needed to rectify the lack of male educators in ECE settings. 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). Rinke (2011) posits that efforts toward recruitment must scrutinise prior educational experiences and examine prospective educators' planned approaches toward instruction, community participation, and professional growth. It has also been suggested that if men become involved in the management of ECE, it would become relatively easy to attract male educators to work in the sector (Johannes, 2010). To attract men to ECE, society must change its stereotypical perception that only females should teach young learners because children can benefit from having male and female teachers (Louw & Tshelane, 2022). Male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities must be applauded, encouraged, and supported for their willingness to teach in ECE schools. Male teachers should not be treated with distrust and suspicion because they want to teach young children not all men are evil and perpetrators of abuse. Sayed and McDonald (2017) recommend that policymakers nurture a culture of teaching as a positive and highly esteemed profession for men and women alike.

Consequently, universities and other state departments should provide career advice to better prepare male pre-service teachers for the challenges and criticism that await them. There must be strategies or policies in place to educate in-service male teachers on coping with prejudice so that they can become resilient and not leave the teaching profession because of these negative connotations associated with male teachers. The value of all ECE teachers must be recognised, regardless of gender. The low status ascribed to ECE has been identified as another reason so few men enter the profession. This is accompanied by the misconception that ECE requires minimal skills and competencies.

### **2.3.5 Male teachers' (re)construction of their identities in ECE**

ECE in South Africa entails the teaching of children between the ages of 5 and 9 years of age. Statistics reveal that 79% of ECE teachers in the country are women (OECD, 2017). Men who decide to teach ECE can actively challenge and disrupt its symbolic gendered image as 'women's work' (Brody *et al.*, 2021). Males and females differ; children can only benefit from growing up with two behaviour models (Tokie, 2018). Male ECE teachers can bring a lot to the ECE setting if society allows them to do their job and does not treat them as janitors to do all kinds of repairs. Children can only benefit from the diverse activities and personalities of both male and female ECE teachers. Male ECE teachers can serve as a model to young children, and specifically to boys. Compared to female teachers, male teachers do a lot of physical activities; female ECE teachers prefer casual games and many rules (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). It is necessary to construct a family environment encompassing female and male ECE teachers to allow for good development in ECE. Some authors have challenged the question of male ECE teachers, criticising the existence of positive male role models and stating the ambiguity of that phrase (Brownhill, 2014; Jones, 2007). Others are concerned with the safety of children and the possible abuse of children by men (Jones, 2007).

Apart from societal misconceptions, male early childhood educators want the opportunity to work with young children without being constantly scrutinised by administrators, other teachers, and parents for possibly being gay or pedophile (Petersen, 2014). The assumption that men in ECE are needed to act as father figures for children with absent fathers is also critiqued, as it reinforces heteronormativity and discounts diverse family structures (for example, families with same-sex parents) (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). Gendered expectations of men in ECE to perform within this situation, with regulatory discourse as superior disciplinarians and sports administrators, places unwarranted amounts of pressure and distress on those men who cannot or do not aspire to fulfil these roles (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Bhana *et al.*, 2022). Once more, women and femininity are repudiated in a process that undermines women in their roles as effective disciplinarians (Hjalmarsson & Lofdahl, 2014) and sports administrators (Smith, Taylor & Hardin, 2017). Sanders (2002) and Joseph (2016) suggested that male ECE teachers often find it necessary to defend their career choices to family members, friends, and female counterparts with whom they work.

Therefore, men usually work as ECE teachers until they find "a path to other work" (Sak *et al.*, 2012: 589), so their aim is career progression.

### **2.3.6 Importance of having male teachers in ECE**

Men can be great teachers like women and positively influence children's lives. It should not matter which gender you are if you want to help enrich someone's life; the determining factors should be capability, experience, and willingness, not whether or not you are a female. It is also essential to remember that men bring a different perspective to ECE (Yousefi, 2016). Furthermore, male teachers may inspire young boys to disregard societal constructs and pursue their passions. Children have malleable brains; they learn quickly and easily, especially from the environments they are exposed to during their periods of development (Yousefi, 2016). Children need to see an equal mix of men and women working in the same field together, planting the seed of equality and cooperation. However, over many centuries, teaching young children has been the domain of female teachers (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015).

According to Rentzou (2017: 202), "more male teachers would encourage more paternal involvement, make schools more father-friendly, and encourage fathers to feel more comfortable about participating in the ECE setting." The ECE sector in South Africa has experienced difficulty in attracting and increasing male participation in various ECD initiatives (Khewu & Adu, 2016). Koch and Farquhar (2015) maintain that in many countries, a low proportion of men working in ECE is accompanied by a correspondingly low presence of men and fathers in the upbringing of children. In developing countries, the duties of child-rearing and providing education tend to be left entirely to mothers and women, and this tendency is particularly prevalent in South Africa (Day, 2012). Rolfe (2006) notes that the presence of male teachers in ECE promotes more gender balance in the environment; males promote a more active, physical environment, while female teachers foster a nurturing, calm, and positive environment. Both male and female educators have different caring styles that can be very beneficial because participating children will be introduced to different types of caring, playing, and instructing (Rolfe, 2006). Joseph and Wright (2016) maintain that children in ECE where there is gender balance will experience a positive male role model, which is something they may not experience at home because some children may come

from homes where the father is absent. It is crucial at this stage to teach positive attitudes and behaviour concerning gender.

Active participation in ECD benefits children, men, and society. Warin (2018) states that some men enjoy patriarchal benefits by prioritising academic success and professional identity over children's emotional well-being. Men in ECE are sometimes premised upon preserving normative masculine ideals based on male role modelling. One facet of the male role modelling discourse is premised upon a need for male teachers to rebuild boys' failing masculinities at school (Martino & Kehler, 2006). This gender discourse is marked by an assumption that female teachers do not ensure that boys perform within a normative masculine ideal generated by male power. In response, male teachers often feel responsible for ensuring boys adhere to hegemonic masculine performances within a patriarchal gender order (Haase, 2008). One more aspect of male role modelling is the expectation that male teachers will be natural disciplinarians and that they will exhibit sporting prowess at school (Harris & Barnes, 2009). Mentioning discipline by male teachers perpetuates stereotypical thinking about discipline, suggesting that it must be directed and aggressive to be effective. However, research has shown that such disciplinary strategies can damage positive teacher-learner relationships (Carrington, Tymms & Merrell, 2008; McDowell, 2022). The view that men are involved in discipline and classroom management solely because of their biology often leads to their attrition from the profession. The gendered binary system of control is somehow problematic as it reinforces male superiority while systematically undermining the ability of female teachers to perform optimally as disciplinarians (Hjalmarsson & Lofdahl, 2014) and sports administrators (Taylor *et al.*, 2017).

Related to male role modelling is the need to promote men in ECE to counteract the adverse effects of absent fathers among children. Research has shown how some men reaffirm their masculine position in ECE by considering themselves as father figures, particularly for boys (Wood & Brownhill, 2018), ultimately reinforcing the need for a heteronormative male presence in the context of ECE. The father figure discourse surrounding men in ECE has subsequently been criticised as a heterosexist ideology that fails to account for diverse family compositions, such as families with same-sex parents (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). Research also demonstrates that the consequence of male role modelling is problematic, as it marginalises women in ECE by undermining their ability to support parents across the gender spectrum while reinforcing men

within normative roles (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). This emphasis is further supported by the idea that male teachers could positively influence children's development at various levels (Nelson & Sheppard, 2005; Peeters, 2007). Tennhof *et al.* (2015) also suggest that the inclusion of male teachers in the classroom may place more emphasis on masculinity when learning materials and activities associated with masculinity are being explored or taught. Several studies have highlighted the importance of having male teachers in primary schools (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). McGrath and Sinclair (2013) interviewed parents and teachers about their perceptions of having male ECE school teachers within ECE primary schools. Participants anticipated that male teachers within ECE would enable the children to see that men could adopt a nurturing occupation and, therefore, be effective role models and father figures to children.

Furthermore, participants felt that male teachers might also be essential to boys in helping to improve their skills and enabling them to feel more comfortable talking about sensitive subjects. Evidence suggests that male teachers within the primary school classroom may be particularly beneficial in helping improve boys' underachievement within schools and aid in teaching vocational skills that may interest them (Riddell & Tett, 2010). Carrington and Skeleton (2003) raise concerns about matching pupils and teachers based on the same gender, arguing that it has little impact on achievement. However, it might have a more positive influence on other aspects of the school experience.

### **2.3.7 Challenges experienced by male teachers in ECE**

Male ECE teachers face gender-related challenges after graduation (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2018). Previous studies have identified various challenges, including job dissatisfaction (Cushman, 2007; Cruickshank *et al.*, 2018) and increased workload due to expectations to perform masculine roles (Smith, 2008), negative perceptions in society and the media (Mistry & Sood, 2016), discouragement from families (Foster & Newman, 2005) and friends (Cushman, 2005), social isolation (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006), questions about their sexuality (Mills, Haase & Charlton, 2008), uncertainty about role modelling (White, 2011) and uncertainty about making physical contact with children (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). These challenges are moderated by demographic variables such as age, years of teaching experience, the number of male teachers in ECE schools where they work, whether or not teaching was their choice of career, the gender of

the principal at the school where they are employed, and whether or not they are a parent (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Smith, 2008; White, 2011). A further concern male ECE trainee teachers face is that they are very aware of being in the minority and working in a more feminine environment (Cushman, 2005; Pollit & Oldfield, 2017). Male trainee teachers have commented that even before they start a job, they have to negotiate a training course that is often more suited to their female colleagues and their learning style (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017).

Moreover, being in the minority could have some disadvantages. In a study with male teachers, Cushman (2005) demonstrated that some participants reported that their female colleagues often joked about them getting a job based only on their gender and not their ability as a teacher. The questioning of males' motives as to why they would want to work as ECE teachers creates the everyday discourse they are not 'real' men but instead are effeminate or homosexual (Thornton & Bricheno, 2006), sexual predators, molesters, and pedophiles (Sargent, 2004; Pruit, 2014; Heikkila & Hellman, 2017) or freaks (Warwick, Warwick & Hopper, 2012). For example, Sargent (2004) highlights a significant theme reported by male teachers: the challenge of facing suspicion of molestation. The teachers interviewed unanimously confirmed that school policies regarding physical contact with children differ for male and female teachers. These rules accentuate the distinctions between men and women, ultimately influencing the teaching style of male teachers and reinforcing the perception that men cannot provide the same level of love and nurturing as women. To challenge and remove the differing expectations of male and female teachers, it is essential to ask why such beliefs exist in the first place. Such expectations are arguably created by the social construction of gender and expectations of the role of an ECE teacher and what it entails. Strong opinions still exist regarding gender-segregated jobs, with many feeling that any care-related job is only suitable for women (Hjalmarsson & Lofdahl, 2014; McDowell, 2015b). The nurturing element of teaching children in the earlier years of ECE and primary school embodies female-only characteristics (Brody *et al.*, 2020). Caring is not seen as part of hegemonic masculinity (MacDougall, 1997). Men are not seen to be legitimate actors in this work role, and this is where essentialists uphold their beliefs about gender and occupation.

Pruit (2014) examines how male teachers accomplish identity construction in ECE in the United States of America, finding that society constructs notions of men as a threat to children due to the predator stigma. As a result, the school has created rules and policies that disallow men and only

men from performing specific caring roles, such as taking children to the bathroom. In the USA, there is a policy based on the head teacher's preconceptions of the views parents may have about male teachers. Such prejudices of how parents 'may' react are arguably ignorance-created beliefs about men being in the occupation in the first place (McDowell, 2023).

Consequently, men are expected to follow and accept these constraints (McDowell, 2023). As a result, men are told not to question preconceptions of how parents may react but to ignore, perform, and accept being judged by others, even if it is inappropriate behaviour. The man's role as the chief breadwinner in the home is frequently linked to demonstrating hegemonic masculinity in many societies (Fan, 2022; Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Therefore, the type of work a man performs is an important aspect used to shape and demonstrate their masculine identity. For example, the teaching profession in the United Kingdom is well known for being low-paid and having relatively low status.

Furthermore, as masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity and homosexuality in Western societies, men who work in feminised jobs are seen to be more effeminate or 'weird', and thus initiate a challenge to the traditional ideas of what is seen as appropriate gender behaviour (Baxter, 2010). Therefore, a joint discourse surrounding male teachers in the UK includes accusations of being homosexual or pedophile, and South Africa shares the same sentiments (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015; Msiza, 2016). A less frequent but equally alarming discourse is that male teachers are violent (Pruit, 2014). Such gender bias results in male alienation from the role and high male teacher attrition rates, which then perpetuates even stronger gendered beliefs, as pupils often only see the male staff in their school in the caretaker or head teacher role. In the UK, the government has initiated policies attempting to tackle the lack of male teachers by emphasising seemingly masculine elements of the role and masculinising the classroom to defeminise teaching (McDowell, 2022). In South Africa, little has been said about the lack of male teachers in primary schools by the DBE (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015; Msiza, 2016). The familiar rhetoric that more male teachers are needed to be role models and to discipline and manage male children, in particular, fuels this gendered belief system.

By trying to deal with discourses of gendered expectations, are male teachers being forced into acting in a certain way to fit in with indexical masculine behaviour to survive in the role? As men

in this role are often viewed with suspicion, if they do not adhere to gendered expectations, it is an issue. Male teachers must deal with the rhetoric surrounding male teachers - that of suspicion, judgment, and fear. Sanders (2002) and Sargent (2001) point out that many men have little or no experience of working and interacting with young children (from birth to age 8), and their awkwardness may cause other teachers in higher grades and families to judge them harshly. Sumsion (2005: 112) writes about male teachers "facing the challenge of negotiating" what he calls their "otherness" concerning their female counterparts. This has resulted in a few male teachers choosing to teach in ECE.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the study's theoretical framework and the literature on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. This study interrogates the literature on male teachers, how they perceive themselves as they have constructed their identities, and what factors influenced them to construct their identities. Furthermore, it presented the male teachers' constraints that hamper them in ECE as a career and what can be done to recruit male teachers in ECE settings. It discusses why male teachers have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE, the importance of having male teachers in ECD, and the challenges they face in constructing and reconstructing in ECE. In the next chapter, The researcher focuses on the methodology used to research male teachers who constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE settings.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains the methodological choices and the decisions connected to research identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The chapter commences with an account of the qualitative approach in general and, more specifically, phenomenology as a research design. This is followed by describing the sampling process, how the sites and participants were selected, and the reasons for the choices. Then the data generation methods and analysis processes used to make sense of identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings will be explained. The chapter will also discuss ethical considerations that are crucial for all researchers.

