

Parental Perceptions of Male Early Childhood Development Teachers in Khami District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to establish parents' perceptions of the involvement of males as early childhood development (ECD) teachers. The research adopted a qualitative approach and used a case study design to allow interaction with the subjects and to draw conclusions based on their diverse perceptions. A sample was drawn from the Khami District population that comprised 10 parents, four administrators, four female teachers and two male teachers. Two sampling techniques, namely convenience and purposive sampling, were used. Convenience sampling allowed the researcher to select a small sample where participants were chosen on the basis of being accessible and convenient. Only parents with children taught by male teachers were purposively sampled. Ethical considerations were observed during data collection by explaining to participants that participation was voluntary, with confidentiality guaranteed. Online questionnaires, telephone interviews and virtual focus group discussions were used to collect data, making it easy to maintain social distancing during the Covid-19 lockdown. The following are some of the major findings of this study: parents have mixed perceptions about the involvement of males as ECD teachers; female teachers and school administrators have more positive perceptions about the involvement of males as ECD teachers because they are viewed as qualified for their job. However, in spite of the positive perceptions established about male teachers, some factors such as gender and societal inclinations still cause parents to have fears about

the involvement of males as ECD teachers. The study recommends that more male teachers should be recruited to balance gender representation and more workshops and refresher courses for both parents and teachers should be conducted to develop trust.

Keywords: parents' perceptions; early childhood development; male early childhood teachers; gender

Introduction

The education of young children in an African traditional society, where girls were attached to mothers and boys to fathers, has contributed towards scepticism regarding modern early childhood development programmes and practices. No one seems to be sure if male teachers are suitable to teach in these classes. Although there are sectors of society that think females are better positioned to teach early childhood learners because of their perceived motherly affection towards young children, this is yet to be established. These proponents rule out the abilities of males in handling young children. They argue that the school is an extension of the home and that fathers at home fail to care for children in terms of bathing them and changing diapers, making it unlikely that they can manage these children in school environments. However, those supportive of the involvement of males in teaching early childhood development (ECD) classes assert that they have a fatherly love and a passion for interacting with young children, even at a home level. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to establish the perceptions of parents on the involvement of male teachers in ECD classes in Khami District, Zimbabwe. The study focuses mainly on the methods, results, discussion and conclusions of the findings.

Method

This qualitative research study used the interpretive paradigm and followed a case study design. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) define a qualitative approach as a method that seeks to find out about what people think and why they think that way. For example, in this study, researchers sought to find answers regarding the behaviour and perceptions of an identified group of people on the involvement of males as ECD teachers. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) and Merriam and Tisdell (2009) say that qualitative research methods are more communicative and descriptive. The data collected is easy to understand and hence the researcher decided to use a qualitative research method. This explanation justifies the adoption of the qualitative approach as more appropriate for gathering information on this phenomenon. The population of this study was drawn from the parents, school administrators, female and male teachers. Creswell (2007) refers to the population as an aggregate or totality of all the objects, subjects or members who conform to a set of specifications. Thus, a population is the composition of participants in the study. Since not every member of the population can participate, the

researchers had to come up with a representative sample. Searberg (1988 cited in De Vos et al. 2005) defines a sample as a portion of the total set of objects, events or persons that together comprise the subject of the study. Accordingly, a sample is a subset of a population chosen for observation or investigation to provide information about the population. The sample comprised 10 parents whose children were taught by male teachers, four school administrators, four female ECD teachers and two male ECD teachers, all from the same cluster in the Khami District in Bulawayo. To come up with a sample, the researchers used two sampling techniques: convenience and purposive. Sampling, according to Kerlingger (1986 cited in De Vos et al. 2005) means taking any portion of a population as representative of that population. According to Creswell (2007), convenience sampling is used when a group of subjects is selected on the basis of being accessible or convenient. Creswell (2007) says that purposive sampling is used by researchers interested in a specific criterion since few cases can be selected for the study. In this study, more parents participated than school administrators and teachers because the purpose of the study centres on the perceptions of parents, though researchers still saw it equally important to hear from other named stakeholders. For a parent to be part of the population, their child needed to be taught by a male teacher, since the researchers believed that these parents would be more useful to the study compared to parents with no experience with male teachers.

