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# Why teach in the Foundation Phase? Motives of males at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa

## Abstract

*Worldwide, male teachers in the Foundation Phase (FP) are a rarity, given the perception that the teaching of younger children is more suited to females than to males. Little research has been conducted in South Africa on the factors that influence men to become Foundation Phase teachers. This study investigated the motives of male student teachers at a university in Johannesburg who had decided to pursue a career as Foundation Phase teachers. The study adopted a theoretical lens based on the Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The study adopted a qualitative approach and an intensive research design, with data collected from semi-structured interviews with seven purposively selected participants. Data were analysed by means of the Factors Influencing Teaching (FIT) choice theory. Three participants were driven by intrinsic motives, stating that they had a passion for teaching young children. The other three were driven by extrinsic motives, stating either that they wanted to address gender stereotypes, or that FP teaching had been their default choice after they had been refused admittance to their preferred course. One participant indicated altruistic motives, borne of personal experience with a family member, empathy and the desire to be a positive male role model.*

*Two recommendations are that schools and initial teacher education institutions develop systems to support males who opt to become FP teachers by making use of a more gender-conscious pedagogy, and that campaigns be run to promote this career option among males.*

**Keywords:** *altruistic motives, external motives, Foundation Phase, intrinsic motives, male teachers,*

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, society has entered an era where gender roles (and indeed gender itself) have become fluid. Whereas in the past, many career choices were determined, at least in part, by gender, career choices now depend far more on personal interests and capabilities. In the light of this shift in societal views and roles, it is worth noting that females still dominate in FP teaching (OECD, 2011). This could be a consequence of the perception that early childhood education may be equated with nurturing, which is still

widely regarded as more a female trait than a male trait (Mashiya, 2014; Ravhuhali *et al.*, 2019). The view ignores the multifaceted nature of both males and females, and possibly overlooks the fact that in early childhood, opportunities for cognitive development are almost as important as a nurturing environment. Males are often not seen as suitable to teach in this phase because of traditional gender stereotypes (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018).

South African studies on males teaching in the FP have shown interesting results. Bhana and Moosa (2016) conducted a study on why male pre-service teachers at a university in KwaZulu-Natal opted not to teach FP learners; their finding was that male participants preferred to teach older learners, because these learners were intellectually more advanced, and because greater status is attached to teaching higher grades than lower grades. Petersen (2014: 1) also explored first-year FP pre-service students' views about males teaching in the FP at a university in Johannesburg, Gauteng. Her findings indicate that males could play an important role in "countering the effects of absentee fathers". Both studies, conducted in different provinces, raise concerns about male FP teachers having to exercise caution around young children because of the high level of sexual violence in South Africa.

International research on male teachers' experiences in the FP notes that many males enjoy working with younger learners, but need mentorship to assist them overcome gender stereotyping (Mistry & Sood, 2013). The current body of literature, both internationally and locally, has provided insights into perceptions and experiences of males teaching in the FP. However, little is known about why males who register for a FP teaching degree opt to do so. This is the gap that this research aims to fill, in order to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about teachers' career choices and motivations. The aim of this research is to investigate the factors that have influenced the decision of men[1] to teach in the FP. It is against this background that this study explores the motives of seven males at a university in Johannesburg to become FP teachers.

## 2. Literature review

Much research has been conducted internationally on the experiences of male teachers in the FP (Warin & Adriany, 2017; Wood & Brownhill, 2018; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). It has been noted that males often feel ashamed and embarrassed about choosing a career path in the FP, because they feel ridiculed by society and under pressure to compete with females (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008). These gender stereotypes are linked to larger sociopolitical discourses about males who work with younger children (Warin & Adriany, 2017; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Male teachers express concerns about low salaries and their need to earn family approval for their career choice (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017). Male FP teachers also need to contend with stereotypical views that they are either homosexual, abnormal or paedophilic (Moosa & Bhana, 2022; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004; Petersen, 2014).