#### **3.2 Research design and methodology**

The study utilises a qualitative research approach, focusing on the commonality of lived experiences in a particular group (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The qualitative research approach turns the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. By using this methodology, the researcher will interview the participants. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative research studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Therefore, qualitative research methods describe a process or experience. To this end, the goal is to make meaning of experiences or phenomena by following data as they emerge (Cruz & Tantia, 2017) to understand a situation or how something is experienced profoundly and meaningfully. Creswell (2009: 176) argues that qualitative research is often conducted in the field, allowing direct interaction with the people being studied in their context. Yin (2009: 72-73) states that "qualitative research provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand the ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles". Mack *et al.* (2011)

indicate that qualitative research seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspective of the local population that it involves. As such, qualitative research allows the researcher to work with male teachers in the local population around QwaQwa in ECE settings in the Thabo-Mofutsanyana District. The research sought to understand the contextual realities of the world of male teachers in ECE. As a result, the researcher gained specific information about identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in early childhood settings.

Qualitative research is relevant to the study as it will assist the researcher in choosing the participants who are considered to have critical information pertinent to the question that guides the study. As a result, male ECE teachers will be selected to participate in this study, as they have essential information about constructing their identities and reconstruction in ECE. Creswell (2009: 176-176) argues that qualitative research is often conducted in the field, allowing direct interaction with the people being studied in their context. The approach used is relevant to the study because it allowed the opportunity to interact with the participants to understand their experiences in identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings.

### **3.2.1 Research paradigm**

The term paradigm has been understood differently by various scholars. MacNaughton, Rolfe, and Siraj-Blatchford (2001) explain that a research paradigm comprises three elements: a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology, and criteria for validity. In comparison, Neuman (2000) and Creswell (2003) refer to the paradigm as the research methodology. Ramrathan (2017) defines a paradigm as the search for truth, which depends on the researcher's positionality in constructing knowledge. This positionality is called a paradigm: the set of lenses one assumes when viewing the world in search of the truth.

From various scholars, it is theoretically understood that an interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Thanh & Le Thanh, 2015). Therefore, in seeking the answers to the research question, the investigator who follows the interpretive paradigm uses those experiences to construct and interpret the understanding from the gathered data. Specifically, interpretivism supports scholars in terms of exploring their world by seeking to examine the experiences of male teachers in ECE settings.

This study uses an interpretive paradigm to research identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in early childhood settings. Therefore, the study draws from interpretivism as a theoretical and methodological framework. Theories explain how and why something operates as it does (John & Christensen, 2007: 7), and this paradigm is relevant to the study as the researcher wants to understand how male teachers perceive themselves in ECE. Interpretivism believes that humans are engaged in meaning and knowledge "making", not knowledge acquisition (Domenic, 2008; Raskin, 2002, 2008). Interpretivism assumes that individuals construct the meaning of experiences and events; therefore, people build the realities in which they participate (Charmaz, 2006). From this stance, the research aims to elicit and understand how research participants make their individual and shared meanings around the phenomenon of interest, namely their lived experiences as male teachers in an ECE setting. The interpretive paradigm was suitable for the study as the researcher got the male teachers to talk about their experiences as male teachers in ECE, where female teachers dominate the sector.

As Creswell (2003: 8) argues, an interpretive researcher relies upon the "participant's views of the situation being studied" and recognises the impact on the research of their background and experiences. Thus, interpretivism is much more inclusive because it accepts multiple viewpoints of different individuals from different groups. Willis (2007) asserts that the leading views of each nation, region, or ethnic group are often founded on different experiences and perspectives of individuals. Drawing from the interpretivism paradigm, the researcher will seek answers by forming and underpinning multiple understandings of the male teachers in ECE as individual worldviews. According to Willis (2007: 194), various perspectives arise from believing that external reality is variable since "different people and groups have different perceptions of the world". Accepting multiple perspectives in interpretivism often leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation (Klein & Meyers, 1998; Morehouse, 2011). The interpretive paradigm will significantly facilitate educational researchers when they need 'in-depth' and 'insightful' information from the population rather than numbers and statistics. Thus, the researcher will be able to meet with male teachers in ECE settings to interpret and gain in-depth and insightful information on their perspective on teaching in early childhood.

### **3.3 Research design**

This study will adopt phenomenology as the research design. Phenomenology refers to the 'lived experience' of several individuals regarding a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Astalin (2013) states that phenomenology is a way of describing something that exists as an integral part of the world in which we are living. Through phenomenology, the researcher can deeply understand the experiences that several individuals have had of a specific phenomenon. Higgs *et al.* (2010) argue that phenomenology explores and describes human phenomena as they present themselves in the lived world. It is particularly suited to studying real-life and complex aspects of practice. Therefore, a phenomenological research design seeks to reveal and richly portray the nature of human phenomena and experiences of those who lived through them, considering the contexts in which these experiences occur and the subjective meanings participants give to particular situations. According to Higgs *et al.* (2010), phenomenologists generally agree that the central concern of this approach is to return to embodied, experiential meanings of aspects of people's lives. An underlying premise of phenomenology is that experiences and significance to individuals are valid sources of knowledge (Finlay, 2009). The principal aim of phenomenology is to reduce the experience individuals have about a specific phenomenon so that, finally, the description of the universal essence is created, which means "grasping the very nature of the thing" (Van Manen, 1990: 177).

In this case, phenomenology is relevant as the aim is to understand the lived experiences of male teachers teaching in ECE. More female and few male teachers are teaching in this setting. Using phenomenology, the researcher will use interviews and focus groups to understand how male teachers perceive themselves in a sphere where women dominate. A phenomenological study seeks to identify the lived experience related to the research interest, as in this study, the results will be to identify male teachers' perceptions of ECE compared to society (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this case, the researcher may bracket their thoughts and perceptions to strive for a purer and more comprehensive, rich description of a phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

### **3.3.1 Relevance of the phenomenological research design**

The phenomenological research design is relevant because it should be flexible and adapt to suit the phenomena under investigation. As a result, the researcher could explore identity construction

and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE. Thus, the male teachers would be able to talk about their lived experiences in ECE, how they perceive themselves in a sphere that is full of women teachers, and how they deal with the ideas of society whereby they are still under the influence of being stereotyped that teaching in ECE is a women-only space. Phenomenology is a way of describing something that exists as an integral part of the world in which we are living. Therefore, using a phenomenological research design is effective when a researcher is aware of a concept that is taking place but does not fully understand why it is happening in that way. In this case, a phenomenon may be events, situations, experiences, or concepts. Identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings was a concern, as there are few male teachers in ECE compared to female and male teachers. The reason for this is that male teachers are scared to teach in ECE because of fear of being ridiculed and being told that they do not have a soft heart compared to female teachers. Using phenomenology as a research design for this study assists in understanding the lack of male teachers in describing and explaining the impact male teachers could have on ECE; for example, what it is like to become an ECE teacher, why there are few male teachers in ECE, and how they have constructed their identities to become ECE teachers in this setting. Therefore, phenomenology will not necessarily provide definitive explanations but will raise awareness and insight into the phenomena.

### **3.4 Data collection**

#### **3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews**

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and focus groups as data collection methods that rely on asking questions with a predetermined thematic framework (George *et al.*, 2022). The three articles presented in this thesis use semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to understand how male teachers have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE settings. Gray (2009) sees semi-structured interviews as non-standardised and often used in qualitative research. Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow for probing of views and opinions, where respondents should expand on their answers. The semi-structured tool will enable the researcher to develop a set of leading questions to be asked; as a result, the researcher is in control of the conversations taking place and obtains the opinions of the male teachers in ECE settings. The researcher will also explore how male teachers perceive themselves compared to other teachers

teaching in higher grades. The participants reveal how they teach young children according to their experiences.

### **3.4.2 Focus group discussions**

Focus group interviews aim to interact to generate data (Merton,2008; Kitzinger, 1996; Morgan, 1996). Using a focus group, the researcher can distinguish this group from the other participants. Carey and Smith (1994) define the focus group technique as imprecise; it uses a semi-structured group session moderated by a group leader in an informal setting to collect information on a designated topic (p. 226). In this regard, focus group interviews are relevant as they will assist the researcher in identifying the group of male teachers teaching in ECE and try to understand how they identify themselves in a sphere dominated mainly by female teachers. The focus group interviews are relevant because male teachers who have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE are often regarded as ‘not man enough’ and as not having ‘soft hearts’ like the female teachers (McGrath, 2018; Msiza, 2020). Essential elements of focus group interviews are that they are a method devoted to data collection and use interaction as a source of data, where the researcher plays an active role in creating group discussions for data collection.

The researcher describes focus groups according to the type of knowledge that they generate (Calder, 1977). The experiences and expertise stem from the terms and language people use to give meaning to their everyday world. Wilkinson (1998) supports the notion of focus groups within the framework of phenomenology. Hence, the researcher is correct in choosing to use focus group interviews, as this study uses phenomenology as a research design and people's experiences, meanings, understandings, attitudes, opinions, knowledge, and beliefs as subsets of phenomenology. The interview guide was developed through reading literature on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The researcher developed a preliminary list containing the key issues to be explored during interviews. The list was examined, and broad issues were identified and incorporated into the interview guide. Comprehensive questions were used, and the participants were informed of the questions before coming to the group. The purpose of the interview guide is to direct group discussion, stimulate conversation about the research topic, and ensure that all the desired information is sought (McLafferty, 2004). However, these questions act only as a guide, and the researcher asked other questions and made comments as necessary to stimulate and focus the discussion.

Recording of data is considered crucial when conducting semi-structured interviews. The researcher realised that it would be challenging to record everything that was said by making notes during the interviews; hence a voice recorder was used after asking for permission from the participants. Hand-written notes were also used, particularly further probes for clarification or elaboration. The data was transcribed to develop a formal report after the researcher completed the interviews. According to Henning (2014), whether a researcher has collected data through interviews or voice recording, one must also make notes to remember what was said. The researcher used face-to-face interviews because the qualitative research design allows for interaction with the participants. During the interviews, the researcher created a relaxed atmosphere so that the participants felt comfortable talking about their experiences in ECE and the challenges they faced in a sector dominated by women without many male teachers.

### **3.4.3 Selection of research participants**

The researcher will utilise the snowball sampling technique in this study (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). The snowball method is often called nonprobability sampling, which includes convenience, purposeful, and quota sampling. Snowball or chain referral is based purely on referrals, which is how research can generate a sample. Nonprobability sampling methods involve models available to or selected by the researcher. Snowball sampling is a convenience sampling method applied when accessing subjects with the target characteristics is difficult. Finding male teachers teaching in ECE will not be easy, as few male teachers have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE and may feel uncomfortable talking about their identities.

The researcher will consult with the DBE in Thabo-Mofutsanyana District in the Free State to connect with schools with male teachers. The research targets five male teachers, and three articles describe the results. The study is based on the publication of articles where male teachers as participants will narrate their situation regarding how they perceive themselves in a sphere where females dominate. This technique is relevant for the study because snowball sampling is extensively used for conducting qualitative research with a population that is hard to locate (Atkison & Flint, 2001). Using this method, the researcher asked the first few participants, usually selected through convenience sampling, if they knew anyone with similar views or situations willing to participate in the research. In this regard, the researcher obtained two participants,

connecting the researcher with the other participants. Working with the referred participants was easy because they knew who had invited them and had some information about the interviews. Having been directed by their acquaintances, they felt comfortable being part of the interviews. As a result, this process allows the researcher to communicate better with the samples. This type of networking is beneficial for finding people willing to reveal their identities in construction and reconstruction in ECE settings. The risk of bias was not found, and the population was homogeneous regarding the target characteristic under question. The researcher chose five participants because this number would provide excellent reliability based on the phenomenon investigated. Ramrathan, Grange, and Higgs (2017) state that sampling, as a participant-selection process, is a significant step in the research design.

A biographic profile of the five participants who were selected is presented in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Biographic profile of participants**

Participants	Gender	Age (yrs)	Highest qualifications	Teaching experience (yrs)	Grade level	Schools	Culture	Residential areas
Participant 1	Male	27	BEd FP	4	3	School A	African	Glubview
Participant 2	Male	30	BEd FP	3	3	School B	African	Harrismith
Participant 3	Male	46	MEd ECD	21	3	School C	African	Harrismith
Participant 4	Male	28	BEd FP	4	2	School D	African	Phuthaditjhaba
Participant 5	Male	29	BEd FP	5	3	School E	African	Phuthaditjhaba

MEd ECD: Master's degree in ECD, University of the Free State, QwaQwa Campus, Free State Province

BEd FP: Bachelor's degree of Education in Foundation Phase, University of the Free State, QwaQwa Campus, Free State Province

In terms of the residential areas of the participants, Glubview is a semi-rural area in Qwa Qwa; Harrismith is an urban area in Harrismith, and Phuthaditjhaba is a rural area in QwaQwa, all in Thabo-Mofutsanyana District, Free State Province.