In this study, various research instruments were administered to collect data. Creswell (2012) defines a research instrument as what is used to collect information (data) to answer research questions. One may say research instruments are tools used to gather data or obtain information from individuals regarding their opinions or views on a particular topic of interest. In this study, the researchers used online questionnaires, telephone interviews and virtual focus group discussions amid the Covid-19 scare as a way of observing the World Health Organisation's social distancing regulations. Creswell (2012) defines a questionnaire as a research instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) say that questionnaires can be thought of as a kind of written interview. It is therefore understood that a questionnaire is a written set of questions given to people in order to collect facts about a certain topic. Besides questionnaires, telephone interviews were also administered. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) define an interview as a conversation between two or more people where the interviewer asks the interviewee questions face to face. Creswell (2012) says that interviews provide a method of data collection that involves oral responses. This study also collected data through the administration of virtual focus group discussions. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) define focus group discussions as a research method in which a trained moderator conducts a collective interview with typically six to eight participants from similar backgrounds or who share similar characteristics or both. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) emphasise that if focus groups are done well, they offer powerful insights into people's feelings and thoughts. Creswell (2007) says that

focus group discussions have an advantage of providing insights into a topic when it may be more difficult to gather information through other data collection methods. In this case, teachers, parents and school administrators participated in the virtual focus group discussions. Focus group discussions in this respect helped capture data the interviews and questionnaires would have missed. Using three instruments enabled errors in a single approach to be identified and rectified in another (Merriam and Tisdell 2009). It facilitated the triangulation of data and thus increased the chances of obtaining information that could be close to the real situation.

All research should observe certain ethical practices in order to protect the person of participants. Creswell (2007) advises that researchers should respect participants' rights, needs, values and demands. This means that if the participants feel that their rights are violated, that their needs are not met, or that their values and demands are not considered, they can withdraw from participating. Ethical practices such as beneficence, informed consent, privacy or non-participation, anonymity and confidentiality should be valued by researchers. It is against this background that researchers in this study explained to participants that participation was by consent and voluntary, with freedom to withdraw at any stage of the research guaranteed.

In this study, various stakeholders freely participated, and collected data was presented, interpreted and analysed systematically, following distinct themes. Creswell (2007) recommends three strategies for data analysis: preparation and organisation of the transcribed data for analysis, categorising data into themes, and presenting data through the use of tables, figures or within texts. Data was analysed by drawing up a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the collected data. All data collected from administrators, parents, ECD female and male teachers was organised in such a way that similar ideas and trends in the data were placed together. Tables were used for data presentation and analysis.

Results

This segment focuses on presenting, analysing and interpreting data collected from the questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. It unfolds by presenting the demographic information of all the participants. Thereafter the findings of the study are outlined. The findings of the research are meant to achieve the following objectives of the study: to investigate the perceptions of parents on the involvement of males as ECD teachers, to find out the perceptions of teachers and school administrators on the involvement of males as ECD teachers, and to suggest possible strategies to promote positive ECD male teacher-parent relationships.

Presentation of Bio-Data Results

Table 1: Results on gender of participants

PARTICIPANTS	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Parents	1	9	10
Administrators	0	4	4
Teachers	2	4	6
TOTAL	3	17	20
PERCENTAGE	15	85	100

Table 1 shows that more females than males participated in the research. In the population, 85% were females and 15% were males. Some male parents who were approached to participate were not keen to volunteer once they noticed that the topic involved caring for young ones, stating that caring for young ones was exclusively women's responsibility. This explains why teaching is dominated by females, especially in the infant department.

Table 2: Results on ages of participants

PARTICIPANTS	31–40 YEARS		41–50 YEARS		51–60 YEARS		60 + YEARS		TOTAL
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Parents	0	7	1	2	0	0	0	0	10
Administrators	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	4
Teachers	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
TOTAL	1	12	2	2	0	3	0	0	20
PERCENTAGE									

Table 2 shows that 65% of the participants were aged between 31 and 40 years; 25% were aged between 41 and 50 years and 10% were aged between 51 and 60 years. No participants were 60 years and above. These age groups indicate an active generation of parents who may be first-time parents or may have little experience with male teachers in ECD. This was an age range that was particular about who cares for their young ones. These statistics portray a population of professionals who were fully aware of the expectations of a professional around young learners, though some still had negative perceptions.

