

# Investigating Gender Disparity between Female and Male Heads of Department (Infant) in Primary Schools in Botswana: The Perspectives of Primary Deputy School Heads

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**Abstract-** There are over seven hundred government primary schools in Botswana. In these schools, one of the managerial posts is Head of Department (Infant), for which the incumbents are responsible for supervising lower classes, of young children between five and eight years old. Despite the fact that these promotional positions are advertised for all qualifying teachers in the country, both female and male, the position is dominated by females. This is despite the definition by International Labour Office (2000) that gender equity means fairness of treatment for women and men including treatment of opportunities. It is in this regard that this research sought the views of both female and male primary deputy school heads in their final year of an undergraduate degree why the position of HOD (Infant) is dominated by females. Data were collected through participants' responses to a semi-structured questionnaire and analysed using a thematic approach. Consistent with the literature, the findings revealed a range of reasons including traditional perceptions about the role of women in child upbringing, as to why the position is dominated by women, with an insignificant number of men holding the position.

**Index Terms-** Head of department Infant, Deputy School Head, Early Childhood Education, Gender disparity.

## I. BACKGROUND

Under representation of men in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has become a topical issue for debate internationally (Yang, 2013). The literature on ECE shows that it is traditionally a profession mainly dominated by women. There is evidence of such under representation in different countries such as Canada with male teachers representing 3.4% of the ECE teachers, and 2% each in both New Zealand and USA. For the rest of Europe the representation is rated at 1.5%, except for Denmark and Norway with 7.6% and 11% respectively (Besnard & Letarte, 2017).

Africa is not an exception as the percentage of the male teachers in early childhood education is also very low in comparison to female counterparts. For instance, a study on

gender divides in Early Childhood teacher education in South Africa reveals low representation of men in ECE (Mashiya, Kok, Luthuli, Xulu & Mtshali, 2016).

Different reasons have been advanced in the literature, which include cultural factors and the role of women in childrearing. One stereotype classification is that of "women as more suited to raising children and thus teaching in the early grades" (Petersen, 2014, p. 3). Others describe the role of ECE teachers as that of 'nannies' and 'caregivers,' mainly associated with society's stereotypes of ECE as a woman's role and not that of a man (Petersen & Petker, 2011). In light of this over representation of women in ECE, this study sought the views of female and male deputy school heads regarding disparity between women and man holding the position of Head of Department (Infant) in primary schools in Botswana.

## II. PURPOSE OF STUDY

To explore participants' views about the disparity between men and women in the position of Head of Department (Infant) in primary schools in Botswana

## III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are participants' views about disparity of men and women in the position of Head of Department (Infant)?

What do the participants perceive as the duties of HOD (Infant)?

## IV. METHOD

Participants were thirty-nine deputy primary school heads in their final year undergraduate degree of Bachelor of Educational Leadership and Management (BELM). It was important to seek the views of this group because as heads of academic they worked very closely with HODs (Infant) in a broad range of curriculum matters, including school-based professional development. Questionnaires were issued to all the thirty-nine

participants who comprised twenty-three female deputy school heads and sixteen male deputies. Only six of the female deputies were previously Heads of Department (Infant), while none of their male deputy school heads held this position. Thirty-eight participants completed and returned the questionnaire with only one not returned.

## V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the theory proposed by Acker called Theory of Gendered Organizations (Acker, 1990, 1992). Basing on the idea that gender is socially constructed, Acker (1990) observed that organizations as part of the society are gendered meaning that norms and practices defining men and women stereotypical persist (Mastracci & Arreol, 2016). In addition, Britton, (2000) advance that gendered organizations implies that they are “ defined, conceptualized and structured in terms of a distinction between masculinity and femininity and will thus inevitably reproduce gendered differences,”( p.419). Thus, the extent to which ‘gendered characteristics are valued and evaluated in turn results in inequalities. The theory of gendered organization first mentioned by Kanter (1977, 2007) was used to interpret inequalities between women and men in the work places. These inequalities that include women’s lack of advancement were attributed to be resulting on the hierarchical situation of women in society and organizations. According to Mastracci and Arreol, (2016) Acker revolutionized Kanter’s thought, by observing that “rules and rituals internal to the organization produce and reproduce disparities between women and men” (p, 137). In addition based on the gendered societal norms about traditional divisions of labour, Acker (2006) argues that such norms continue to be seen in occupational fields and organizations as dictating who gets hired, promoted, and rewarded in the workplace.

The theory of gendered organizations is relevant in this study as Early childhood Education is generally a gendered field. Traditionally child care, care work and nurturing are associated with women and therefore are a female’s domain. Studies describe gendered occupational fields as those fields with a significant skew to the gender distribution of the employees (Kanter, 1977; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Sargent, 2005). According to Sargent (2005) the work in such fields is “typically imbued with gendered meanings and defined in gendered terms” (p. 251).