### 2.1 Gender roles and stereotypical characteristics

Family and cultural dynamics strongly tend to reinforce gender roles and decisions, which are often systematically reproduced from one generation to the next (Petersen, 2014; Rohrmann, 2020; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). We know that the way in which members of school management teams have been socialised influences the employment prospects of male FP

1 For the purpose of this study, the term "men" is synonymous with cisgender males, i.e. those who identify with the sex that they were assigned at birth.

teachers (Kagola & Khau, 2020). Traditionally in South Africa, men are seen as providers and protectors, and women are seen as nurturers, since they are the primary caregivers (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). Females are viewed as affectionate, childlike and compassionate, not given to using harsh language, eager to soothe hurt feelings, gentle, sensitive, tender, sympathetic, warm, understanding and loving when it comes to children (Petersen, 2014; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In contrast, male teachers in the FP are stereotyped as sexual predators and paedophiles who may molest children sexually (Mashiya, 2014; Msiza, 2020). Another gender stereotype is that men are strong and dominant, which contradicts the stereotype associated with FP teachers, who are expected to be caring, nurturing and loving (Bhana *et al.*, 2022). These views and expectations lead most male teachers to set their sights on teaching in a different phase. Stereotypical views affect how male FP teachers are perceived and could influence their decision of whether or not to teach in this phase. In addition, because homosexual men are often regarded as feminine, and feminine qualities are associated with teaching in the FP, any man who wishes to teach in the FP may be seen as homosexual (Moosa & Bhana, 2022). This highlights the need to demystify the ideas of masculinity as depicted by various social constructs (Everitt-Penhale & Ratele, 2015). Despite the discourses on gender roles and stereotypical ideas of what defines a man, there are still males who opt to become FP teachers.

The literature has not explicitly explored the motivations of men who decide to teach in this phase, although it abounds with examples of positive and negative perceptions about male involvement in this phase (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Perez, 2019). For example, on the positive side, men are deemed to excel at sports and to be effective disciplinarians (Mashiya, 2014), which is considered at an asset in teaching. There is therefore a perceived improvement in learner behaviour in the FP when a male teacher is present (Petersen, 2014). Furthermore, men are seen to bring "more play, active movement, entertainment, and rough and tumble play" (Mashiya, 2014: 27) to the FP environment. Research has noted that when men enter the FP in schools, they are able to introduce sports coaching where this does not exist (Mashiya, 2014). Males in the FP have also been regarded as a male role presenting "alternative, non-violent and caring masculinities" (Moosa & Bhana, 2019: 888). Another perceived positive trait of male teachers in the FP is that learners seem to like them; they exhibit high levels of curiosity, an eagerness to participate in class, and a desire to spend time with their teacher (Mashiya, 2014).

Negative perceptions include the idea that men working in this phase are "abnormal" or homosexual, or want to be like women (Mills *et al*, 2004). The motives of men in early childhood education are often questioned (Mills *et al*, 2004) and, as such, male FP teachers often come under suspicion and scrutiny (Msiza, 2020). In South Africa, men are often seen as a threat to young children, a result of increasingly high levels of violence against women and children in the country. Hence, the perception has arisen that children are not safe around male teachers (Petersen, 2014). Attitudes from both teachers and outside stakeholders towards male teachers are often apprehensive and negative, with some teachers outright making fun of them (Mashiya, 2014). As a result, male teachers often feel isolated, unwelcome and uncomfortable discussing issues with female teachers (Mashiya, 2014). For many, there is the possibility of losing friendships due to their unheard-of career choice (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). It clear that gendered views and practices about teaching in the FP, influenced by larger sociopolitical discourse, affect male teachers (Warin & Adriany, 2017).

Given the level of overt and covert opposition to males as Foundation Phase teachers, it was thought pertinent to investigate the factors that influence young men to choose to teach in this phase.