Table 3: Results on professional qualifications of administrators and teachers

HIGHEST PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
School certificate O or A level	0
Diploma in Education—General	0
Diploma in Education—ECD	6
Postgraduate	4
Other	0
TOTAL	10

Table 3 shows that the participants had different qualifications. No participant possessed only a school certificate or general diploma in education. Six teachers had a Diploma in Education—ECD, and four administrators were postgraduates. The participants' qualification had a bearing on the topic under study. They were all qualified personnel, with the majority of them being ECD specialists, fully aware of the requirements of handling young learners, and in contact with male teachers, learners and parents whose perceptions about the involvement of males in ECD were of primary concern. These statistics portray a population of professionals who are fully aware of the expectations of the male professional around young learners.

Table 4: Results on professional qualifications of parents

HIGHEST PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
School certificate O level	0
School certificate A level	0
Diploma level	7
Degree level	3
Other	0
TOTAL	10

Table 4 shows the qualifications of parents. Most of the parents, 70%, are diploma holders and 30% are degree holders. These qualifications had a bearing on the way they regard male teachers. They were also aware of the expectations of the male professional around ECD learners. However, they still have fears about males caring for little ones.

Table 5: Occupations of parents

OCCUPATION	NUMBER OF PARENTS
Self-employed	4
Trained professional	4
Supervisory post	1
Managerial post	1
TOTAL	10

Table 5 shows that five parents were self-employed but have tertiary level education; four were trained professionals; one held a supervisory position, and one was in a managerial post. These occupations made them liberal to reveal their true feelings about the involvement of males as ECD teachers.

Presentation of Themes

Perceptions of Parents on the Involvement of Males as ECD Teachers

The data collected from the questionnaires and focus group discussions revealed that parents had both positive and negative perceptions. Ten parents participated, of whom five wrote their responses on questionnaires and five participated in a focus group discussion. Parents were named P1 to P10. The parents first indicated that they had no say in choosing the teacher. Staffing is done by the administrators and is based on the teacher's qualifications. Thus parents have no liberty to choose if the teacher is male or female. To make matters worse, parents were not introduced to the teacher of their children upon enrolment, but only once schools opened. One parent indicated that she was not aware that the teacher was male when she enrolled her child. She said:

I only discovered that the teacher was male a few days after schools opened, when my child told me the name of the teacher.

This problem may arise because of late staffing done on closing days or after meetings are finished.

All the parents assumed that infants, especially ECD classes, are taught by females who are assumed to have inert motherhood instincts. P5 said:

I believe in general terms females are better suited to teaching infants because of their inert instincts and therefore are more likely to outperform males.

They believed that men could not render quality care needed by young learners because they tend to be impatient, harsh and tempted to use corporal punishment against attention-seeking or nagging learners. P6 had this to say about male teachers:

Females are patient by nature hence they will be patient with the pupils whereas male teachers won't have as much patience as the female teacher.

She added that she is not comfortable with male teachers caring for ECD learners because:

Males are harsher than female teachers. If pupils are taught by a harsh teacher at ECD they might not like school.

P7 and P10 shared the same sentiments.

A tense atmosphere might instil school phobia in young learners. Parents indicated they fear that their children are in danger of being abused sexually by male teachers. P3 and P4 had this to say respectively:

I imagined him beating them all the time.

I was afraid he would abuse them even sexually. I just suspected he would abuse the learners.

P10 indicated that although nothing sinister had happened, she was always uncomfortable and found it hard to trust males around ECD learners. The parent also said that it seemed normal for a female teacher to carry a child on her lap, hug or kiss a child, be it a boy or a girl, but it was awkward to see a male doing that. Such a scenario portrayed improper association with learners.

Male teachers were also accused of not being good at instilling self-care skills in learners, especially girls. Some of the participants believed that some male teachers fail to create order in their classroom and their classroom environment might not be as beautiful, clean and safe as that of females. According to the study, 70% of parents thought it was not in men's nature to care for children, hence those who try to do it might overdo it and become too friendly or too soft with learners and end up spoiling them. Only 30% of parents said men are equally good at caring for children. The participants also indicated that a male teacher might try to compensate for his impatience and end up being accused of being too close to some female parents. This might cause trouble with their husbands. Playing the father role to learners whose fathers are too busy to give the toddler enough attention might make the teacher clash with the learner's father.