Low representation of males in early childhood education has generally been observed internationally (Peeters, 2007; Sargent, 2005; Yang, 2013). Studies that have paid attention to low representation of males in ECE argue that the field is considered as an extension of baby care which traditionally a woman’s role. This role is considered as work that women do naturally and intrinsically better (Peeters, 2007). Peeters (2007) examined what could be done to increase the employment of men in ECE. The findings revealed that the role of males in ECE in Europe is still undervalued by society hence the work is less inspiring to men.

In another study by Peeters (2007) an observation made about the low persisting gender disparity in ECE occupation is that the work is lowly paid and is still highly associated with women. For instance, when women consider taking up male dominated jobs, it is mostly because the occupations have a high pay and have opportunities for advancement. Peeters (2007) argues that men

who take up ECE jobs would therefore be sacrificing in terms of pay and status. Furthermore, are the potential reservations about their masculinity and suitability for the job. As noted by Sargent (2005), in some instances, when men break the social taboo and do child care work, they implicitly attract negative labels such as feminine, homosexuals or pedophiles. In addition, Sargent, (2005) indicate that Early childhood Education is therefore viewed a feminine job, or ‘framed through the metaphor of motherhood, as such men cannot fit this metaphor while simultaneously living up to expectations of hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood’(p. 255).

## VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nurturing children is viewed as naturally a women’s job (Sargent, 2005). Female predominance in teaching is a global phenomenon (OECD, 2005), with percentage of women highest at level of ECE (Drudy, 2008). Evidence of this is the 2010/2011 statistics on Kindergarten in Hong Kong that revealed that there were only 126 male teachers and 10,328 females in ECE (Education Bureau, 2012). Such gender imbalances in teaching are a major concern for governments in many countries (OECD, 2005).

A study by Ho and Lam (2014) in China reveal societal divergent views whether kindergartens should also employ male teachers, with others maintaining that taking care of young children is only suitable for females, as it relates to a mother’s role. The same study shows that some in Chinese society believe that naturally, men are breadwinners while women are homemakers. This saying has been deeply rooted in societies where men play a dominant role in many aspects of life. It would seem that culture plays a major role in defining masculinity and femininity in a social context.

Sumsion (2000) argues that where there has been lack of male teachers as role models, boys tend to be weak and timid with some of them showing the tendency of being feminine. The implication is that male role models are important for the personality of children. Mac Naughton and Newman (2001) therefore make a case for the need for male participation in ECE. They suggest males’ involvement in ECE not only to provide children with role models but also to cultivate the modern concept of gender roles. According to Yang (2013), with active participation of male teachers, children not only get to fulfil the need for physical exercise but also the need for psychological development.

The literature on ECE provides possible perspectives regarding potential initiatives to attract more males to early childhood education. Some point out that lack of men is a result of inappropriate career guidance and information, as well as societal prejudice and narrow-minded perceptions that early childhood education is a female profession and men are not able to care for young children. This leads men to think that they are not welcomed to ECE and that entry into the profession will be difficult for them (Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009). Therefore, to overcome male teachers’ low participation in ECE, changes are required in deeply rooted institutional and management practices. This would entail among other things, the provision of better career prospects and some improvement in the professional status of kindergarten teachers (Ho & Lam, 2014). Other suggestions

aimed at attracting men include incentive grants to ECE services, provision of scholarships, and effective use of media campaigns (Farquhar, 2012; Yang, 2013).

## VII. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings answered all the three research questions and captured participants' views which were in three categories. These were the perspectives of female and male deputy school heads without any previous experience as HoD (Infant), and female deputy heads with previous experience as HoD (Infant).

### **Disparity between female and male Heads of Department (Infant): The perceptions of female and male primary deputy school heads**

Divergent perspectives were given to justify why the position of head of department attracted mainly women and few men. All deputy school heads were aware that the position of head of department (Infant) was mainly held by women, with all of them indicating that they came from schools where no man held this position. As noted by Yang (2013), under representation of men in early childhood education has also become an issue of concern in Botswana. They also unanimously agreed that advertisements for the post were not gender biased as they were open to all members of the teaching staff.

Participants indicated that, the overall role of HoD (Infant) is to supervise early childhood education classes, and that as part of their responsibility they organized "Breakthrough" workshops for all infant teachers, including newly appointed one. They are also expected to teach infant classes and help infant class teachers whenever they encountered difficulties.

### **Female deputy school heads' views about potential causes of the disparity**

Female primary deputy school heads advanced divergent views regarding the dominance of women in the position of head of department (Infant). Their perceptions were mainly on account of the traditional role of women in respect of children upbringing in comparison to men. For instance, one participant stated: "Women are too close to young learners. They can easily handle young ones as compared to men. Women are more patient with children." Another one maintained: "Mostly women are more close to children than men. They are easily able to connect with mothers. Children feel more comfortable with women than men." Participants' comments are consistent with Peeters (2007) view of the women's role being traditionally perceived as an extension of baby care

There were other comments which were raised with specific reference to children learning such as: "Men believe that they are the best in upper classes. So normally they believe that women are better when dealing with young learners. "Similar statements were made as follows: "Most women know how to handle small children in comparison to men and that is why most of them teach lower classes." "Most of the women train for early childhood methods of teaching. Lady teachers can stand the mess of young learners." The literature also reveals high percentages of women teachers at infant level in different countries (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). Women were also painted as people who are more loving as compared to their male counterparts. One participant pointed out that, "females have motherly love and know how to

handle infants," while another one argued that, "women by nature have the zeal and motherly love of dealing with children."