## 3. Theoretical framework

The Expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) formed the theoretical framework for this research. According to this theory, individuals' behaviour is motivated by the expectations associated with their choices as well as by the importance, usefulness, desirability or worth that they ascribe to the outcome of their behaviour, i.e. its value to them. The theory states that people consciously consider and weigh the expected costs and benefits of a chosen course of action, and will choose behaviours that align with their expectations and the value they ascribe to the expected rewards of the behaviour. Whether intrinsically, altruistically or extrinsically motivated, people are most likely to carry out behaviours that they believe will lead to valued, desired outcomes. Both expectations and values are formed by one's past experiences and the stereotyped beliefs that one holds (Eccles, Adler & Meece, 1984). As such, this paper argues that individuals' decision to teach in the FP are linked to three basic categories of motivation: intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic motives (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Moran *et al.*, 2001). Each of these categories is discussed below.

Intrinsic values are regarded as the foremost motive for the choice to become a teacher (Ashby *et al.*, 2008). Intrinsic motives include personal interest, experience and intellectual fulfilment (Moran *et al.*, 2001; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992). They also include the desire to work with children and make a positive contribution to their lives as a result of their own positive personal, teaching and learning experiences (Watt *et al.*, 2012). Individuals who are intrinsically motivated tend to be more committed to the teaching profession than those who are not intrinsically motivated (Wang & Fwu, 2001). Those who are intrinsically motivated to teach do so because teaching aligns with their personal expectations and values.

Altruistic motives are similar to intrinsic motives, but are more other-centred; the person is drawn to the teaching profession because of the desire to have a positive impact on children's futures and to make a social contribution within the school context (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Teachers who are motivated by altruistic factors view teaching as an imperative task that focuses on the public good (Roness, 2011; Sinclair, 2008) and they aspire to be part of the growth and development of those in their care (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Moran *et al.*, 2001). Altruistic motives are closely linked to one's past experiences.

Extrinsic motives for teaching are linked to external factors and rewards such as salary, relatively lengthy holidays and status (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Moran *et al.*, 2001; Roness, 2011). Another external motive is the fact that in some cases, individuals are unable to study their first career choice and, fearing not attaining any qualification at all, opt for any course of study that will admit them, often teaching. In general, external motives are aligned to the personal, financial, social and psychological benefits and value of becoming a teacher.

The expectation-value theory creates a framework for a nuanced understanding and explanation of males' motives for becoming FP teachers. The framework opens up opportunities for discussing and interpreting the findings linked to male FP teachers' motives.

## 4. Research methodology

This study used an interpretivist paradigm in order to make sense of individual meanings and contributions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) with regard to being male FP teachers. In addition, an intensive research design and qualitative phenomenological method were used to interpret the raw data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The overall research question that guided this research was: What motivates males to study to become FP teachers at a university in Johannesburg?

This study made use of purposive sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The sample comprised seven purposively selected male FP preservice teachers studying at a public urban university in Johannesburg, South Africa. We were able to find only seven male FP pre-service teachers at the research site because of the scarcity of males specialising in this phase. All seven were in their 20s or 30s, as shown in Table 1. The participants' relative youth meant that they had limited experience of their chosen field and possibly a lower level of self-knowledge than older participants might have had. For this reason, the findings are not generalisable, but do provide some insight into a field in which there has been limited research.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews, which allow for in-depth engagement with participants' perspectives and experiences (Patton, 1990). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) conducted in light of the expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) enabled us to identify themes and patterns in the data, with themes identified by names, symbols or descriptive words (Saldana, 2009). Inductive coding and categorising were used to analyse the data. This kind of analysis yields insight into what the data indicate, enabling the researcher to define and redefine interpretations (Basit, 2003). Lincoln and Guba's model (1985: 290-300) was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. All ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld in this study.

## 5. Findings and discussion

Table 1 shows the pseudonyms and ages of participants, along with the kinds of motivation that had caused them to study FP teaching.