Despite the negative perceptions cited by parents about male ECD teachers, some positive responses were noted too. All the parents agreed that the male teachers were equally trained, qualified and experienced. P2 and P4 regarded males in ECD as having a special calling to be able to handle young learners. The fact that males are not mothers

freed up their time and allowed them to fully devote their attention to their work. It is commonly assumed that mothers have chores they do at home and because of the task of caring for their own children, they are at times forced to be absent from work when their biological children are not well. This might overwhelm female teachers and affect them in executing their duties when they come to work. Parents attributed their children's noted progress to the male teachers' dedication and devotion to their work. The male teachers were commended for being results-oriented. P10 mentioned the

expectations on pupils. Performance is high. They also rate their success depending on the performance of their pupils. As a result, pupils will be pushed to the limit.

Male teachers in ECD classes act as role models to learners. P1 indicated that the presence of males in ECD is important. She said:

It allows children to observe men who are not violent and interact positively with women and children. Boys are likely to emulate such good character.

The male teachers proved that men are also capable of caring for, handling and teaching ECD learners. They showed that men are important in the upbringing of children and might inspire boys in their future careers. By being parents (*loco parentis*), male teachers become fathers to the fatherless learners. P1 explained that at first she was uncomfortable around the male teacher, but once she got used to him, she discovered that he had good communication skills. He had excellent rapport with learners. It was noted that male teachers are aware of the negative perceptions of parents and hence they work hard to impress the stakeholders. Their firmness makes them excellent disciplinarians, with total class control. Class management is one of the attributes a good teacher should have that contributes to class discipline. Some parents believed that a disciplined class or child is easy to teach. This notion was strongly supported by P10 when she said:

Most female teachers tend to baby the pupils and I consider this as a misleading approach because children need a firm approach both at home and school from a tender age.

This explained the remarkable progress noted in learners by the end of term one of 2020.

Female Teachers' Perceptions on the Involvement of Males as ECD Teachers

Female teachers and administrators seemed able to give first-hand information regarding the way male ECD teachers work, because they work with them. The female teachers were named T1 to T4. They unanimously indicated that male teachers have none of the motherly qualities such as patience, care and warmth needed by ECD learners. T2 said males do their work haphazardly without following routines. They have a danger of not meeting targets set.

Male teachers who wanted order tended to use threats and at times resorted to corporal punishment. Asked how male teachers moderate the behaviour of young learners, T2 said male teachers should be “firm, while friendly. Timeout punishment and at times corporal punishment [are used] if pushed to the limit.” T4 agreed with this assertion when she said “they use threats and at times corporal punishment.”

T3, however, stated that male teachers use moral stories and timeouts. This indicates that 75% of the teachers agree that male teachers use harsh ways of moderating behaviour in learners and only 25% believe they are gentle. This perception is one of the main concerns raised by parents on the involvement of males as ECD teachers. Males failed to model self-care skills to female learners as they depend on female assistant teachers. The female teachers also indicated that they raise suspicions of improper association with children, female parents, and even fellow colleagues as they try to be friendly to them. At times they do not share ideas in a bid to prove that they are as competent as their female counterparts.

The female teachers agreed with the administrators that male teachers are trained professionals who know the duties expected of them as well as their limitations. The data from the questionnaires and interviews show that male teachers act as role models to boys that men can be gentle and handle young learners. Based on the data collected, all the female teachers agreed that male teachers have proved to have a good rapport with parents, learners and fellow colleagues. In terms of their scores, males’ rapport with the named stakeholders ranged from fair, good, and very good to excellent.

Male teachers proved to be active in both indoor and outdoor activities. Their extra energy allowed them to cope with the hyperactive young learners. Males also proved to be dedicated and content with their jobs, as stated by administrators A3 and A4 who said:

Yes they are content in teaching ECD classes.

The administrators and female teachers said male teachers play a crucial role of being role models and parents to learners. A1 and A2 commended the male teachers by saying:

Males tend to become role models especially to the boys who may want to consider teaching as a profession.

Male Teachers’ Views on Their Involvement as ECD Teachers

It seemed unfair to outline the perceptions of some stakeholders about male ECD teachers and not give the people concerned the platform to provide their own views on their involvement as ECD teachers. The data collected from the male teachers on their

views on their involvement as ECD teachers is shown below. They were named T5 and T6.

According to the data, the male ECD teachers think male and female teachers do not differ in the way they execute their duties. T5 said:

Males have almost the same passion for these learners as their female counterparts.

Yet the word “almost” might indicate that they are not the same. In other words, one might be better than the other. Here the participant was not clear regarding who is better, but his true perceptions later revealed that he deems males better at caring for children than women. T6 said male and female teachers are the same because “they follow the same procedurals.”