### **Perspectives of female primary deputy school heads with previous experience as HoD (Infant)**

The views of female primary deputy school heads with previous experience as HoD (Infant) were also sought, and they also gave different possible reasons. However their views regarding this trend did not differ much from those articulated by deputies with no experience of heading department at infant level. The traditional perceptions of linking child upbringing also emerged strongly, with strong sentiments that suggested that the tender age of children growth, is traditionally mainly a responsibility of women. One participant argued that, "there is a believe that ladies have an upper hand in handling children and children have fear towards men," while another indicated that "women are the ones who raise kids from a tender age, so they are very close to the hearts of infants."

Further emphasising the sentimental relationship that makes women want to work with children, some participants described women as "motherly to young children" and that "they have love and care for young ones." They argued that it is against this background "that women usually teach lower standards than men, and men usually teach upper classes." Men were described as "not as patient as women when it comes to nurturing of children" and that "the post is more entitled for taking care of young ones and that is why men feel they cannot afford to do that." "The bottom line" according to one participant is that "women are able to cope with situations at lower classes." These stereotypes by participants about the role of women are also revealed in the literature (Petersen & Petker, 2011).

### **Male deputy school heads perspectives about women's dominance of the position of HoD (Infant)**

Male deputies also expressed views about the dominance of the position of HoD (Infant) by females. They expressed similar sentiments to those of their female counterparts. This includes strong perceptions about the traditional role of women in the development of the child as represented by the comment that, "females understand child development much better than males because it's an inborn skill." Another commented that, "this may be by virtue of females being child bearers by nature and have the skills of child caring as compared to males." They also credit women for love towards children which makes them perfect candidates for the position of HoD (Infant) in comparison to men. One of the participants who held this view said; "They have the patience and love to deal with young ones. They love to teach lower classes which make it easier for them to be recommended for the post."

Qualities of women's as more caring and loving compared to men are implied in the following participant's comments: "HoD Infant posts attract more women because at primary school infant classes that is, standard 1 to 3 are mostly taught by women. Women can handle small children than men and the department ends up being dominated by women, hence they are better qualified for the post of HoD Infant." There was one participant whose comments seemed to undermine the intellectual capacity of women to teach higher classes as reflected thus; "Females like lower classes. The content is much easier to handle so women do

not always go for challenging material. They think children like them because they equate them to their mothers.” The men express mainly traditional perceptions about the role women in society (Peeters, 2007; Petersen & Petker, 2011).

#### **What can be done to attract more men to the post**

Participants considered the role of men in early childhood education as very significant. This is also strongly recommended in the literature (Mac Naughton & Newman, 2001). When participants' views were sought regarding potential initiatives to attract men to the position of head of department (Infant), they gave divergent responses. Female deputies' suggestions included, training, introduction of an allowance and targeted advertisement. Several comments were captured that represented views on training. For instance, one participant commented: “Train them on handling infant classes.” Another one stated: “Develop them through seminars, showing them that can do the job despite their sex.”

Those who were for some incentives to attract men to apply for the post made such comments as: “Attach an incentive for teaching infant classes,” and “Attach allowances to the post.” The literature also makes reference to high paying jobs that attract men in comparison to low pay in early childhood education (Peeters, 2007). There was a participant who pointed out that, “once in a while the advertisement of the post should be specifically for men only.” It was also suggested that men should be assured that teacher aides will be provided “to help with nursing of the children.”

The views of male deputy school heads bore similarities to those of their female counterparts. They emphasised the need for training to help men appreciate that they can also handle infants and that handling children at any level was a responsibility of all regardless of gender. Comments such as “suitable training even at social gatherings levels to expose men to dealing with infants,” and “specific training for men is needed during teacher preparation programme,” capture men's views about training. There were other male participants who also commented about the need for the introduction of incentives. This category of participants associated handling of infants with extra work that required them to be for such extra burden, with one stating that, “incentives such as allowance should be introduced to cater for extra work” while another one called such responsibility “extra job that calls for government to pay more.” It is expected that with such interventions more men could be motivated to apply for the post of HoD (Infant), and as emphasised in the literature, and become role models for children (Sumsion, 2000)

#### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The findings show that previous advertisements for the position of head of department (Infant) was not gender biased and that participants were aware that the position was mainly dominated by women. Participants advanced different reasons why women mainly held the position in comparison to man, and most of such reasons were based on traditionally held perceptions in society regarding women's role in child development.

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