**Table 1:** Participants' pseudonyms, ages and motives for studying FP teaching

| Participant (Pseudonyms have been used) | Age | Intrinsic factors | Altruistic factors | Extrinsic factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thato | 25-30 | X | | |
| John | 25-30 | X | | |
| Sipho | 25-30 | | X | |
| Mpho | 36-40 | | | X |
| Lucky | 20-24 | | | X |
| Bongani | 25-30 | X | | |
| Siyabonga | 20-24 | | | X |

Three participants decided to become Foundation Phase teachers upon completion of Grade 12, at the age of 18 or 19. Two decided in their 20s (21 and 23); one made the decision at the age of 34; and one did not make the decision by himself, as someone else had completed the university application form on his behalf. The other six made the decision soon after matriculating. Of the seven, three fell into FP teaching for reasons beyond their control – two

could not get into their first choice of study, and one appeared to have had the decision made for him by a family member. We find this interesting, as it indicates that for the majority of participants (four of seven), becoming a FP teacher was their first career choice.

Altruistic factors were the least-cited reason for participants' decisions, with only one citing altruistic reasons. Sipho said that he wanted to assist young children with barriers to learning because of his personal experiences with a family member. It was interesting to find that participants' motives did not intersect; all seven cited only one factor that had motivated their decision, whether intrinsic, extrinsic or altruistic. Thato, John and Bongani were motivated by intrinsic factors, in that they saw themselves as "*best suited*" to being FP teachers because of their "*love [for] teaching*" and "*working with kids*". Siyabonga, Lucky and Mpho were motivated by extrinsic factors. Siyabonga "*couldn't get into the course*" he wanted, Lucky felt that there is "an under representation of the male gender in this phase", while Mpho stated that "*young boys need role models*" and that this was a challenge, because "*there's an under- representation of the male[s]*" in the FP. He believed that he was able to make a difference in the lives of male learners in particular.

Three themes were uncovered in the findings that explain why the participants had chosen to teach in the FP: i) their passion to teach young children; ii) their personal experiences, which had given them empathy and a desire to be good role models; and iii) the desire to challenge gender stereotypes.

Each is discussed below with reference to intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic motives, and findings in the literature.

## 5.1 A passion to teach young children

Three participants (Thato, John and Bongani) cited intrinsic factors with regard to their decision to become FP teachers. These included having a love for working with young children, and a recognition that they were best suited to teaching younger children. The participants stated,

> *I thought I want to become a teacher and I think I'm gonna be best suited in the Foundation Phase … you think you want to become a Foundation Phase male teacher because you're thinking you are gonna be best suited there but not because I'm a man … I didn't think I was gonna change the world. So it was basically based on my needs and the needs I think I could pass down* (Thato).

> *I have not thought of why I wanted to become* [a FP teacher]. *I just applied and wanted to become a teacher in that phase. I didn't see myself teaching intermediate or FET. Just like any other person who's applying to become an FET teacher because, some people they say, "Oh, because I love History or I wanna teach Life Science or I wanna teach Geography." I just wanted to become a male Foundation Phase teacher because I felt in that time I'll be best suited in that phase* (John).

> *I love working with kids and … I love teaching ... I do work with kids at home … I have two nephews who I help them out with the schoolwork and everything* (Bongani).

These participants felt that their dispositions and personalities, along with their personal "*needs*" made them "*best suited*" to teaching in the FP. It can be argued that the character traits that people believe they possess affect their career choices, since people will often choose professions which they feel they are best suited to (Bontempo & Digman, 1985). These participants held a strong view that they would be effective FP teachers because of the various qualities they possessed, which they linked to qualities that a FP teacher requires.

These participants' personal interests and desire to help younger children, as highlighted by Moran *et al*. (2001) and Brookhart and Freeman (1992), are what motivated them to become FP teachers. This finding is contrary to that of Petersen and Petker (2011), whose study reported that participants chose this field because of the "short working days and regular long holidays".