The male teachers acknowledged that there were few men in the ECD field. They were aware that they are regarded as the gender that cannot care for children, thus T5 said men in ECD

want to prove a point that it’s not females who can handle children well.

Their performance was scrutinised by parents and even by some female teachers. They constantly had to work hard and be as transparent as possible in everything they did, or they would be accused of being lazy and incompetent, as indicated by A3.

Male teachers worked to prove a point—that they are capable of handling young learners too. When asked why he chose to be in the ECD field, T5 said:

I have always wanted to prove to other males it’s not only females who can take better care of the little one. We males are capable and can handle learners far better than females.

This implies that most men think they cannot care for children, but T6 wanted to prove that they can. This perception might put pressure on them as they execute their duties.

In an effort to create good relations with learners and some parents, male teachers were suspected of associating with them improperly and hence clashes arose. T5 indicated that

some girls have never been cleaned by males, hence are uncomfortable when I clean them [and] that is why I engage female assistant teachers, otherwise I have no problem cleaning them but cannot do it if the child is uncomfortable.

The data collected shows that male ECD teachers regard themselves as trained personnel who maintain their professionalism at all times. They have been equipped with skills to

handle young learners and also motivate them to learn. Both male teachers indicated that they have a passion for their work and are dedicated to it. T5 mentioned that teaching young learners also changes the teacher's character:

It makes one humble, calm and lowers self to reach children's level.

The male teachers believe that they do not only play the role of parents, but also act as role models to learners and demonstrate that men can be calm and take an active role in the holistic development of young learners. T6 was interested in the development of children, and he said being in ECD allows one to

[s]tudy how children develop physically, intellectually, in language, emotionally and socially from birth to eight years.

Strategies to Promote Positive ECD Male Teacher-Parent Relationships

From the responses it was clear that the male teacher-parent relationships were strained. This may affect the male teachers' performance and hinder the holistic development of the learner, thus there is a need to find ways to improve this relationship. The data collected from all the parents showed that teaching is female-dominated. The teachers and administrators all agreed that there are few male teachers. A3's responses show that men themselves believe it is a female task to teach infants. Based on T5's view, men need to realise that they are equally capable of taking care of children. All the stakeholders should have faith in male ECD teachers as they are qualified to handle ECD learners. T6 said that all teachers followed the same procedures when they executed their duties. He added that all stakeholders have to work hand in hand supporting ECD classes with teaching and learning materials. There were complaints and suspicions, but all the administrators said they were unfounded. P4 confessed that nothing sinister had happened, but she still had fears of having her girl child cleaned by a male teacher. P1 indicated that her fears vanished once she got to know the male teachers. P2 said that her fears settled after she did her own investigation. This implies there is need to investigate all complaints and address them accordingly.

Discussions

Parents Had Negative and Positive Perceptions about the Involvement of Males as ECD Teachers

From the research it is clear that parents cannot choose teachers for their children. A parent has the liberty to choose the school they believe provides the best quality child-care services. Staffing is done by school administrators, usually at the end of the year after enrolment has already been done mid-year. As advised by one parent, it would be prudent for the school administrators to hold orientations for new students together with their parents before schools open and introduce the teacher. This way the parents may

have a chance to make up their minds if they still want their child enrolled. If not, they can look elsewhere, though there is danger of not securing a place for the child during that time. This seems to be the best they can do for parents, as they cannot allow parents to influence the staffing procedure.

It is evident from the research that parents believe male teachers lack maternal instincts. Teaching is a female-dominated profession. In his findings, Drudy (2008) cited that primary school teaching is perceived as a domain of women. It is believed that teaching requires people who are caring and possess inert motherly instincts. Men are considered not to have such maternal instincts, and hence are less nurturing (Cooney and Bittner 2001). One participant in the study indicated that the male teachers can be impatient with the young learners who can be nagging and attention seeking. One might say that although both male and female teachers are qualified, females are deemed to be better than male teachers because of these instincts. Men are generally not accepted in the ECD field. Drudy (2008), Russo and Feder (2001) assert that men in female-dominated professions have to perform stereotypically female tasks and display feminine attributes in order to gain acceptance. According to Mukuna and Mutsotso (2011), this is viewed as a violation of traditional notions of masculinity.