### 3.5 Data analysis

This study uses thematic analysis as a primary approach to analyse the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The researcher will follow the steps in thematic analysis to get to know the data and understand the more obvious elements. The researcher will obtain data from the interviews by following Creswell's (2013) three steps for data analysis. Step 1 involves organising the data and defining the codes. The researcher will read through the data to gain a general sense of the information and then reflect on the available information. Step 2 involves developing the

categories and codes. The researcher will use open coding, look at the data, and read the data repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants. This involves looking at the relationships among the open codes; in other words, looking at what influences these connections have and what conditions precipitated them to occur, including the context they were part of and the strategies used to accomplish them. In step 3, the development of themes and sub-themes takes place. When coding the data, the researcher marked passages and grouped them according to patterns that emerged from the research literature and what male teachers in ECE were saying. The researcher will check if the themes emerged from the data collection and will tabulate the data according to the themes.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness in qualitative research**

The purpose of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the argument that the inquiry results are worth paying attention to. Reliability refers to how qualitative researchers ensure that transferability, dependability, and confirmability are evident in research. This is the process that will be followed in this study to ensure that the study is trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned credibility in qualitative research. Credibility emphasises internal consistency, where the core issue or phenomenon is researched to ensure rigour in the research process and that communication with other people is done correctly. Ghafouri and Ofoghi (2016) described credibility as being authentic and accurate, specifically for the researcher to determine whether the data and the findings reflect the research. The researcher will follow the process to check the authenticity of the results when interviewing the participants and ensure the data's accuracy. In this regard, the researcher will check with the participants after the data is transcribed to ensure that what is recorded is authentic, reflecting what they narrated, with no bias. Another strategy that the researcher used is transferability, which implies that the findings in the present research will be the same as those from others in the same situation and that the research findings will be suitable for use in the future. Confirmability is crucial because it implies how much others confirm the research findings and that the review methods by participants confirm the credibility of the research. The transferability process will be helpful for both the researcher and the participants to agree on what has been narrated and recorded. Dependability is the extent to which the procedure by which results are produced is explicit and repeatable whenever possible. By ensuring trustworthiness, the researcher could analyse the data from which the themes emerged and were classified.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

The protection of human subjects through the application of appropriate ethical principles is essential in any research study. The researcher must follow ethical principles in accessing the site (Arifin, 2018) to prevent unauthorised disclosure of information and defamatory or irrefutable damage to the institution or organisation. The first step was for the researcher to apply for ethical clearance from the University of the Free State of South Africa. The researcher also had to apply for permission from the DBE to research as the participants were male teachers teaching in ECE in the Thabo-Mofutsanyana District. The researcher has to purposefully choose the participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation to provide the rich information needed. Five male teachers were purposefully selected to provide information on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The data sought could explain why few male teachers teach in the early years, and for the male teachers who have constructed their identities, what are their views on finding themselves in a setting where women mostly dominate? Ramrathan (2017) adds that the ethical requirement of protecting participants is crucial. The participants were given consent forms explaining in detail why the study was being conducted and why they should participate. Participation in this project was voluntary. Potential participants were approached individually, and the study's purpose and the data collection process were explained to them. The participants were also told that if they did not choose to participate or choose to withdraw from the investigation while it was in progress, this would not affect their care or job in the teaching and learning of children. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were preserved by not revealing their names and identities in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. Privacy and confidentiality of the interview environment were managed carefully during communication, interview sessions, data analysis, and dissemination of the results.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the research design and methodology used in this study to answer the main research question. I used a qualitative approach as this suited the theoretical ideas gleaned from the interpretive paradigm. The rationale behind using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the sampling procedure, data collection, data analysis, and issues of trustworthiness were also outlined. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to be flexible when generating

data from participants with focus groups interviews used to understand their experiences, which also allowed them to find out from one another whether they shared the same sentiments in their different schools, as male teachers are in the minority in most of the primary schools. These interviews aim to understand the perceptions of male teachers in constructing their identities in ECE settings. From the data analysis, themes emerged that helped the researcher understand how male teachers construct and reconstruct their identities. In the next chapter, the researcher will present these results in three articles which have been prepared for submission to three different peer-reviewed journals.

## CHAPTER 4

### ARTICLES

Chapter 4 presents the three articles developed from this research study for publication in relevant peer-reviewed journals:

- Experiences of male teachers in early childhood education and strategies to increase their recruitment: A self-concept approach – for submission to the *South African Journal of Childhood Education*;
- Construction and reconstruction of identity by male teachers in early childhood education – for submission to the *International Journal of Early Childhood* and
- Male teachers' narratives: teaching experiences in early childhood education – for submission to the *Journal of Studies in Social Science and Humanities*.

## ARTICLE ONE:

# EXPERIENCES OF MALE TEACHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THEIR RECRUITMENT: A SELF-CONCEPT APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** 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).

**Aim:** To explore the experiences of male early childhood teachers in primary schools and strategies to increase their recruitment.

**Setting:** Five primary schools in Thabo-Mofutsanyane District, Free State, South Africa.

**Methods:** 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.

**Results:** ECE male teachers in rural schools are few, if not few, and as a result, this statement calls for strategies to increase their recruitment.

**Conclusion:** 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.

**Contribution:** This paper contributes to the importance of promoting gender diversity and gender balance in the early childhood education field.

**Keywords:** Male early childhood teachers, primary schools, narrative approaches, rural schools

## **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 et al. 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. 2020:6). The argument is that children's gender knowledge is extended upon observing male teachers demonstrating both 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.

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 (ECEC) setting includes centre-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, the attention is on 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 (Department of Education 2001:2) 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 et al. 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 and posters, and in 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 (HEIs) 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 (Ackerman, Courtney (2018) defines who you are and what can influence your relationships and personal growth and development. 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 to these teachers to reflect and to understand

themselves with other teachers teaching 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.

### **Research objectives**

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

### **Research methods**

#### **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 and whenever they felt uncomfortable, with no detrimental effects to themselves.

## **Research design**

This article presents an interpretive qualitative case study of five ECD male teachers from rural areas in Free State. According to Brandon (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 et al. 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 (2009:79) 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 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 45 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 schools' 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 up the results and triangulated them 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).

## **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 of the 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 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 are you 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 that 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, in fact, 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 considered to be [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 were scared of 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 have to prove themselves, to 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, 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 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 have to 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 do it, why cannot male teachers do it? (Participant 1).*

### ***Being labelled***

The results demonstrated that male teachers have been labelled in 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 have to 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 the 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, regarding 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 can teach in ECE and do the job as well as or even 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 cannot 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 when they have messed up, who report at home that the male teacher helped them. 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 and are 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 I 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 practicals 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 I am a parent and other children are raised by single parents... (Participant 3)*

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

### **Discussion**

This study found that male teachers had negative experiences such as not being trusted to assist children whenever they messed themselves up, when they had 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 have to 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 as to 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 et al. 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.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

There are few male teachers in ECE in South Africa due to the gender imbalance that has been 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 into ECE by 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 that they will be resilient when facing challenges with their career choices.

### ***Implications for ECD practitioners***

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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## ARTICLE 2:

# CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY BY MALE TEACHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Women continue dominating the teaching workforce in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3), especially for learners aged five to nine. Male teachers are underrepresented in the early years of teaching globally and in South Africa. Male Foundation Phase teachers are frequently ridiculed, and their masculinity is questioned because their choice of work is associated with women, not men. This article explores how male early childhood development (ECD) teachers (re)construct their identities in early childhood classrooms.

Data was generated from five male ECD teachers from 5 rural primary schools in Free State, South Africa, through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The theoretical construct used was identity theory, which states that the identity of the self is an occupant of a role and incorporates significances and expectations associated with that role and its performance into the self.

It was found that male ECD teachers in primary schools still face the challenge of being ridiculed as ‘not being man enough’. Society reinforces the mentality that male teachers have a primary responsibility to foster the social development of male learners. It is suggested that the more significant societal perceptions of who can be a teacher are challenged to encourage discussion of teacher diversity regarding gender, ethnicity, language, and citizenship status.

**Keywords:** Male teachers, teaching construction, (re)construction identity theory, early childhood education, rural primary schools

### Introduction

Men who decide to teach in early childhood education (ECE) can actively challenge and disrupt its symbolic gendered image as ‘women's work’ (Bassett, Brody, Jack, Weber, Cohen, Clark, Dale,

& Moskowitz, 2021). Male ECE teachers can bring a lot to the ECE setting if society allows them to do their job and does not treat them as janitors responsible for repairs. Children can only benefit from the diverse activities and personalities of both male and female ECE teachers. Constructing a family environment encompassing female and male ECE teachers is necessary to provide good development in ECE. Some authors have challenged the question of male teachers in ECE, criticising the existence of positive male role models and stating the ambiguity of that phrase (Brownhill, 2014; Jones, 2007). Some authors are concerned about the safety of children and the possible abuse of them by men (Jones, 2007). Gendered expectations of men in ECE to perform within this situation, with regulatory discourse as superior disciplinarians and sports administrators, place unwarranted amounts of pressure on those men who cannot or do not aspire to fulfil these roles (Harris and Barnes, 2009; Bhana, Moosa, Xu, & Emilsen, 2022).

The research question of this study was as follows: How do male ECD teachers (re)construct their identities in early childhood education?

### **Literature review**

Xu and Waniganayake (2018) stated that male teachers' love of children is the most significant reason for becoming early childhood education (ECE) teachers. Prioritising their love of children is crucial in seeking employment in the ECE sector. Mashiya (2014) posited that the increasing importance of ECE resulted in more opportunities in this field, encouraging men to enter the profession. Being an ECE teacher requires a passion for teaching children, and it is passion that motivates male teachers to stay in their profession despite the challenges they encounter.

Jordan's (2011) study indicated that some men received support to pursue the profession from teachers, family members, and close friends. Another factor influencing the construction and reconstruction of the identities of male teachers in ECE is their willingness to teach if offered an internship position in an early childhood school. The experience of working with young children and their love and enjoyment of working with children would help train them as future fathers and promote a desire to contribute something of value to this group (Santiago, 1999; Mashiya, Kok, Luthuli, Xulu, & Mtshali, 2015). Some men enter the field because of increased interest in further involvement in early childhood programmes (Mashiya et al., 2015). Another possible reason males

teach in ECE is that they want to be treated equally in everything, including rules, expectations, and personnel policies.

### **Theoretical framework**

Stryker developed the identity theory in 1980, aiming to understand and explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviours (Stets and Burke 2003). Identity theory attempts to make the concepts of society and self-researchable and to organise these concepts as explanations of specified behaviours (Stryker & Burke 2000). This theory originated from the origins and distress of identity disruption (Burke, 1991). The primary purpose of this theory was to specify how the meanings attached to various identities are negotiated and managed in an interaction structure (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Some identity theorists focus on how identities relate to one another, given their likelihood of being brought into situations and how central or essential they are to individuals. They discussed how identities relate to role performance (or behaviour), affect (feelings), physical and mental health (such as stress, anxiety, and depression), self-concept (such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity), and social structure (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Stryker and Burke (2000) emphasised that identity theory categorised the self as an occupant of a role and incorporated into the self the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance.

This theory is relevant in this study because it helps to understand the person as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural agent who influences the structure of society and is influenced by the social system (Burke, 1981). It is helpful because the male teachers could explain how they view themselves in ECE settings compared to the community and other male teachers teaching in higher grades. It could help us to understand what society says about the male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities by teaching in ECE.

Teaching in ECE is often accompanied by simplistic images of ECE teachers as nannies and caregivers and generally associated with a woman's rather than a man's role in society (Petersen & Petker, 2011; Msiza, 2020). Identity theory is suited to this study as it allows an understanding of how teachers perceive themselves against society's beliefs on gender roles. In addition, identity theory makes mention of functions that are embedded in one or more of a variety of groups that provide context for the meanings and expectations associated with the role. It allows an

understanding of what male teachers perceive as their roles and functions in ECE among female teachers. It helps to understand factors that influenced male teachers to choose ECE as a career labelled as a woman's job. Islam (2014) begins with the premise that individuals define their identities concerning social groups and that such identifications protect and reinforce self-identity. Therefore, male teachers who have (re)constructed their identities could define their identities against the creation of group identities that involve categorising one's in-group concerning an out-group and the tendency to view one's group with a positive bias vis-à-vis the out-group. This theory might allow the male teachers in ECE to identify themselves with a collective depersonalised identity based on group membership and infused with positive aspects. Male teachers must show positive features that indicate that they can also teach in ECE and deliver the expected results (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Stryker (1980) mentioned one commitment component: female teachers connected by possessing a particular identity. The male teachers in ECE should have the same commitment component, an element similar to that of female teachers: having a soft heart toward children (Msiza, 2020).

According to Coss (2014), social identity theory consists of a particular role identity that fulfils the role's expectations, coordinates and negotiates interaction with role partners, and manipulates the environment to control the resources for which they are responsible. Thus, the social identity theory complements the identity theory because male teachers are social agents who represent a specific group in the ECE setting. They should be considered as others in the group and see things from their perspective.

Every male or female teacher possesses distinct individuality and can acquire knowledge. Teaching in ECE is not the space of an individual gender, as the community or society believes. Some male teachers are doing better than females, and males have chosen this profession; as a result, they are flourishing in this setting.

### **Research methods and design**

The study draws from the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bonache and Festing, 2020). A phenomenological research design is used as an approach to qualitative research focusing on the commonality of lived

experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 1999, 2013). The best criterion to determine whether to use phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of the human experience common to a group of people. This research design is relevant as it allows the researcher to interview male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE. How do they identify themselves in this space for women only in ECE? Using a phenomenological research design, the researcher can build a universal meaning of events, situations, or experiences and arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

### ***Sampling***

The researcher used the snowball sampling technique, which is considered relevant for this study because it is used extensively for conducting qualitative research with populations that are hard to find (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This sampling technique involves primary data sources nominating other potential data sources to participate in the research study. Snowball sampling, or the chain referral method, is based purely on referrals, which is how a researcher can generate a sample (Ramrathan, Grange, & Higgs, 2017; Matthews, Bialocerkowski, & Molineux, 2019). I consulted with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in Thabo Mofutsanyana District in the Free State province to assist me in locating schools with male ECD teachers. I will communicate with one male teacher about the research I wish to conduct, and they will start the process by referring me to other male teachers. Five male ECE teachers from 5 schools were considered as participants. As the researcher will be working on a delicate phenomenon, the male teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences. The researcher communicated with them by explaining how important this research is and how they will be able to express their views. Interviewing using semi-structured interviews coupled with focus groups is a standard research tool that is relatively well understood and has the advantage of simplicity, versatility, and low cost (Adejimi, Oyediran, & Ogunsanmi, 2010).