## 5.2 Personal experiences, empathy and desire to be positive male role models

Sipho's motivation to become a FP teacher, strongly influenced by personal experiences with a family member, may be regarded as altruistic. Altruistic factors may be influenced by personal experiences, which give one insight into the struggles of others and the desire to help them. Sipho had witnessed the challenges experienced by his sister with a child who was "*slow*", and had also been called on to assist the child with his academic needs. These personal experiences led him to believe that young boys need more male role models at schools. Sipho stated:

> *My sister gave birth to a baby … and then the doctor said there were going to be complications … We took him to crèches … and he was rejected by most of them … because he is slow and because they couldn't handle him. So he became rejected by the system. I decided I'm gonna come into the system and try and change that, because I felt like there's so many other kids out there that we do not know of that are going through the same thing* (Sipho).

The finding is contrary to that of Wolhuter *et al*.'s (2012) study in South Africa that reports that male teachers are motivated by family, religion, the education institution, teaching practice or friends. Of interest to us was how Sipho's personal experience had steered him in the direction of FP teaching. Sipho was motivated by the desire to make a meaningful difference in the lives of younger children and in that way to contribute to society (Watt & Richardson, 2007). He especially wanted to contribute positively to the lives of parents who struggled to place their children in schools because of the children's learning barriers, a desire that might not have taken root, had it not been for his personal experiences.

## 5.3 The desire to challenge gender stereotypes

Three participants (Mpho, Lucky and Siyabonga) indicated that extrinsic factors had contributed to their decision to become FP teachers. These factors included an under-representation of male teachers in the FP and the desire the challenge gender stereotypes. For these participants, being a male FP provided them with a measure of status (Roness, 2011) since, as male teachers in the FP, they would be seen as role models. Extrinsic factors included the fact that two participants (Siyabonga and Lucky) had registered as FP teachers as a result of being unable to register for their first choice of study.

Mpho said:

> *It's because there's an under representation of the male gender in this phase …* [males] *don't want to come in … maybe young boys need role models that they can look up to …* (Mpho).

Mpho chose to teach in the FP because he wanted to be a "*role model for the children*". He further explained that another factor that influenced his decision was his awareness that there was "*an under representation of the male gender in this phase*" and that he wanted to change this.

Participants noted that learners did not have a problem with their being male. Lucky said,

> *The learners have surprisingly warmed up to me, and it seems as if I connect with them more easily. It seems as if they are enjoying having a male figure in their classroom.* (Lucky).

Siyabonga noted that he was "*respected by the learners and teachers*" and went on to say,

> *The children love male teachers. They see role models before they can see a teacher in a male teacher. As an individual, I have also grown to accept and understand the social issues that children bring into our classrooms* (Siyabonga).

These findings indicate that despite the various stereotypical views that society and female teachers have about FP male teachers (see Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Moosa & Bhana, 2022), the learners themselves do not have anything against them and in fact enjoy having male teachers. This finding aligns with the call by Everitt-Penhale and Ratele (2015) to debunk the myths of traditional masculinity, a social construct that is currently widely under scrutiny.

Interestingly, Siyabonga, whose first choice had been to study something else, expressed a desire to change the status quo in the profession. He said,

> *Like many other people I couldn't get into the course I wanted, so teaching was the next best thing and I chose the Foundation Phase because I don't get along with teens so well* (Siyabonga).

Lucky indicated some ambiguity about his career choice, stating,

> *I haven't thought about ... I don't even know why I became a male Foundation Phase teacher. I don't know. I was quite naïve about the issue. I actually thought that there was actually more male Foundation Phase teachers out there. So I had not planned to do teaching* (Lucky).

Of the three participants for whom FP teaching was not the first choice of study, Siyabonga mentioned that he wanted to do engineering, but someone else had decided that he should become a FP teacher. Mpho indicated that he "*did not get into the course*" he originally applied for, and that teaching was his second option. Lucky stated that he wanted to do law, but did not meet the university requirements to do so. Since they could not pursue their first options, these participants were studying to become FP teachers by "default". It is worth noting, though, that Foundation Phase teaching was their second and not their third or fourth choice, which suggests that it may have been high on their list of options.