One sensitive reservation that was cited by most parents was child abuse. The parents expressed that they are afraid male teachers might abuse the little ones sexually. In their study, Rice and Goessling (2005) explained that there are few men in ECD due to the perception that men who choose to work with young children are homosexuals and paedophiles. Mukuna and Mutsotso (2011) share similar views; their research findings indicate that men working with children are believed to sexually abuse them. This stigma causes all men to be suspects even if they have not done anything. One parent in this study acknowledged that nothing sinister has happened or been said about the male teachers, but this parent still could not trust them and was uncomfortable with men around young learners, especially girls. Men are also believed to be disciplinarians and hence they might abuse children physically and emotionally. To enforce discipline men might use harsh words or even corporal punishment. One parent in the study indicated that she imagined the teacher beating children. It is, however, evident from this study that although parents have their fears, which cannot be dismissed, some of them argued in favour of male ECD teachers as harmless. One might then agree with one participant who said that most complaints and allegations are unfounded.

Despite the negative findings mentioned above, several positive findings were noted in the study. All ECD teachers were qualified for this job. The school administrators only employed qualified personnel as advised by Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 (Government of Zimbabwe 2005), which states that all staff at ECD centres should be suitably qualified and experienced. Some parents applauded the teachers' skills, knowledge, creativity and enthusiasm. They also commended male teachers for being

active and thus able to handle hyperactive young learners. The participants unanimously agreed that male teachers are active in both indoor and outdoor activities. Some even expressed that male teachers in ECD classes have a calling as teaching such young learners was not viewed as an easy task.

The study indicated that male teachers have characteristics that make them good ECD teachers. Some parents indicated that their negative perceptions about male teachers changed when they became used to their children's teachers. With time, parents realised that male teachers can also be patient, calm and not impulsive. The male teachers displayed good communication skills and excellent rapport with all stakeholders. Mukuna and Mutsotso (2011) and Chiparengé and Saruchera (2016) agree that male teachers communicate well with fathers. They could also outline children's needs on a man-to-man basis. Some parents indicated that men's personal problems interfere with their work to a lesser extent compared with female teachers. Men are also assumed to be able to repress their emotions or problems (Tufan 2018), while it is believed that females suffer from extended hostility. This means that if a female teacher leaves for work angry, learners are likely to suffer as well on that day because of the incident that happened in the teacher's home. It is presumed that this is a rare characteristic in men.

Some male teachers have been commended for excellent class control. Class management is a vital attribute of a teacher. In his study, Tufan (2018) (2017) asserts that male ECD teachers are perceived to be skilled in classroom management and can handle class management issues well. Parents believe that male teachers' firmness contributes to the learners' discipline. However, this might have positive and negative impacts on learners. Children with a firm teacher may not be as easily controlled by any other teacher, especially female teachers, whom they deem soft. They may also grow up to be tough on others later in life. On the other hand, the teacher may become too soft on them in a bid to try to be friendly to them and hence spoil them. These are some of the dangers of being too firm or too soft on learners.

The study reveals that male teachers are role models for both boys and girls. Cameron (2001) says that male teachers were found to be desirable as a source of role modelling, particularly for boys. Boys seem to regard the teacher as their hero. They want to emulate his character traits. One male teacher indicated in the study that he wanted to prove that men are also caring. This is good for learners to know and disproves the perception that men are violent and cannot handle ECD learners. Male teachers may influence the boys' choice of career later in life and may also encourage them to be more humble, gentle, calm, and patient and hopefully to reduce domestic violence. In the study, participants said male teachers are role models and fill the gap of busy fathers or can be a father to the fatherless. However, Grayson (2021) cautioned that having a poor role model could cause significant damage in the classroom. This means that the teacher has a responsibility to be a positive role model.

The Majority of Teachers and Administrators Have Positive Perceptions about the Involvement of Males as ECD Teachers

Teachers and administrators regard male teachers as qualified professionals who know their duties. All ECD teachers are qualified for their job. School administrators have only employed qualified personnel as advised by Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 (Government of Zimbabwe 2005), which states that all staff at ECD centres should be suitably qualified and experienced. Lamb (2000) asserts that male teachers are as good as female teachers. Female teachers view male teachers as equal to them. Male ECD teachers are role models to learners. Zhang (2017) acknowledges that the teacher's gender is of primary concern in ECD, and its impact cannot be ignored. Men's presence helps children develop positive relationships with men. Sanders (2002) says that they help children to develop positive maleness and masculinity. Cameron (2001) states that male teachers were found to be desirable as a source of role modelling, particularly for boys. Boys seem to regard the teacher as their hero. They want to emulate his character traits. Zhao and Zeng (2010) add that the presence of males in ECD allows boys to explore their interests with the help of a man. However, Rentzou and Ziganitidou (2009) cautioned that having a poor role model could cause significant damage in the classroom. This means that the teacher has a responsibility to be a positive role model.