### ***Data collection***

Focus group interviews aim to interact with participants to generate data (Merton, 1990; Kitzinger, 1996; Morgan, 1996). However, Carey and Smith (1994) define the focus group technique as a semi-structured group session moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting to collect information on a designated topic (p. 226). In this study, focus group interviews will assist the researcher in trying to understand how the group of male teachers teaching in ECE identify

themselves in a sphere dominated by female teachers since male teachers who have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE are not taken as ‘man enough’ and are regarded as not having soft hearts like female teachers (McGrath, 2020; Msiza, 2020). Essential elements of focus group interviews are interaction as a source of data and the active role of the researcher in creating group discussions. The researcher describes focus groups according to the type of knowledge that they generate (Calder, 1977); the experiences and expertise stem from the terms and language people use to give meaning to their everyday world. Wilkinson (1998) supports the notion of focus groups within the framework of phenomenology. Hence, focus group interviews were an appropriate choice as this study uses phenomenology as a research design and seeks to ascertain people's experiences, meanings, understandings, attitudes, opinions, knowledge, and beliefs as subsets of phenomenology.

An interview guide was developed by reading literature on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The researcher developed a preliminary list containing the key issues to be explored during interviews, and broad issues were identified and incorporated into the interview guide. Comprehensive questions were used, and the participants were informed of the questions before coming to the group. The purpose of the interview guide is to direct group discussion, stimulate conversation about the research topic, and ensure that all the desired information is sought (McLafferty, 2004). However, these questions act only as a guide, and the researcher asked other questions or commented as necessary to stimulate and focus the discussion.

Data recording was considered crucial when conducting the semi-structured interviews since the researcher realised it would be challenging to record everything said by making notes. A voice recorder was used after getting permission from the participants to do so. Handwritten notes were used when needed to probe further for clarification or elaboration. The data was transcribed to develop a formal report after the researcher completed the interviews. According to Henning (2014), whether a researcher has collected data through interviews or voice recordings, they must make notes to remember what was said. The researcher used face-to-face interviews because the qualitative research design allows for interaction with the participants. During the interviews, the researcher created a relaxed atmosphere so that the participants felt comfortable talking about their experiences in ECE and the challenges they faced in a sector dominated by women without many male teachers.

### ***Participants***

Five male ECE teachers took part in this study. They were purposively selected from 5 chosen rural schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District of the Free State Province in South Africa, a convenient location for accessing public primary schools. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009, p. 79) define purposive sampling as selecting participants based on specific characteristics that qualify as holders of data required for the study.

### ***Data analysis***

Thematic analysis was used as the primary approach to analyse the data (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017) gathered from the interviews and focus groups. I followed three of Creswell's (2013) steps for data analysis. In step 1, I organised the data and defined the codes. I read the data and then reflected on it to gain a general sense. In step 2, I developed the categories and codes using open coding. I looked at the data and read it repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants. This involved looking at the relationships among the open codes; in other words, I looked at what influenced these connections and what conditions precipitated them, including the context and strategies used. In step 3, I developed themes and sub-themes by marking passages and grouping them according to patterns from the research literature and what the male teachers in ECE said. I tabulated the data according to the themes.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical considerations refer to ethical principles used to avoid harm to participants when conducting research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). This includes receiving ethical approval from the relevant research ethics bodies to ensure that the researcher abides by confidentiality, non-maleficence, and respect (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). Authorisation to carry out the study was sought from and provided by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education of the University of the Free State South Africa (2020/10/14/64019209/07/AM). Permission was also obtained from the DBE. Ethical standards were carefully considered and upheld to protect participants' autonomy and confidentiality (Babbie & Mouton, 2002), including adhering to the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence. The researchers ensured that no harm was done to anyone involved in this study, and all ethical considerations were attended to.

Participation in this study was voluntary (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). Participants signed a consent form (Bertram & Christensen, 2014) to assert their autonomy, and pseudonyms (participants 1 to 5) were used to conceal their identity. They were informed that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any point should they wish to do so. Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility and dependability. According to Polit (2017) credibility refers to the extent to which the research accurately represents the phenomenon being studied and the degree to which the findings are believable and trustworthy. Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different contexts. This involves establishing rigorous research procedures, collecting data systematically and standardized, and ensuring that the data analysis methods are reliable and replicable. Credibility and dependability help ensure that the research findings are robust and can be used to make informed decisions and draw valid conclusions. Since this was a small-scale case study, the results may not be generalised (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). No claim is made for the transferability of the results to other situations or contexts.

## **Results**

### ***Stereotyping early childhood education as for female teachers***

The participants hold that women are regarded as better nurturers of young children and are good in early childhood education because they can care for children at that stage. There is an element of stereotypical thinking in society that only women can take care of children. However, the participants believe that there are men who can take care of children even better than women can. They also believed that there were more female than male teachers in ECE:

*I will take it back to our cultural domains whereby they say naturally women can be better nurturers of kids than men. Hence, we see that in the early stage of the child's growth, women play the part while ... (Participant 1)*

*... if we can go back, you would see women nurturing kids, not men, but superstition is a myth that women can take care of kids better than men (Participant 1)*

*There is knowledge that women are good for teaching young children because they are perceived to love the children. Children need to be guided on how to read and write and be able to express themselves at a specific limit. (Participant 5)*

The participants believe that women are good for teaching in ECE, as the male teachers point out gender roles that hold that women are better at taking good care of children, which is why there are so many female teachers in ECE compared to male teachers. However, men also believe that they can do the job. Superstition and myth are also mentioned, and according to the men, they believe in women as much as they believe in themselves.

### ***Passionate about teaching in early childhood education***

The results suggested that male teachers are passionate about teaching in ECE. Some participants declared that they enjoy teaching younger children and understand them. They stated that they are proud to teach young children in ECE and be a male teacher. Male teachers who constructed their identities in ECE mentioned that they did not get the space to register in higher grades but did enroll in ECD. When they went for the teaching practical, they realised there was nothing wrong with becoming a male teacher for young children. They developed a love for children, and now they are very passionate about teaching young children:

*I am very proud of teaching young children, and I understand teaching as a job irrespective of being male or female (Participant 2)*

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

It is evident that male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities are proud of their career choice and can teach young children in ECE just as female teachers. The male teachers mentioned they are passionate about teaching young children and capable of teaching in ECE. Society should also understand that teaching young children is not about gender or qualifications - as society deemed that male teachers teach young children because of not being qualified. Male teachers understand they are male teachers, and nothing can stop them from working with young children. How teachers perform is irrespective of their gender:

*Children are always happy, and they come in the morning and tell you what is happening at home, telling you about exciting news or bad news; as a result, you need to be at their level so that they may be free and as a teacher (Participant 4)*

*I do not feel ashamed; I am proud and happy with what I do, and at times, I will be asked if I want to go to intermediate to teach. I cannot entirely agree because I love the Foundation Phase; instead, I change Grades in the Foundation Phase. The reason is to teach all the classes in the Foundation Phase to have more knowledge (Participant 5)*

Male teachers play an essential role in ECE as the children can interact with them by telling stories and being at the children's level. Male teachers are not ashamed of their career choices; they mention that they are happy in their work. In this case, young children understand the male teachers as they can communicate with them and share stories. A male teacher mentioned being asked to go to the Intermediate Phase, but he refused because he loves ECE and is prepared to rotate in ECE, teaching all the classes to have a solid foundation for ECE.

### ***Female dominance***

There is an element of women dominating in the ECE space, as it is mentioned that when male teachers and female teachers must discuss curriculum matters, the female teachers end up talking about things that concern them, not considering the male teachers. The results show that there are many female teachers. In this situation, we find the male teachers to be voiceless. Above all, it shows that we need male teachers to balance gender equity in ECE. Identity construction in ECE is of importance when talking about gender equity:

*Finding yourself teaching in ECE as being dominated by female teachers (Participant 4)*

*... when we must discuss specific issues on the curriculum, you will find them talking about other things unrelated to what we are supposed to do. Women are talkative (Participant 5)*

Some of the teachers indicated that teaching in ECE could be for both genders:

*My perception about this field is that if female teachers can, why cannot male teachers do it? We also have women doing the job that men predominantly did; now, we are breaking the*

*gender barriers and coming in by doing the job even better than female teachers (Participant 1)*

Another participant indicated that male teachers are in the minority and that female teachers sometimes do not take them seriously:

*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)*

It was revealed that male teachers perceived themselves as able to do the job even better than women. However, male teachers also claimed that they are not taken seriously because there are so few of them, and as a result, they are voiceless. Therefore, more male teachers in schools need to try to correct the gender imbalance. It is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education to see to it that there is gender equity in schools. The Department of Basic Education should also be aware of male teachers' identity construction and reconstruction in ECE settings.

### ***Early childhood education is suitable for female teachers***

Female teachers are considered suitable for teaching in ECE because they are considered soft-hearted, delicate, and understanding - more so than male teachers. It is effortless for children to work with female teachers, while with male teachers, children may deal with aspects of masculinity:

*The first thing is that female teachers mostly dominate ECE. They are regarded as suitable for teaching in this setting (Participant 2)*

*What comes with being a male is being rough, not gentle, so having to deal with children is considered that children need females because females are delicate, soft, and understanding (Participant 3)*

*..., but I have realized that women are soft compared to males teachers (Participant 2)*

One participant suggested that males are commanding, with deep voices, and do not need to repeat themselves:

*In class, I do not need to repeat myself when giving instructions; as men, we have commanding voices. There is order in a man's style compared to a female teacher's class*  
(Participant 2)

Male teachers spoke about women being soft and kind compared to them. There is also the element of discipline, as male teachers say they have commanding voices whereas female teachers struggle with discipline. Male teachers can also give instructions easily compared to female teachers. Therefore, the reconstruction of male teachers in ECE is evident, because they can teach in ECE setting and are better at some aspects than women.

### ***Incorrect beliefs about male teachers***

Male teachers believe they can teach young children even though they are regarded as unable to handle the children by showing them love, caring, and understanding. Having more female teachers than male teachers indicates that the Department of Basic Education trusts female teachers. However, there is a statement that suggests that male teachers are also capable of teaching young children. Meaning it is wrong to believe that male teachers cannot be able to teach young children.

*There are many challenges in the foundation phase, especially as a male teacher; because they think you cannot handle the young children; you need to love and care for them to understand what you are teaching them* (Participant 5)

*The big challenge is in writing, and the Department does not trust male teachers because if not, there would be fewer female teachers than male teachers. We all know how to teach children more in the foundation phase because it is more of a child's development* (Participant 5)

Male teachers believe there are challenges in teaching young children; however, male teachers can teach in ECE as they have constructed their identities on becoming ECE male teachers. Mentioning some challenges does not mean that they are incapable. Male teachers think that the Department of Basic Education can trust male teachers and understand that identity construction and reconstruction in ECE are essential in ECE settings. Male teachers perceive themselves as capable, and besides that, they mentioned that they have and care for these children; having mentioned love and caring shows that they can take these children step by step in teaching them how to write and

read. For young children to be able to write and read, as a teacher, you need to love them first and be able to handle them. Male teachers are for the idea that only if the Department can realize that they also have the potential, it is then that the Department can employ more male teachers to balance the number of male and female teachers.

### ***Pressure on male teachers***

Male teachers get pressure when teaching in ECE because of their gender and because they are not qualified to teach young children, as ECE is mainly female teachers. This means that being a male teacher in ECE is challenging because of gender, being a male teacher. Being a male teacher in ECE does not mean that male teachers are not qualified; it is only the belief of society that if you are a man teaching in ECE, it is because you are unqualified. The male teachers teaching in ECE are qualified and have reconstructed their identities. As a result, they need not be put under pressure for their gender.

*I get the pressure that I am not qualified to teach in ECE because of my gender because I am a male (Participant 3)*

*There is a stigma that children fear men, and there is this saying that male teachers should only teach higher grades (Participant 2)*

*Society has the stigma that male teachers cannot deal with children; men are not as gentle or soft-hearted as females. (Participant 3)*

Being a male in ECE is questionable, not qualified or unqualified by society. The community is unaware of the identity construction and reconstruction of male teachers in ECE. This is because of being used to having females in ECE, and as a result, female teachers dominate in ECE, and it is regarded as a female career. This calls for more male teachers to be in ECE, and we are calling for recruiting male teachers in ECE. This is where the Department of Basic Education comes in. The stigmatization needs to be removed by recruiting more male teachers to ECE, and a recruitment strategy is needed in universities or higher institutions to strategise how to get male teachers to come to ECE.

### ***Regarded as untrained in teaching ECE***

Society holds that a male is not supposed to teach young children, and female teachers feel that male teachers cannot handle some cases; as a result, male teachers feel as if they do not have enough training, even though they do - and this causes them to feel unworthy. Male teachers are advised to call for female teachers whenever an issue needs to be solved. Female teachers know that male teachers are well trained, but do not trust male them, which is why they are advised to call for female teachers whenever there is an issue:

*Whenever there is a situation in my class, I am advised to call a female teacher with the knowledge that I would not be able to handle some cases because I feel unworthy or untrained to teach in that phase (Participant 3)*

*It is like male teachers cannot take a child to the toilet, or if the child is crying, the male teacher cannot take care of such things. (Participant 5)*

Male teachers are therefore not trusted with the children. Identity construction is not understood in ECE. The male teachers are unsure how to perceive themselves as male ECE teachers, because they feel unworthy of working in ECE where female teachers dominate. It is held that male teachers do not need to be instructed; they need to call for females whenever there is a situation in class. In fact the male teachers need not be given instructions on how to deal with situations, since as they are also trained teachers, and they do not have a problem taking children to the toilet or comforting them when they cry.

