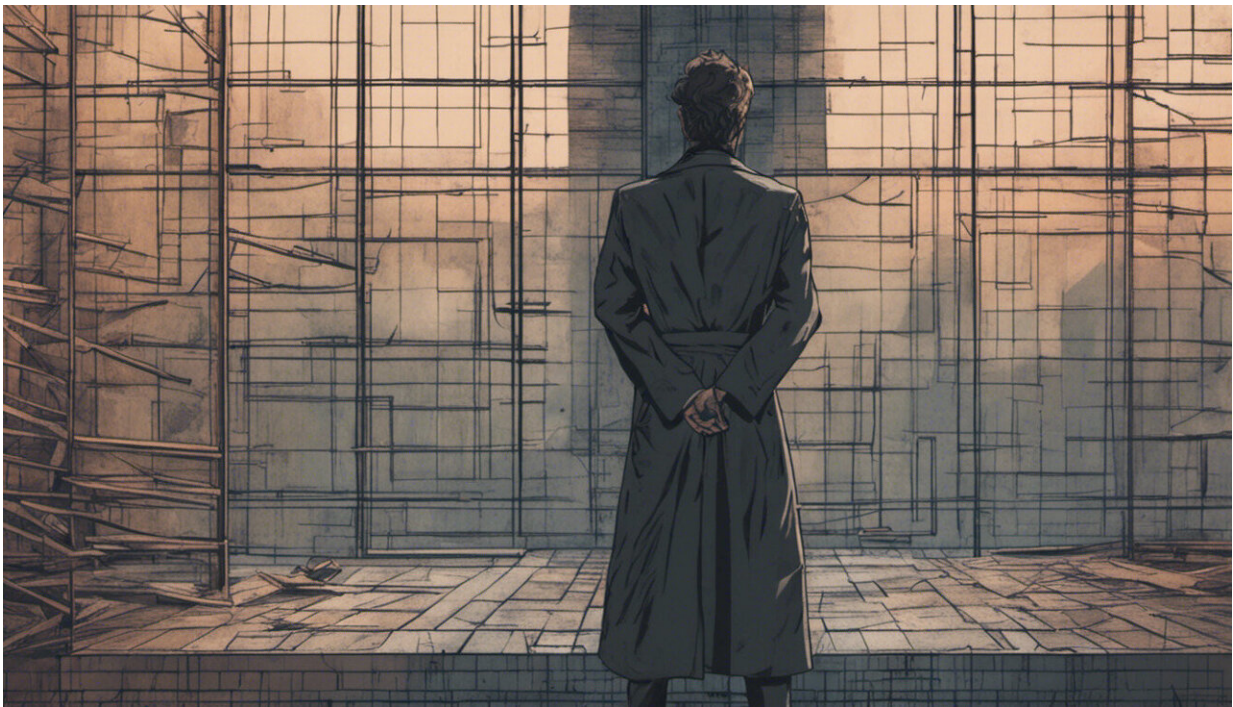


Why having both male and female teachers is a good idea for schools

October 2 2019, by Deevia Bhana, Kevin F. McGrath, Penny Van Bergen and Shaaista Moosa



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In South Africa, [one in five teachers](#) in the foundation phase—roughly from ages 6 to 9—are male. This is consistent with a [global trend](#) that see men being more likely to teach adolescents than young children.

A lack of male teachers for young [children](#) has become the focus of a growing body of research internationally. Typically, this research has examined the experiences of male educators and explanations for their absence.

This work has appeared amid a global [gender](#) equity movement and adjacent to calls for greater female representation in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics and in senior managerial positions.

In South Africa, research focusing on male teachers has emerged alongside [recent calls](#) to increase the involvement of men in the lives of young children. Around 43% of children under the age of 5 live without a biological father. Here, young children's observations of men as caring are particularly limited.

To date, our research has considered how [experiences of childhood](#) are shaped by [gender](#), sexuality, race, class and culture, and affected by poverty, violence, and the [spread of HIV](#). In addition, we've investigated how [interactions and relationships](#) between teachers and students are shaped by gender and behaviour. Together, this work has contributed to understanding child development and the social forces that construct and reinforce "traditional" views of masculinity and femininity.

[In our most recent research](#), we explored how masculinity is constructed and perceived by female and male teachers in the early years of schooling. To better understand why few men teach in the early years of schooling, we investigated the experiences of male teachers and how they were perceived by their female colleagues.

In doing so, we came to better understand why men might avoid this work, but also the reasons why schools should include both female and male teachers.

Stereotypes

For men to choose to work as teachers of children in the early years of schooling, they must first overcome gender barriers.

For example, gender expectations and stereotypes strongly influence why men shy away from teaching—with teaching often viewed as "women's work" and associated with the care and nurturing of young children. Consequently, men who teach young children may have their masculinity [questioned or scrutinized](#), and not be seen as ["real men"](#).

Teaching young children, however, requires a balance of stereotypically feminine and masculine traits: the teacher must be caring, yet authoritative, a listener, and a leader. Schools also benefit when teachers reflect the interests, needs and backgrounds of their students. One important way this can be done is by including both male and female teachers.

To understand how men are perceived in the teaching profession, we spoke to male teachers and their female colleagues.

[Our research found](#) that there were conflicting accounts of men's roles. Some teachers welcomed men, and others strongly condemned associations between men and young children.

Those that thought that men were important in children's lives connected men with stereotypical male roles. They reported an expectation that male teachers should display traditional masculine traits, and be "sportsmen" and "disciplinarians."

In this way, male teachers were seen as socially acceptable when their behavior conformed with pre-existing ideas of men: reproducing the dominant notions of masculine power that position men as being [more](#)

[suitable](#) for management positions.

On a more progressive note, some of our findings show support for male teachers who can show children caring and non-violent ways of being a man. The need for such male teachers stems from a wider societal problem in South Africa.

Why gender diversity matters

In a recent announcement capturing [global attention](#), the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, described the rates of violence against women and children as being similar to [a country at war](#); announcing an emergency action plan to deal with gender-based violence.

As gender scholars, we are greatly concerned about how existing gendered perceptions about men may affect perceptions of male teachers too: particularly if men are uniformly positioned as bad. The fact is that male teachers can provide a source of hope. Indeed, men are not a single group of perpetrators, and some care for children deeply.

In our [recent collaboration with researchers in Australia](#), and focusing on a shortage of male teachers in both countries, we identified additional reasons why [teacher](#) gender diversity is important for children, for classrooms, for schools, and for society.

For young children, male teachers can contribute to children's gender knowledge. This may be particularly important for some children—allowing them to observe men who are non-violent and whose interactions with women are positive. For other children, male teachers may increase their understanding of how to interact with adults who are different to themselves—promoting [positive relationships](#) between men and young children.

For schools, having a diverse workforce of teachers in foundation phase can also enhance [decision making processes](#). People from different backgrounds may see the same problem in different ways, leading to innovative solutions. Workforce diversity has also been linked to [improved performance](#) and [job satisfaction](#).

Diversity

The presence of male teachers in the early year of schooling may help promote gender equitable versions of masculinity. By working in roles that are typically viewed as being more appropriate for women, men can break down the polarized differences that foster gender inequalities.

Much remains to be done in creating a diverse workforce—one which recognizes men and women outside of gender stereotypes.

But in South Africa there is little policy imperative in addressing the missing men in the early years of schooling. For communities to promote positive representations of men, including men at this schooling phase, the focus must be on creating gender harmony and peace.

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