Male Teachers Have More Positive Perceptions about Their Involvement as ECD Teachers

As a result of the historical background of ECD, teaching is characterised by low wages and low status, hence some men think the hard work involved in this field is not rewarded. Stereotypes cause men to look down upon the profession. In spite of all the challenges males face as ECD educators, some men join women in the profession so as to take part in the raising of children. This makes them feel important in children's lives. Wardle (2004) says that men want to receive the same treatment as female ECD teachers and not to be regarded as aggressive oppressors. They want to eradicate all the unfounded allegations about them and prove that they can be as good as their female counterparts or even better. Mukuna (2008) and Mukuna and Mutsotso (2011) also point out that some of the children come from single-parent families or families where parents work for long hours away from home, which denies children a father figure. Therefore, the opportunity of being taught by a male teacher helps to close that gap.

There Is a Need to Find Ways to Improve Male Teacher-Parent Relationships

From the responses it is clear that the male teacher-parent relationship is strained. This may affect the male teacher's performance and hinder the holistic development of the learner, hence there is a need to find ways to improve this relationship. It is necessary to teach parents that teaching is not only the preserve of females. Some parents doubt the qualifications of some male ECD teachers. It is the task of schools to assure parents of the suitability of staff members. There is a need to encourage professionalism and

transparency amongst all staff. All stakeholders need have faith in male ECD teachers as they are qualified personnel. Based on the collected data, complaints and suspicions about male teachers' unsuitability exist, but all administrators say they are unfounded. A parent confessed that nothing sinister had happened to her child, but she still had fears about having her girl child cleaned by a male teacher. This implies that all complaints should be addressed, with unfounded allegations discouraged at all costs.

Conclusions

This study investigated parents' perceptions on the involvement of males as early childhood development teachers in Khami District, Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. A total of 20 participants, who comprised 10 parents, four female teachers, four school administrators and two male teachers, completed online questionnaires and took part in telephone interviews and virtual focus group discussions. The study established the following findings: parents have negative and positive perceptions about the involvement of males as ECD teachers; female teachers and school administrators have more positive perceptions about the involvement of males as ECD teachers; male teachers have positive perceptions about their involvement in ECD classes. Some participants feared that male teachers would abuse the learners and lack innate motherly instincts. Parents unfortunately cannot choose teachers for their learners, but they can choose the school in which to enrol their children. Despite these negative perceptions, several positive perceptions were noted. All male teachers are deemed qualified for their job; males are believed to have special characteristics such as patience and calmness, to mention but a few, required for the care of little ones; they have excellent class management and communication skills, act as role models to young learners, especially boys, and contribute to the development of learners' socio-emotional skills. Despite the positive perceptions that were established, it was found that ECD teachers' gender and societal perceptions about the involvement of males in ECD still cause fears in parents about the involvement of males as ECD teachers. These have a negative impact on the male teacher's performance that hinders the development of the learners. Therefore, there is need to find strategies to promote positive male teacher-parent relationships.

Recommendations

In light of the above discussions, findings and conclusions, this study recommends that school administrators should enlighten all male ECD teachers about the perceptions, complaints and allegations made by parents and advise them accordingly. This should be followed by workshops, seminars and refresher courses for in-service teachers on parents' perceptions on the involvement of males as ECD teachers. School administrators should conscientise parents and staff members on the benefits and challenges of involving males as ECD teachers. They should encourage professionalism and transparency amongst all staff, while at the same time recruiting more male teachers to balance the gender representation amongst staff members. There is a need to educate

parents that teaching is not only the domain of females, but males too can play valuable roles. Perhaps the most important strategy is to correct men's own perceptions about teaching ECD. The parents' complaints should be addressed, but unfounded allegations should be discouraged at all costs. Furthermore, there is a need to involve parents in school activities and invite male volunteers to help in both indoor and outdoor activities. The study's recommendation for further studies is that, since this research was conducted in an urban set up, it would be interesting to have the same study conducted in a rural set up in order to compare the results.

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