### ***Gender roles***

Male teachers are told that whenever there is an issue in a classroom, they should call for female teachers to assist. Male teachers are not regarded as able to care for young children. One reason why male teachers are not trusted is because of other men who are child molesters, which affects all males. There is an element of trusting female teachers compared to male teachers:

*Caring for children is challenging for male teachers because we cannot care for them. If the child comes to a male teacher asking for help, it is like males are incapable of doing that. It is like male teachers cannot take a child to the toilet, or if the child is crying, the male teacher cannot care for such things. (Participant 5)*

*I see myself as a capable teacher because I love young children and can see the results.*  
(Participant 4)

ECE should not be based on gender roles, whereby male teachers are regarded as not being able to do certain things and female teachers can. Male teachers are also caring and loving, as they have constructed their identities by teaching in ECE and are willing to work in the field. There is an element of not trusting male teachers due to other men molesting children. Male teachers need to be allowed to show that they can work with young children. Male teachers see themselves as capable of teaching in ECE, but since the characteristics of ECE teachers are held to be those of women rather than men, fewer male teachers apply for posts in this space. In this case, male teachers are being treated differently based on their masculinity, which should not be the case.

### ***Exposure to different genders***

The results demonstrated that children's exposure to different genders is crucial in early years. Many children have single parents, with only a mother at home, and there is a need for them to be taught by male teachers in order to have exposure to all genders. Boys are often not exposed to male teachers and feel great appreciation when they have male teachers available, and are able to converse with male teachers better than with females. There is a need for both genders to teach at schools. Both genders can work as a team. Male teachers also have a love for young children, and they also act as parents and understand young children:

*....you can see around that there are men who can also take care of their kids even better than those that are taken care of by females, but like you are saying that....* (Participant 1)

*I see myself as a capable teacher because I love young children and can see the results; I can teach in ECE. I teach Grade 2, and I am the only male teacher. We are four male teachers, and the rest are females. When I arrived at the school, I found older female teachers and took them as my parents, who would lead me* (Participant 4)

Although there are gender differences, the same participant emphasises that most boy children are more comfortable talking to a male teacher and telling them stories since they are the same gender:

*I love them so much that they even want to tell me stories about what happened in their homes, and I listen to them. Most of them who talk to me are boys; they want to tell me*

*stories, and I realise it is because of the same gender. Boys feel much more comfortable around male teachers (Participant 4)*

This shows we need to avoid stereotyping and stating that females are better than males in teaching in ECE. Male teachers can guide children in ECE as much as female teachers can. Men are also capable of teaching young children. Male teachers agree that while there is much to learn from females, this does not mean they are incapable. Male teachers are essential in ECE as boys socialize with male teachers, tell them stories, and seek attention. Some children are from families with no father figures, and having two different genders in ECE will expose such children to both genders, as well as removing gender imbalance in ECE.

### ***Fear of playing with children in ECE***

We all know that children like to play, which is their learning method. Playing with the children is not a challenge for female teachers, but in the case of male teachers, some are willing to play with children while others are afraid to do so. There is indoor and outdoor play in ECE; male teachers may play with the boys, while the girls will be left behind. Male teachers are very good with sports but play mostly with boys:

*..., but with other teachers, it is a problem because they become scared to play with children, and the ECE teaching method is through play. Other male teachers are afraid to play with children; as a result, they cannot meet all the needs of the children. More significantly, it involves outdoor physical education games, which is difficult for male teachers. (Participant 5)*

*Being part of this setup, I would say it has phases; when I joined myself, it was scary because I found myself among females and I had to work with their experiences who have worked with kids for a long time. (Participant 1)*

Even though male teachers have constructed their identities by coming to teach in ECE, they do not feel comfortable with their choices; one teacher emphasises the point of not feeling accepted and working with females who have so much more experience. The situation is the result of having few male teachers in ECE, which is why an inferiority complex manifests itself. Starting a new career comes with stress, especially when you have to work with people who have more experience than you. This is always scary, but it does not mean that the male teacher with training will not be

able to do the job. There is always a starting point, and in a space where one gender is dominating, it is not easy. Male teachers must be allowed to show they can also become teachers for young children. Again, this calls for employing more male teachers so that they do not feel scared or inferior in this setting.

### ***Carefulness of male teachers***

The male teachers are careful when working with young children, because these children can come to them and share their experiences from their homes. Male teachers are willing to learn how to work with young children by listening to them whenever they want to share stories. Male teachers love children, and can work with them. Male teachers are needed to break the stereotype of having mostly female teachers in ECE, making it seem like male teachers cannot teach young children. Young children need to be exposed to the different genders:

*I can understand the level of these children, and I can put myself at the same level as theirs. I also play games with them (Participant 5)*

*Children are friendly; the only thing is how you approach them (Participant 1)*

*I have to learn how things are done, one of which was how to approach these children. (Participant 1)*

*They will just come in and report everything happening at home. (Participant 4)*

From the narratives above, it is clear that male teachers are happy with their career choices. They have what it takes to become teachers in ECE. Male teachers mentioned that they love children and do not have any problem teaching them. They also understand these children's level, making it easy for them to work with them, and they are also acting as parents as these children will tell them what is happening at their home.

### ***Male teachers love working with children***

Male teachers love children and they do not have problems working with them. As much as male teachers did not get the space to register for teaching in higher grades, they developed a love for working with the children as time went on. Choosing to work in ECE is not challenging for male

teachers because they have constructed their identities and perceive themselves as loving, caring, and supportive:

*As male teachers, we love children, and I do love them; I do not have a problem teaching young children (Participant 5)*

*I will show these children that not all men are abusive, but we can be supportive, gentle and [they can] have a relationship with a male person. (Participant 3)*

*The love of children is the thing that I have, and I wanted to know how young children learn to read and write. (Participant 4)*

It is not true that only female teachers can teach in ECE; male teachers also can and want to show the children that it is possible to have a relationship with male teachers, as they also have the characteristics of female teachers. It is not all males who are abusive or child molesters. Male teachers have features such as being supportive, gentle, and caring. Male teachers have what it takes to teach young children. Male teachers choose to construct their identities by wanting to explore how young children learn how to read and write. As a result, male ECE teachers are capable, and there is a need to have more of them, bringing gender equality to ECE. Society and other male teachers teaching in higher grades should stop questioning the career choices that are made, especially in ECE, where there are few male teachers and they are scrutinised and not taken seriously.

### ***Experiencing an inferiority complex***

The results showed that being male teachers in ECE could lead them to experience inferiority, as most ECE teachers are females. Other teachers in higher grades and members of society question the sexuality of male teachers, asking them questions such as ‘Can you work with young children?’. In this case, male teachers must prove themselves, to show that if female teachers can do it, they can too. Male teachers also have to deal with questions about whether they are soft, nurturing, and caring like female teachers. All of these statements resulted in pressure being put on 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 1)*

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

*Now that I am part of this setup, it created an inferiority complex that comes from within and from external forces; people from around, when you deal with children they don't take you seriously (Participant 2)*

### ***Fathers of the fatherless***

The results demonstrated that male teachers could fulfil the role of being a father of the fatherless, as many children in the school do not have fathers and live with their mothers:

*... which is not true because some children are from households without fathers, and when they are at school, they can be exposed to different genders. We need to remove stereotyping about men in ECE. As a male teacher, I am also a parent to these children, and I love working with them and understanding them. (Participant 2)*

*I am optimistic about being a teacher in ECE because now I feel like I am a parent and other children are raised by single parents; they do not have relationships with their fathers, most of them in the school that I am teaching, so having to have a male teacher as a father to them (Participant 3)*

*I feel like there is a space in a community that is not covered since it has to be female violence. 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, but they can be supportive and gentle and can have a relationship with a male person, and there is still hope. (Participant 3)*

*It would help if you created a positive environment so that they may be able to engage with you as a teacher for teaching and learning. Besides that, you need to be a parent to them so that if a child has a problem outside the classroom, they should be able to come and report to you and not be afraid of you. (Participant 5)*

*Other children do not have a relationship with their fathers. (Participant 3)*

Male teachers feel good about working in ECE, as they mention that they want society - and the children too - to see that not all men are evil. Some male teachers are supportive and gentle with children. Male teachers see themselves as parents to the children and can create a positive environment where they consult with them whenever there are problems. Within these narratives, there is a reason or a call for male teachers, as there are children who are without fathers, and being exposed to male teachers allows them to work with males and understand that not all men are not good. Male teachers can even create a positive environment for the children to feel loved and protected by them as fathers to the fatherless.

### *Acting as role models*

The results showed that male teachers could be role models for boys in ECE and act as fathers for children without fathers at home. Having male teachers in ECE shows that they can be equal to females. The Department of Basic Education should develop a strategy for recruiting males to become teachers in ECE, and for tertiary institutions to be involved in the recruitment process. Male teachers do not have a problem working with female teachers; as a result, the male teachers will be able to learn and work as a team. There is a need to consider hiring more male teachers in ECE:

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

*I feel like I am a parent; other children are raised by a single parent* (Participant 3)

*Most of the children that talk to me are boys; they want to tell me stories, and I realise it is because of the same gender.* (Participant 4)

*Boys can also have role models, not to think that only female teachers are appropriate to teach in ECE.* (Participant 1)

It is necessary to have both genders in ECE. Even children exposed to females may also be able to relate to male figures. Having boys show interest in making small talk with male teachers shows that they need role models and associate themselves with the gender that is the same as theirs. We need to consider both genders in ECE.

### ***Community (societal) judgement***

Male teachers are judged by society as ‘not being man enough’ and feel unworthy in a space dominated by female teachers. Male teachers also feel the pressure of being regarded as unqualified when teaching young children. Their sexuality is being questioned as to whether or not they are gay. As a result, they feel insecure and have an inferiority complex in the face of working with experienced female teachers:

*... they tend to think you might not be man enough, being half man or half woman (Participant 2)*

*The society thinks you are not qualified enough when teaching in ECD (Participant 3)*

*Teachers in higher grades do not take us seriously; they say go and play with children and carry them on your back. (Participant 5)*

*I play with children. I do not have a problem with that because the method of teaching and learning in ECD is through play. (Participant 5)*

*... now that I am coming in, it created that inferiority complex and inferiority complex does not come only from within but even from external forces. People around here, when you deal with kids see you differently from other men ... (Participant 2)*

The narratives above make it clear that the community judges male teachers by not taking them seriously and questioning their sexuality. They are judged in the face of females being considered perfect for teaching young children. Again, the community does not seem to understand that male teachers can also teach young children, and they are regarded as unqualified and as having just come to play with the children. Also, community members do not feel comfortable with their children being taught by male teachers, because males are associated with perpetrators of abuse. Male teachers always have to account to female teachers when asked if they are coping with the children, and they are told that they can call for assistance from the female teachers, who are willing to assist them.

### **Discussion**

Males and females differ, and children can only benefit from growing up with different behaviour models (Tokie, 2018), and from the diverse activities and personalities of male and female ECE

teachers (Brody et al., 2021). Male ECE teachers can serve as models to young children, specifically to boys, and those children who are with single parents will be able to get the opportunity to explore the other gender. Male teachers who choose to teach young children turn to have developed love and passion in working with young children. Despite societal misconceptions, male early childhood educators want the opportunity to work with young children without being constantly scrutinised by administrators, other teachers and parents (Petersen, 2014). It is suggested that the more significant societal perceptions of who can be a teacher are challenged to encourage discussion of teacher diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, language, and citizenship and the other suggestion is that if only these male teachers can be afforded the opportunity not to be judged by being not taken seriously by the society thinking that if a male teacher is teaching young children it is of the result of not being qualified enough or not have proper training. It is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education to educate the society against the stereotyping of a style.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Few male teachers have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE. The construction and reconstruction are necessary because male teachers are ridiculed, and their identities are being questioned. We need different genders to teach in ECE so that young children can explore different role models, which will also bring gender diversity to ECE. Some children are from single-parent households with no male figures present, and males can play an essential role in the lives of these children by becoming like fathers to the fatherless. However, I would recommend that the Department of Education sticks to the process of vetting to check the profiles of teachers for a criminal record or child abuse before they are employed, so that when male teachers are engaged, we know that they are not likely to abuse the children. Society must be taken through this vetting process, so that male teachers will no longer be questioned and belittled.

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## ARTICLE 3:

# MALE TEACHERS' NARRATIVES: EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

Globally, women are over-represented in teaching in the early years of primary school, or the Foundation Phase, as it is known in South Africa (SA). We explore how male teachers in SA may experience challenges in teaching in primary schools that are complicit in reproducing men as managers. Men tend to be positioned within dominant notions of masculinity, which produce masculine power in school management, while primary teaching is characterised as 'women's work'. Teachers of both genders are complicit in safeguarding the primary school as a nurturing, female domain while reproducing gendered binaries and unequal power relations. Through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, we explore the experiences of five male early childhood development (ECD) teachers from five rural primary schools in diverse settings in Free State, SA. Males have challenges in ECD as they are not allowed to teach but are encouraged to be involved in management, where they may sit on different school committees such as those related to sport and discipline, and also take care of the school premises. There is a need to create alternate masculinities beyond rigid notions of appropriate gender performances and address social challenges such as the paucity of male teachers, children being exposed to only one gender, and gender transformation in SA. In this way, the challenges facing male ECD teachers, who are not being entirely accepted in this field, will be eliminated.

**Keywords:** Male Teachers, Primary schools, Early childhood

### **Introduction**

Globally, teaching patterns are highly gendered, with a lack of male teachers in the early years of primary schooling (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Skelton, 2012). Some academic studies have argued that equal involvement of men and women as teachers of young children can work towards

changing gender patterns in primary schooling (Younger, 2016). In South Africa (SA) the Foundation Phase of teaching refers to the cohort of children in Grades 0 to 3, who are generally between the ages of five and nine (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Men's reluctance to teach in the Foundation Phase is highly gendered. As scholars have noted, the low status of the profession, men's desire to teach older learners instead of young children who are assumed to require nurturing, and the characterisation of primary school teaching as a mothering profession combine to reduce men's involvement at primary school level (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Petersen, 2014). Throughout SA men's engagement with and association with children have become a key intervention area (Moosa & Bhana, 2016; Richter et al., 2012). Male involvement with children is critical in the 2012 White Paper on Families in the country (Department of Social Development, 2012). Increasing the number of men in primary school teaching can increase their involvement in care work and in the lives of young children, where they remain under-represented.