The finding that FP teaching was not the first choice for three participants is supported by Petersen and Petker (2011), who indicate that for most males, teaching children is a default or "last resort" option, and sometimes pursued more in order to get a qualification than indicative of a passion to teach. However, the current findings add nuance to this view, in that all participants had found reasons to value the choice, with four of the seven citing intrinsic or altruistic motivations. This concurs with Abbott, Dallat and McClunes' (2001) study, which reports that participants were motivated by intrinsic and altruistic factors.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, an equal number of participants (three each) were motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with one participant motivated by altruistic factors. Intrinsic motives included a passion for teaching young children, while extrinsic motives included the desire to address gender stereotypes, and the fact that teaching had been a default option rather than a first choice. The altruistic factors that motivated one student were empathy borne of personal experiences, and the desire to be a role model to children in need of positive male role models.

All participants identified only one motivator, whether intrinsic, extrinsic or altruistic, as influential in their decision to become FP teachers. Of interest is that so few were motivated by altruistic factors such as empathy, or the desire to alleviate suffering, make a change in the lives of learners, or contribute to society. Most were motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

The findings differ from those of the Author (2020), whose earlier study on why first-year students (both males and females) opt to become teachers, found that over 60% of participants were driven by altruistic factors, and a minority by intrinsic factors (17%). That study was conducted at the same university as the current study among students of all phases. The difference might suggest that male FP students have different motives for becoming teachers than intermediate and senior FET phase students. The findings from this study suggest that male teachers have more intrinsic and extrinsic motivations than altruistic ones. In addition to this, our findings also indicate that three participants opted to become Foundation Phase teachers as a default career as they were not accepted at university for their first career choice. The finding that at least some of this small sample had chosen teaching as a default option rather than a first choice is not uncommon; several studies note the same finding (see Dison, Shalem & Langsford, 2019; Mkumbo, 2012; Moosa, 2020). According to Lassibille and Navarro Gómez (2008), students who select teaching as a default or “fall-back” career are unlikely to remain in the profession once they qualify. It is possible that the participants in this category in the current study will fail to complete the degree, as they may not be fully aware of the challenges and demands of teaching in this phase, and may lack the necessary passion to work with younger learners. On the other hand, it is also possible that the participant motivated by altruistic factors could end up feeling despondent by the education system and the lack of support that educators encounter in South Africa on a daily basis (Chireshe & Shumba, 2011; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). This is particularly the case for learners with barriers to learning and their parents, the aspect that interested this student. His expectation that teaching would enable him to make a difference in the lives of such learners might not be fully realised because of the extensive and complex demands of the profession.

This suggests that the three participants motivated by intrinsic factors may have had the most realistic view of what it takes to be a male teacher in the FP, and sufficient ongoing motivation to persist in the profession. These three participants were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and believed that they possessed the personal characteristics that suited them to working in this phase. This suggests that they had thought carefully about what it means to be a FP teacher, and had combined this knowledge with self-knowledge, to arrive at a decision that was more likely to last than those motivated by altruistic or extrinsic factors.

## 7. Implications of this study

This study has revealed the factors that motivated seven males to become FP teachers. An understanding of male students' motives for becoming FP teachers could inform a more focused recruitment strategy by initial teacher education institutions and the Department of Basic Education. The study also highlights the possible ill-preparedness of some young people in South Africa with regard to the demands of various careers, especially teaching, as well as the need for appropriate career counselling. The Department of Basic Education and initial teacher education institutions should implement campaigns to encourage males to become FP teachers, showing the value of and need for good male role models to children in their early years. Such campaigns would expose more males to the possibility of FP teaching as a viable career and would normalise this career choice for males. It might also go some way to inculcate a greater appreciation for the needs of the developing child among South African males.

## 8. Limitations of the study

One obvious limitation of this study was the small sample size, mostly a result of the fact that very few males were enrolled to become FP at this particular university in Johannesburg. The limitation was addressed by conducting in-depth interviews with participants about their personal decision to become FP teachers.

## 9. Recommendations for future research

It is our recommendation that similar studies be conducted at other initial education institutions with male FP preservice teachers to understand their motives in pursuing a career in FP education. More research might also be conducted on female teachers' and parents' views on male FP teachers, along with the views of learners.

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