## **Background**

The regulation of men within hegemonic masculine ideals by distancing men from being teachers of young children has received global attention. The idea of men as early childhood development (ECD) teachers is often met with contestation and uncertainty by existing ECD teachers who actively conform to hegemonic masculine beliefs, positioning men as school managers while distancing them from care (Moosa & Bhana, 2016). Early childhood education (ECE) attaches more importance to caring practices than secondary schooling (Warin & Gannerud, 2014). In many societies care and education are viewed as primarily women's responsibility, and such stereotypical assumptions have gendered consequences regarding who teaches young children (Piburn et al., 2011). More specifically, the association of teaching young children with mothering has resulted from it being considered a traditional female occupation (Haas, 2008; Msiza, 2020). Such beliefs conflating mothering with teaching young children is problematic not only for men intending to enter the profession, but also for women who have trouble balancing their expected role as both mothers and teachers in the workplace (James, 2010). Recruiting more male teachers of young children could help challenge existing stereotypes that label ECD school teaching as essentially female territory (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). On the one hand, men are embraced as vital role models in a society with a prevalence of absent fathers (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Evans & Jones, 2008; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Mathwasa & Okeke, 2017), while

on the other hand, they are treated with suspicion as a result of accusations that men are/are potential sexual predators (Baris, 2013; Cushman, 2008; Deneen, 2011; Evans & Jones, 2008; Moors, 2010; Petersen, 2014).

### **Social identity theory and its relevance**

The social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. This theory originated from the minimal group of paradigms, which demonstrated people's inherent desire to distinguish themselves from others based on their group memberships and willingness to sacrifice absolute rewards and maintain relative superiority over members of other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory holds that individuals should define their identities concerning social groups and that such identifications work to protect and strengthen self-identity. Hogg and Williams (2000) attempted to apply cognitive grouping phenomena to social groups. Cognitive grouping involves judgemental accentuation. Mental categories increase the salience of distinguishing features between types, exaggerating category differences, which means that male teachers must protect their categories from being judged for choosing ECE as a career. In contrast, category differences are exaggerated, where male teachers are only considered good with sport or to occupy a management position (Petersen, 2014). Social identity theorists assume that individuals' identities are based on the social groups they belong to and their traits (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Scheifele et al., 2021).

Social identity theory is suited to this study since it could explain society's perceptions towards male teachers compared to other groups. Male teachers will get the opportunity to protect their identities in ECE, where often their sexuality is also viewed with suspicion (Martino, 2008). This theory helps understand social identity construction and reconstruction for male teachers in ECE settings. It helps male teachers to understand how to manage challenges, protect their identities, and enhance their self-concepts against negative out-group characterisations in their communities. Similarly, through the self-categorisation of social identity theory the individual's identity forms by belonging to a social group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Social identity theory is relevant because it opens the minds of male teachers to express themselves about the female-dominated environment and protect themselves from being scrutinised and stigmatised as not having nurturing and caring skills like females. Furthermore, male teachers in ECE will be able to explain how they feel about

being in social groups that perceive ECE to be of low status. This theory helps male teachers construct their social identities and fulfil the expectations of the role of ECE teachers as the environment and society expect.

### **Challenges of male teachers in teaching in ECD in rural primary schools**

Male primary teachers face gender-related challenges after graduation (Cruickshank et al., 2018). These male teachers are very aware of being in the minority and of working within a more feminine environment (Cushman, 2005). Previous qualitative studies have identified a range of challenges, including dissatisfaction with salary (Cushman, 2007), increased workload due to expectations to perform masculine roles (Smith & Hung, 2008), negative perceptions in society and the media (Mistry & Sood, 2015) discouragement from family (Foster & Newman, 2005) and friends, social isolation, questions about their sexuality (Mills et al., 2008), and uncertainty about role modelling (White, 2011). Male teachers are often scrutinised more than their female colleagues regarding physical interaction with children and their motives for pursuing the career have been questioned (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). These challenges are moderated by demographic variables such as age, years of teaching experience, the number of male teachers at the school where they work, whether or not teaching was their first career choice, the gender of the principal at the school where they are employed, and whether or not they are a parent (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Smith & Hung, 2008; White, 2011). Male teachers in primary schools start to experience these may criticised challenges as early as during their training, with a lack of understanding from peers who them for choosing an 'easy' career option (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). This lack of support experienced by male trainee teachers might be linked with the concept of 'identity bruising' highlighted by Foster and Newman (2005). These researchers argue that male trainee teachers have often received knockbacks from peers, colleagues, and occasionally parents and partners about their decision to follow this career. Concerns are raised about primary school teaching being a low-status profession, and some males have expressed that people perceive them as having lower intelligence than those teachers who teach older children (Pollitt, 2017).

### **Research objective**

This study aims to explore male ECE teachers' narratives in rural primary schools and seeks to respond to the following question: What are the challenges of male teachers in teaching in ECD in rural primary schools?

## **Methodology**

This study draws from the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists believe in socially constructed multiple realities (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Bonache & Festing, 2020). A phenomenological research design is used an approach to qualitative research focusing on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 1998, 2013). The best criterion to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of the human experience common to a group of people. This research design is relevant as it allows the researcher to interview male teachers who have constructed their identities in ECE about how they identify themselves in space for women only. This design will allow the researcher to build meaning of events, situations, or experiences and to arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

## **Sampling**

The researcher used the snowball sampling technique, which is relevant for this study because it is extensively used for conducting qualitative research with a population that is hard to find (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This sampling technique involves primary data sources nominating other potential data sources to take part in the research study. Snowball sampling, or the chain referral method, is based purely on referrals, which enables the researcher to generate a sample (Ramrathan et al., 2017; Matthews, 2019). I consulted with the Department of Basic Education in Thabo-Mofutsanyana District, Free State province, to assist me in locating schools with male ECE teachers. I communicated with one male teacher about the research study I wished to conduct, and they referred me to other male teachers. In this way, five male ECE teachers were selected as participants. Since the researcher will be working on a delicate phenomenon, male teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences. Using semi-structured interviews coupled with a focus group are appropriate research tools that are relatively well understood and have the advantages of simplicity, versatility, and low cost (Adejimi et al., 2010).

## **Data collection**

Focus group interviews aim for interaction to generate data (Merton, 1990; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Carey and Smith (1994) define the focus group technique as using a semi-structured group session, moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting, to collect information on a designated topic (p. 226). Focus group interviews are relevant as they will assist the researcher in identifying the group of male ECE teachers and trying to understand how they identify themselves in a sphere dominated by female teachers. Male teachers who have constructed their identities in teaching in ECE are often taken as ‘not man enough’ and do not have hearts as soft as those of female teachers (McGrath, 2020; Msiza, 2020). Essential elements of focus group interviews are that they are devoted to data collection with interaction as a source of data, with an active role played by the researcher in creating group discussion for data collection. The experiences and expertise that are revealed stem from the terms and language people use to give meaning to their everyday world (Calder, 1977). The interview guide was developed through reading literature on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE settings. The researcher developed a preliminary list containing the key issues to be explored during interviews. The list was examined, and broad issues were identified and incorporated into the interview guide. Comprehensive questions were used, and the participants were informed of the questions before coming to the focus group. The purpose of the interview guide is to direct group discussion, stimulate conversation about the research topic, and ensure that all the desired information is sought (McLafferty, 2004). However, these questions act only as a guide, and the researcher asked other questions or commented as necessary to stimulate and focus the discussion.

Recording of data is crucial when conducting semi-structured interviews. The researcher realised it would be challenging to record everything said by making notes during the interviews. Hence, a voice recorder was used after obtaining permission from the participants to do so. Hand-written notes were also used, particularly when probing further for clarification or elaboration was necessary. According to Henning (2014), whether a researcher has collected data through interviews or voice recording, one must make notes to remember what was said. The researcher used face-to-face interviews because the qualitative research design allows for interaction with the participants. During the interviews, the researcher created a relaxed atmosphere so that the participants felt comfortable talking about their experiences in ECE and the challenges they faced

in a sector dominated by women. The data was transcribed to develop a formal report after the researcher completed the interviews.

### **Participants**

Five male ECE teachers constitute the participants in this study. They were purposively selected from five rural school in Thabo Mofutsanyana District in the Free State, an available and convenient location for public primary schools. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009, p. 79) defined purposive sampling as selecting participants based on specific characteristics that qualify them as holders of data required for the study. This researcher believes that all participants expressing their experiences and understanding may help to increase the recruitment of male ECE teachers in rural primary schools. Their demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic variables of the participants**

<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Duration of teaching experience in primary school (years)</b>	<b>No. of male teachers in the school</b>
Teacher 1, 27	Three	One
Teacher 2, 28	Three	One
Teacher 3, 32	Five	One
Teacher 4, 28	Three	Four
Teacher 5, 30	Four	One

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used as the primary data analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017). Three of Creswell's (2013) steps for data analysis were followed. In step 1 the data were organised and codes were defined. The data was read to gain a general sense of the information and then reflected on. In step 2, the categories and codes were developed using open coding. I read the data repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants. This involved looking at the relationships among the open codes; I looked at what influenced these connections and what conditions precipitated them, including context and strategies used. In step

3, the themes and sub-themes were developed. When coding the data I marked passages and grouped them according to patterns from the research literature and what the male ECE teachers said. I checked for themes emerging from the collected data and then tabulated them.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations refer to ethical principles used to avoid harm to participants when conducting research (Orb et al., 2001). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board and authorisation to carry out the study was sought from and provided by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education of the University of South Africa (2020/10/14/64019209/07/AM), and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of Basic Education. Ethical standards were carefully considered and upheld to protect participants' autonomy and confidentiality (Babbie & Mouton, 2002), including the main ethical principles of non-maleficence and beneficence. The researchers ensured that no harm was done to anyone involved in this study, and all ethical considerations were attended to.

Participation in this study was voluntary (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Participants signed a consent form (Bertram & Christensen, 2014) to assert their autonomy, and pseudonyms (participants 1 to 5) were used to conceal their identity. They were informed that they could withdraw from participating at any point should they wish to do so. Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility and dependability. According to Polit (2017), credibility refers to the extent to which the research accurately represents the phenomenon being studied and the degree to which the findings are believable and trustworthy. Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different contexts. It involves establishing rigorous research procedures, collecting data systematically and in standardised way, and ensuring that the data analysis methods are reliable and replicable. Credibility and dependability help ensure that the research findings are robust and can be used to make informed decisions and draw valid conclusions. This was a small-scale case study, and therefore the results may not be generalised (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). No claim is made for the transferability of the results to other situations or contexts.

### **Results**

### ***Mistrust of male teachers***

The results revealed that male teachers are mistrusted in teaching in ECE. The male teachers mentioned that they experienced challenges as they were not allowed to touch the children. Some male teachers highlighted that they relied on female teachers whenever an issue arose. Male teachers are not trusted because of other men who are child abusers, which is why they were told not to touch the children. This becomes challenging because when working with children they may touch their 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 trying to correct the imbalance in the 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)*

The results showed that female teachers in primary schools could challenge male teachers not to have physical contact with children. It is impossible to work with children and not touch them; some classroom activities require the teacher to show the child things and be in close proximity when doing so. In such situations the male teacher should try not to touch the children, which is not the case for female teachers.

### ***Inability to handle children***

The results revealed that male teachers cannot handle the young children in some instances. They mentioned that they experienced challenges as they were not allowed to touch the children. Some male teachers highlighted that they relied on female teachers whenever an issue arose:

*I am the only male teacher in primary school. (Participant 1)*

*I experience challenges when I must attend the workshop; the female teachers will ask, am I at the right place? (Participant 2)*

*The challenge I am facing is trying as possible not to have physical contact with children (Participant 3)*

*Female teachers would tell me that if a girl child had a problem, I must call the female teachers (Participant 2)*

*The child will have messed up themselves; as a male teacher I will have to assist the child (Participant 4)*

### ***The only male teacher***

Male teachers are in the minority in primary schools; they are intimidated and feel unworthy in a space dominated by female teachers. Another challenge is being the only male teacher at the school, which results in them not being taken seriously when they voice themselves, since no one is listening to them:

*As male teachers, we are not taken seriously when we voice ourselves because we are the minority in schools. (Participant 4).*

*I feel unworthy or untrained to teach in primary school. (Participant 3).*

*I have realized that women are soft compared to males. (Participant 2)*

*Working with people who have experience created the inferiority complex. (Participant 1)*

*I had a horrific challenge whenever I had to go to school because there was no time for teaching. I was attending to reports, and so doing this and trying to discipline the children; I found that challenging. (Participant 5)*

Their narratives revealed that the male teachers face challenges as they sometimes feel unworthy in the primary school setting and even gave the analogy of not being as soft as women; this created an inferiority complex. They were a male teacher in school, resulting in them being forced to apply their masculinity as they will be assigned the work of disciplining the children. They feel that they are not teachers enough because they are not doing what they must to teach the children.

***Stigmatisation*** Male teachers are stigmatisation as it is believed that they cannot deal with children, and males are thus scared of becoming teachers of young children. Other teachers in the higher

grades laugh at them, saying ECE is all about playing with children and they must go and play with the children. This makes them feel belittled and not accepted by colleagues in the higher grades. If they have to attend the practical the male teachers will choose the higher grades when they arrive at schools, because they do not want other teachers to know they have chosen to teach young children:

*... other male teachers think I might not be man enough, half man or half woman* (Participant 1)

*Can you work with young children?* (Participant 1)

*They think I am earning little because I teach young children.* (Participant 1)

*I do not have qualifications, so I teach young children.* (Participant 2)

*A parent said that only if he knew that his child's teacher is a male he would not allow it, and male teachers are incapable.* (Participant 5)

From the above narratives it is clear that male teachers are experiencing challenges teaching in primary schools. As a teacher, it is not acceptable to be asked by other teachers whether you can work with children, and society thinks that if you are a male teacher teaching young children, it is because you are not qualified enough. Also, it is held that they earn little because they find themselves in a space where female teachers dominate.

### ***Exercising discipline***

Because there are few male teachers in primary school, they are supposed to exercise their masculinity whereby they are good at disciplining the children, and spend most of the time doing that instead of teaching the children. Male teachers even report that children would like them to shout as the female teachers do, but they only use their normal voices and the children will do whatever they are supposed to. Their classes are not as noisy as those of the female teachers:

*... the discipline is excellent because I am a male teacher.* (Participant 1)

*... for a male teacher, the discipline is different from that of female teachers as for female teachers shout at children repeating themselves when commanding the discipline, but with male teachers, I only speak once, and they listen.* (Participant 2)

*Children fear males more than females. (Participant 3)*

*I cannot shout, but I use my deep voice as a male teacher. (Participant 4)*

*I raise my voice, and the child listens. (Participant 5)*

This shows that the classes held by the male ECE teachers are disciplined enough, compared to those of the female teachers. Children need to be exposed to different genders at school so that they may learn how to behave. Male teachers need to know how to make the children feel comfortable in class, so that they do not feel that they are being punished more because of being in a male class.

## **Discussion**

Male teachers teaching in primary schools face the challenge of not being taken seriously by other teachers; there is a lack of understanding from their peers, who may criticise them for choosing an 'easy' career option (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). Being in the minority resulted in not being taken seriously, and other teachers in the more feminine environment asked them if they were able to work with young children (Cushman, 2005). The challenge for male teachers in primary schools starts while they are still in training; they have to negotiate a training course that is often more suited for their female colleagues and their learning style (Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Male teachers are ridiculed by being told they are earning little and not qualified enough, which is why they teach in primary schools (Foster & Newman, 2005; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Male teachers often feel they are under more scrutiny than female colleagues regarding physical interactions with children, and have questioned their motives for pursuing their career (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015). These challenges are moderated by demographic variables such as age, years of teaching experience, the number of male teachers at the school where they work, whether or not teaching was their first career, the gender of the principal at the school where they are employed, and whether or not they are a parent (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Smith & Hung, 2008; White, 2011). The societal notion is that roles that have a caring aspect are a natural choice for females rather than males (Cameron, 2001; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training come together to discuss the situation prevailing in primary schools, why there are so few male teachers, and what challenges could be prohibiting male teachers from joining primary schools. I recommend that the Department of Higher Education and Training go to different universities to develop marketing strategies and provide motivation and clarity on becoming a male teacher for primary schools. It is clear that when teaching in primary school as a male teacher, the benefits are the same as for teachers teaching in higher grades. There needs to be more explanation in high schools, before the students pass matric and apply for higher education institutions, so they can choose their career with understanding. Also, male teachers in primary schools should be given motivational talks, so that they do not feel like leaving the primary setting too early because of not feeling that they are taken seriously by their colleagues and other teachers in high schools. Developmental workshops are crucial at this stage to motivate all primary school teachers, so that male teachers can feel accepted in their career choice.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter comprised three articles. The first deals with the experiences of male ECE teachers in primary schools and strategies to increase their recruitment, using a self-concept approach; the second discusses reconstructing identity in early childhood classrooms; and the third presents male ECE teachers' narratives on their experiences of teaching. This chapter focuses on a discussion of the study's main findings, as related to the research objectives, as well as recommendations that emerged from the findings. The chapter will conclude with the study's limitations, reflection on the research, and suggestions for further studies.

#### **5.2 Meeting the aim and objectives of the study**

The study aimed to determine how male teachers' identities can be reconstructed in ECE settings, and the objectives were as follows.

1. To explore the perceptions of male teachers in identity construction and reconstruction in ECE settings.
2. To explore how male teachers construct and reconstruct their identities in ECE settings.
3. To determine the factors influencing male teachers' identity construction and reconstruction in the ECE settings.
4. To determine the constraints hampered male teachers' recruitment as career professionals in the ECE settings.
5. To understand why male teachers (re) construct their identities in early childhood.

**Each of these will be discussed in the sections that follow.**

### **5.2.1 How male teachers' identities can be reconstructed in early childhood education settings**

This study found that male teachers can work with young children and are passionate about doing so. Male teachers need to be allowed not to be monitored by female teachers in checking whether they are coping. The male teachers indicated that they teach young children because they love children and are passionate about their career choices. They mentioned that young children can talk to them about matters in their families, showing that children need to be allowed to explore and relate to the different genders at school. Male teachers can operate at the level of young children as they play with them since the teaching and learning approach for young children is play-based. It was found that when engaging with children, the male teachers feel like their parents; many do not have a father figure at home. The children can understand what males are like at school and engage with the male teachers. In this way, they could have role models, and boys were seen to be interested in conversing with male teachers. Male teachers mentioned that they received the support of their families to teach in ECE.

These findings were consistent with the existing literature, suggesting that male teachers' love of children is the most significant reason for their choosing early childhood teachers (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Prioritising the love of children is crucial in seeking employment in ECE, which has resulted in more opportunities in this field, encouraging even men to enter the profession. Jordan's (2011) study indicated that some men obtained support to pursue the profession from teachers, family members, and close friends. Men who decide to teach in ECE can actively challenge and disrupt the symbolic gendered image of being 'women's work' (Brody et al., 2021). Warin (2018) stated that some men accrued male-controlled benefits by prioritising academic success and professional identity over children's emotional well-being. Men in ECE have reinforced the hegemonic system of male power, despite having crossed the gendered boundary that distanced men from working in what is considered a traditionally feminine profession (Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

### **5.2.2 The perceptions of male teachers in identity construction and reconstruction in ECE settings**

This study found that male teachers are proud of teaching young children and understand the job, irrespective of the fact that they are male. The male teachers feel like the parents of the children, many of whom have single parents and no relationship with their fathers. Male teachers may become role models to the children. The findings show that male teachers wanted to change the situation of all men being regarded as abusers. Children often come to school and want to tell the male teachers what is happening at home. They would behave well in class because of the men's masculinity; male teachers only had to project their voices to get the children to listen to them, unlike female teachers who needed to shout at the top of their voices to do so. At times, these female teachers call for the assistance of the male teachers to discipline the children. There are few male teachers in ECE and many female teachers; as a result, the male teachers find themselves voiceless in terms of being able to raise issues that relate to them.

Another aspect is the perceptions and attitudes of society, where there is a tendency to ask whether a male teacher can teach young children, whether they are qualified or not. Their gender is scrutinised with the intimation that they are 'not man enough.' Other male teachers do not take them seriously, saying that they have chosen the most effortless career because all that they have to do in ECE is play with children.

There was consistency with previous studies, with Brody's (2015) findings revealing that charisma, initiative, daring, playfulness, and attention to the children's needs could be considered teachers' masculine identities. Msiza (2020) posits that the identity of a disciplinarian is another common one imposed on male teachers in ECE, and there is an expectation for male teachers to serve on disciplinary committees (Brown, 2012). Zhang (2017) indicated that male teachers' presence in ECE is advantageous for children, providing a role model and offering another world perspective for children from single-parent families. However, when a man chooses to become an ECE teacher. Some immediate negative thoughts arise, especially about the man's sexuality, and questions about child abuse and molestation are often raised (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Skeleton, 2003). Having few male teachers in ECE is accompanied by the misconception that ECE requires minimal skills and competencies (Bernard *et al.*, 2000). Some agree that the low status of ECE may be one reason for the low salaries paid to persons working in the field (Cooney & Bittner, 2001).

### **5.2.3 How male teachers construct and reconstruct their identities in early childhood education settings**

This study found that male teachers construct and reconstruct their identities because of their love, passion, and support for the children. Male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities face challenges from society and their colleagues who teach in higher grades. Having chosen ECE, it is as if they are seen as ‘not man enough’ but also that they do not have the softness of heart towards the children that the female teachers have. Teachers in higher grades laugh at them by saying they have chosen a simple career that just involves playing with children, meaning they are not taken seriously. That said, the male teachers indicated that they do not have a problem playing with the children; they can work with the children as they suggest they understand them and can operate at their level. They do not want to be monitored as to whether they are coping with the children or shouting whenever they need help. However, society does not trust male teachers, because child abuse is so rife in our communities.

Teachers in ECE are mostly female; having more male teachers will bring diversity and help move away from being stereotyped. Other findings are that we need different genders in ECE for young children to explore, to allow variety in ECE, and to expose them to other role models. Some children are from single-parent households with no male figures; therefore, males can play an essential role in the lives of these children, becoming like fathers to the fatherless.

The findings were consistent with other scholars' findings, indicating that men who decide to teach in ECE can actively challenge and disrupt its symbolic gendered image as 'women's work' (Brody *et al.*, 2021). Males and females differ; children can only benefit from growing up with two behaviour models (Tokie, 2018). Male ECE teachers can bring a great deal to the ECE setting if society allows them to do their job and does not treat them as janitors who are to do all kinds of repairs. Children will benefit from the diverse activities and personalities of both male and female ECE teachers (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013).

### **5.2.4 Factors influencing male teachers' identity construction and reconstruction in the ECE setting**

This study found few male teachers in ECE in South Africa due to the gender imbalance noted in ECE settings. Love and passion influenced those male teachers who decided to join ECE and

motivated them to become male teachers in ECE. They mentioned that their teachers, family members, and close friends supported them in pursuing the profession. The availability of internship positions in ECE was also an influencing factor. Others mentioned that they undertook the career to explore how young children learn to read and write. Some male teachers mentioned wanting to be like their teachers who had taught and guided them through life. In addition, the career is taken up because of the bursaries offered at universities. One that is concerned explicitly with teaching is the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme. This is advantageous because once the students complete their degree, they do not have to apply for a job and be interviewed; they are given a placement in a school and work to be able to refund the money. Another encouraging factor in ECE is working with children not challenging to discipline and control.

The findings were consistent with those of other scholars, which indicated that the increasing importance of ECE resulted in more opportunities in this field, encouraging even men to enter the profession. However, being an early childhood teacher requires a passion for teaching children (Mashiya, 2014). In South Africa, Van Broekhuizen (2015) argues that extrinsic motivation is a pull factor, and outside factors include, among others, the full-cost Funza Lushaka bursaries and the immediate absorption of the recipients of these bursaries into schools upon completing or attaining their qualification. In contrast, disillusionment can arise during teacher education training or when student teachers are engaged in teaching practices and experience first-hand the realities of school environments. This may cause them to intend to leave the teaching profession down the line (Ravhuhali *et al.*, 2019).

### **5.2.5 Constraints that hampered male teachers' recruitment to ECE as a career**

Findings revealed that recruitment of male teachers faced constraints in the ECE setting. This was mainly due to public confidence in women, who were considered more nurturing than men, which hindered male teachers from pursuing careers in ECE. Worldwide, women have dominated ECE. There are few male teachers in ECE, and in many schools, there are none. Society does not understand the presence of male teachers in ECE because they are not used to male teachers in this phase of education. As a result, male teachers are uncomfortable in joining ECE because of being scrutinised by the community and other teachers. A recruitment process must be in place to balance the number of female and male teachers. The male teachers said they are not trusted with the young children and are monitored.

The findings are consistent with the literature. Some scholars found that it was not easy to recruit male teachers, who were non-existent in some preschools (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). Worldwide, a gender imbalance has been noted in ECE and lower primary schools, where classes have been skewed to female teachers with a conspicuous absence of men in these settings (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). Public recognition of outstanding male ECE teachers and male lecturers in ECE undergraduate degrees should attract males into the ECE setting (Rentzou, 2017; Skeleton, 2009; Svodziwa & Raymond, 2016). Jordan (2011) suggests that more affirmative descriptions of men in childcare roles are needed to rectify the lack of male educators in ECE settings. Rinke (2011) mentions that efforts toward recruitment must scrutinise prior educational experiences and examine prospective educators' planned approaches toward instruction, community participation, and professional growth. It has also been suggested that if men become involved in the management of ECE, it would become relatively easy to attract male educators to work in the sector (Johannes, 2010). Society must change its stereotypical perception that only females should teach young learners because children can benefit from male and female teachers (Louw & Tshelane, 2022).

### **5.2.6 Why male teachers (re)construct their identities in early childhood**

The findings indicate that men can be great teachers like women and positively influence children's lives. It should not matter which gender you are if you want to help enrich someone's life; the determining factors should be the capability, experience, and willingness, not gender. It is also essential to remember that men bring a different perspective to ECE; furthermore, male teachers may inspire young boys to disregard societal constructs and pursue their passions. Male teachers in ECE promote gender balance in the environment. Male teachers also promote a more active, physical environment, while female teachers foster a nurturing, calm, and positive environment. Male and female educators have different caring styles, and this can be very beneficial because participating children will be introduced to different types of caring, playing, and instructing.

The findings are consistent with the literature. Children need to see an equal mix of men and women working in the same field together, planting the seed of equality and cooperation. Over many centuries, teaching young children has been the domain of female teachers (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015). According to Rentzou (2017: 202), "more male teachers would encourage more paternal

involvement, make schools more father-friendly, and encourage fathers to feel more comfortable about participating in the ECE setting." The ECE sector in South Africa has had challenges in attracting and increasing male participation in various ECE initiatives (Khewu & Adu, 2016).

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The following recommendations regarding identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in early childhood settings emerged from the findings of this research study:

- The situation calls for the increased recruitment of male teachers. The Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training should develop a framework to motivate male teachers to discuss the situation prevailing in primary schools, why we have few male teachers, and find out what challenges could prohibit male teachers from joining primary schools.
- There should be public recognition of outstanding male ECE teachers and male lecturers in ECE undergraduate degrees to attract males into ECE by advertising that focuses on male involvement in ECE, which tends to promote the profession and reduce stereotyping.
- Male teachers should also be encouraged and educated about coping strategies to deal with criticism and be resilient when facing challenges regarding their career choices.
- Children are exposed to different genders, and male teachers can serve as a role model and support for young children, specifically boys.
- There needs to be a good explanation of careers in ECE in high schools before the students pass matric and apply to higher education institutions so they can choose their career with understanding.
- Male teachers in primary schools or ECE should be given motivational talks so they do not feel like leaving the primary setting early because their colleagues and other high school teachers do not think they are taken seriously.
- Developmental workshops should be implemented to motivate all the teachers in primary schools so that the male teachers can feel more accepted and accepted in their career choices.

### **5.4 Limitations of the study**

The study was limited to five schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, from which a small sample of participants comprised of five teachers was utilised. The study's findings cannot be generalised but are restricted to the context of the five schools in the Free State province. A few more schools could have been added to supplement the dimensions of the findings; however, the norm with qualitative research is to seek depth rather than breadth. Accordingly, this implies that while the findings of this study may not represent all male teachers in the district, province, and country, they can be used as a guideline for all interested stakeholders. There might be several challenges and solutions that should have been discussed in this study. Still, the male teachers who contributed to the research study deemed the identified challenges and strategies significant in recruiting male teachers into ECE settings. Regardless of the limitations mentioned above, the research study generated and analyses the data to the best of its ability.

### **5.5 Reflections on the study**

I was a Foundation Phase female teacher for the past 20 years, and my experience was with only female teachers and management. I therefore decided to research why there are so few male teachers in ECE. I wanted to develop research that could contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge. This meant I had to immerse myself in reading the literature on existing and new research on identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in ECE. I became very interested in those male teachers already teaching young children, how they perceive themselves in a setting where female teachers dominate, what possible challenges they come across, and what can be done to increase the number of male teachers in ECE. The process was not easy because male teachers are few, and I had to meet with them and tell them the aim of the research and how this study can contribute to the Department of Education breaking the barriers in this setting. I discovered that ECE is not solely for female teachers, as the findings show that male teachers can work adeptly with young children. The results also showed that male teachers have love and support and are passionate about their career choices. I realised that both genders are essential to children as early as they are in ECE and should be exposed to different genders.

### **5.6 Suggestions for further study**

The study suggests that the Department of Education should intervene in ECE to balance male and female teachers and eradicate the stereotype of having few male teachers in ECE. Another suggestion is to recruit more male teachers to bring balance to ECE because having male teachers will uphold diversity in ECE, whereby young children will get the opportunity to have both genders in the schools and be able to choose role models. The Department of Education should develop workshops to try to retain the male teachers in ECE so that they do not leave their careers, which can occur because of not being well accepted by society and other male teachers teaching in high schools. Studies could be carried out among learners in high school on how they can be assisted in choosing careers that they are sure about so that they do not regret or change courses at the tertiary level.

### **5.8 Conclusion**

The ECE setting is mainly the realm of female teachers; female teachers dominate, with ECE currently a predominantly female occupation space. Women have historically held positions of power in ECE because of the general belief that they are better at nurturing than males. This prevents male teachers from reimagining themselves as ECE professionals and moving further. As a result, there are few male teachers in the ECE setting. The literature shows that the stereotypical ideas of nannies and carers accompanying ECE instruction are more often connected with women's roles than male teachers, and male teachers can be positive examples for boys and families without father figures. Men who have formed and remade their identities and gender roles according to stereotypes and gendered performances are often mocked by both men and women. Hence, these elements aided in developing and reshaping male educators' identities in ECE contexts. The study concludes that recruitment must be put in place and promoted to balance the current imbalance in ECE and motivate those male teachers who have constructed their identities not to leave the ECE setting due to stereotyping. It is, therefore, necessary for children to be exposed to teachers of both genders as early as in the ECE setting.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Title registration



17 November 2022

#### APPLICATION FOR TITLE REGISTRATION

**Applicant:** Mofokeng, MM  
**Student Number:** 2003098510  
**Discipline:** Early Childhood Development and Learning  
**Study Code:** Doctoral (ECDA9100)

Dear Ms Mofokeng

**Your registered title is as follows:** "Identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in Early Childhood settings"

All of the best with your studies.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Patrick Mafora  
Chair: CTR committee

Ms CS Duvenhage  
Secretary: CTR committee

205 Nelson Mandela Drive | Park West, Bloemfontein 9301 | South Africa  
P.O. Box 339 | Bloemfontein 9300 | South Africa | [www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)



### Appendix B: Ethical clearance

**GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)**

16-Aug-2023

Dear Mrs Mahudi Mofokeng

**Application Approved**

Research Project Title:

**Identity construction and reconstruction among male teachers in Early Childhood settings**

Ethical Clearance number:  
**UFS-HSD2023/0399**

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Adri Du Plessis**

**Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee**

Adri  
Du  
Plessis

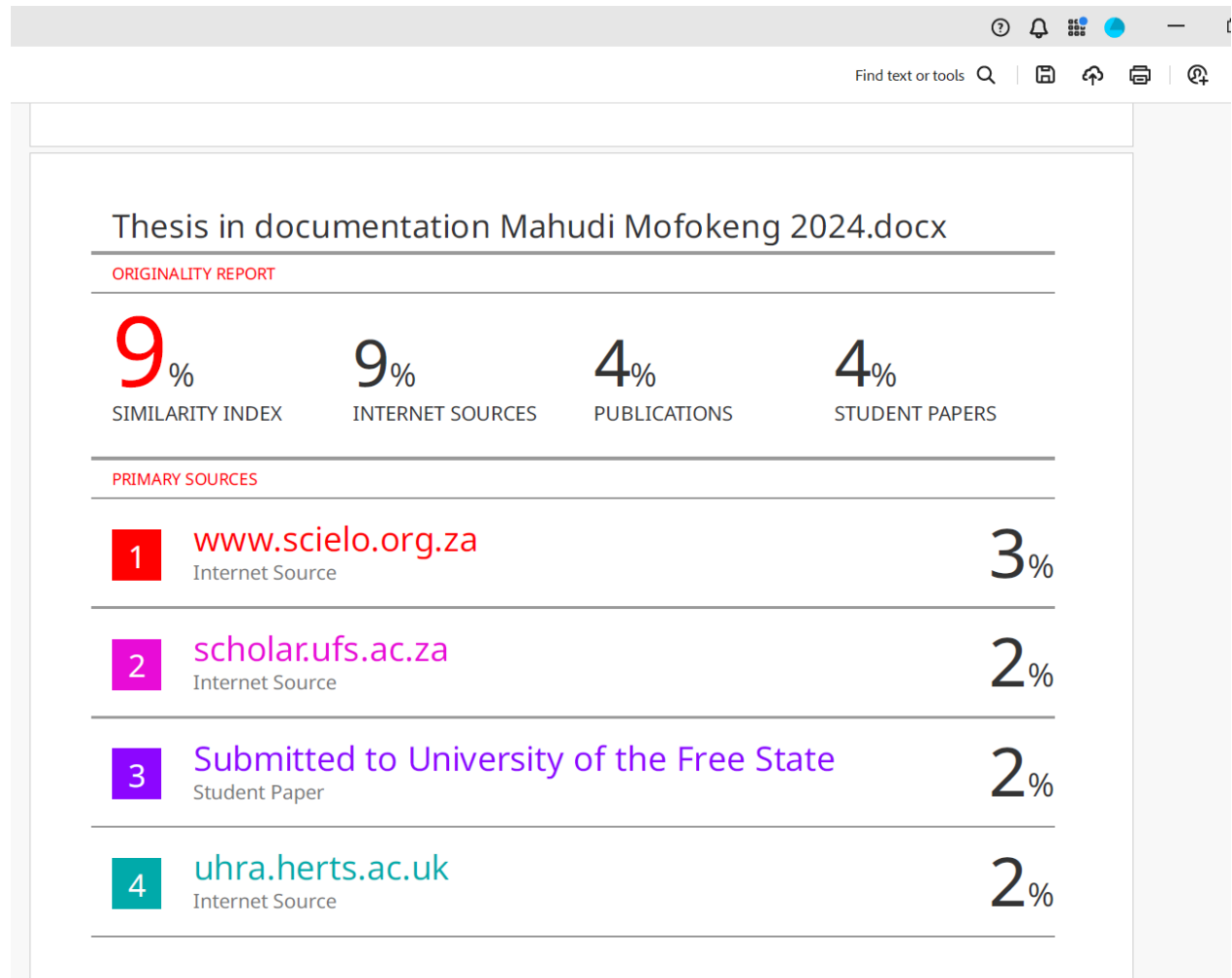
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signed by  
Adri Du  
Plessis  
Date:  
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205 Nelson Mandela  
Drive  
Park West  
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P.O. Box 339  
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Tel: +27 (0)51 401  
9337  
[duplessisA@ufs.ac.za](mailto:duplessisA@ufs.ac.za)  
[www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)



## Appendix C: Turnitin report



## Appendix D Interview questions

The interview guide with broad questions for ECE male teachers.

1. How do you perceive male teachers who have constructed and reconstructed their identities in ECE?
2. How do you perceive yourself as an ECE teacher?
3. What influence did you get to become an ECE teacher?
4. How do learners address you as a male teacher?
5. Do you have some challenges teaching ECE, especially if you are a male teacher?

6. Which class are you teaching?
7. How is the discipline in your class as compared to women teachers?
8. Why did you choose to teach ECE?
9. How do you feel to be in a sector that females mostly dominate?
10. Are you satisfied with this gender imbalance in ECE?
11. What do you suggest in closing the gap between male and female teachers in ECE?
12. What could be done to recruit male teachers to ECE?
13. What are the recruitment strategies of male teachers in balancing gender base in the ECE settings?

**Appendix E: Approval from the Free state Department of Education**

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango  
Ref: Research Permission: M.M. Mofokeng  
Tel. 051 404 8808  
Email: [MZ.Thango@fseducation.gov.za](mailto:MZ.Thango@fseducation.gov.za)



49 Blignaut Street  
Kestell  
9860

Dear Mrs. M.M. Mofokeng

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT**

This letter serves to inform you that you have been granted permission to conduct research in the Free State Department of Education within the Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District. The details in relation to your research project with the University of the Free State are as follows:

**Topic:** Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male teachers in Early Childhood Settings.

1. **List of schools involved:** Dipelaneng Primary School, Letlotlo Primary School, Thebe Ya Kgomo Primary School, Paballong Primary School and Qwabi Primary School.
2. **Target Population:** Fifteen male teachers teaching in grade 1 to 3 at the selected schools.
3. **Period of research:** From the signature of this letter until 30 September 2023. Please note that the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year. Should you fall behind your schedule by three months to complete your research project in the approved period, you will need to apply for an extension. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. The approval is subject to the following conditions:
  - 4.1 The collection of data should not interfere with the normal tuition time or teaching process.
  - 4.2 A bound copy of the research document should be submitted to the Free State Department of Education, Room 101, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Thuto House, St. Andrew Street, Bloemfontein or can be emailed to the above-mentioned email address.
  - 4.3 You will be expected, on completion of your research study to make a presentation to the relevant stakeholders in the Department.
  - 4.4 The ethics documents must be adhered to in the discourse of your study in our department.
5. Please note that costs relating to all the conditions mentioned above are your own responsibility.

Yours Sincerely,

  
**Mr. MZAMO W. JACOBS**  
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 30/03/2023

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango  
Ref: Notification of research: M.M. Mofokeng  
Tel. 051 404 8808  
Email: [M.Z.Thango@fseducation.gov.za](mailto:M.Z.Thango@fseducation.gov.za)



District Director  
Thabo Mofutsanyana District

Dear Ms. Mabaso

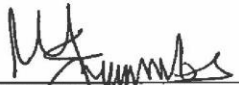
**NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH PROJECT IN THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT**

This letter serves to inform you that Mrs. M.M. Mofokeng has been granted permission to conduct research in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District under the auspices of the University of the Free State. The details in relation to the research project are as follows:

**Topic:** Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male teachers in Early Childhood Settings.

- 1. List of schools involved:** Dipelaneng Primary School, Letlotlo Primary School, Thebe Ya Kgomo Primary School, Paballong Primary School and Qwabi Primary School.
- 2. Target Population:** Fifteen male teachers teaching in grade 1 to 3 at the selected schools.
- 3. Period of research:** From the signature of this letter until 30 September 2023. Please note the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year nor during normal school hours. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
- 4. Research benefits:** The research is valuable in such that it explores the male teachers in Early Childhood Education, that we have few of them. It is hoped that this study will enlighten the Department of Education about having few male teachers in ECE setting. The learners will be able to benefit by having experience of having the opportunity to have male teachers in schools and to choose the role models not to have only female teachers.
- 5. The Sub-directorate of Research and policy will make the necessary arrangements for the researchers to present the findings and recommendations to the relevant officials in the Department.**

Yours Sincerely,



**Mr. MZAMOW JACOBS**  
**DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING**

**DATE:** 30/03/2023

## Appendix: F Consent form



### Consent to participate in this study

I, the undersigned,  
Mr Lebuso Phana

(participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant")  
confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as the

(the "Study") in relation to

Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male teachers in Early Childhood settings\_

and which Study is being conducted by

Mofokeng Mahudi Magdelina

(insert the name of the researcher), (the "**Researcher**").

I, Lebuso Phana the undersigned Participant, further confirm that-

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;
6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the semi-structured interviews

Full Name of Participant: Lebuso Phana

Signature of Participant: *Lebuso Phana*

Date: 01/09/2023

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahudi Magdelina Mofokeng



## Appendix: H Editing Certificate

Leverne Gething, M.Phil., *cum laude*  
PO Box 1155, Milnerton 7435; cell 072 212 5417  
e-mail: [leverne@eject.co.za](mailto:leverne@eject.co.za)

29 January 2024

### **Declaration of editing of a PhD thesis:**

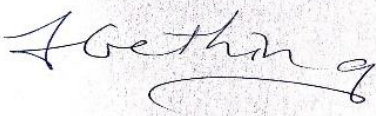
#### **Identity Construction and Reconstruction among Male Teachers in Early Childhood Settings**

I hereby declare that I carried out language editing of the above thesis, excluding final review of references, on behalf of Mahudi Magdelina Mofokeng. This included editing all three articles contained within the thesis according to the respective styles of each journal.

I am a professional writer and editor with many years of experience (e.g. 5 years on *South African Medical Journal*, 10 years heading the corporate communication division at the SA Medical Research Council), who specialises in Science and Technology editing – but am adept at editing in many different subject areas. I have previously edited many academic papers and theses for various higher education institutions and journals.

I am a full member of the South African Freelancers' Association as well as of the Professional Editors' Association.

Yours sincerely



A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Leverne Gething", is written on a light-colored, textured background.