

The Influence of Preschool Teachers' Gender on Strategies to Scaffold Socio-Emotional Competence (SEC) in Children in Eldoret Town, Kenya

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Abstract

Gender equality is a recurring theme in international conventions on education and social development. Relatively, little information exists regarding gender differences among teachers and their strategies to scaffold Socio-Emotional Competence (SEC) in preschool children. The information available has so far provided a mixed picture with some studies mainly focusing on the influence of teachers' gender on children's achievement. Some of these studies show that women have greater influence on children's achievement, while others find no significant differences. This mixed methods study provides supplementary evidence on the influence of teachers' gender on children's achievement, but specifically, on SEC which is non-cognitive. From a total of 98 public and private preschools in Eldoret town, purposive sampling was used to select 301 preschool teachers out of which 6 participated in an interview while 2 classrooms were placed under observation. From these data, despite women being nurturers, there was no statistical significant influence of gender on strategies used by preschool teachers to scaffold SEC in children. Both men and women used the same strategies to scaffold SEC in children and this has been explored in detail. Efforts should be made to encourage preschool teachers regardless of their gender to intentionally scaffold SEC in children.

Key words: Socio-Emotional Competence, Strategies, Preschool teachers, Teachers' gender.

INTRODUCTION

Having both male and female teachers has been recognised as one of the factors that provide a good learning climate for holistic child development according to the Dakar framework for Action (2000) document. Among the principles of Dakar Framework was the recognition of the need for a beneficial learning climate for a holistic development of the child. However, statistics have indicated that most preschools all over the world have low numbers of male teachers. In the US for instance, males are only 3%; in Turkey 7%; in Sweden, 6%; in Germany it's 4% and in Kenya, less than 1% (Gakii, 2003; Ministry of Education of Kenya, 2011; Peeters, 2007; Republic of Kenya, 2012; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelson, 2005; UNESCO, 2006). Although not in tandem with educational and development policies, many reasons have been advanced for these disparities.

According to Farquhar, (1997), culture is one of the reasons that have been given for having more female than male preschool teachers, since in many cultures child care is the preserve of females. In another study, Ngure, (2014) and Waitthaka, (2002) cite lack of adequate remuneration, lack of promotional opportunities and lack of public acceptance as some of the reasons for low number of males in preschool teaching. According to Coone and Bittner, (2001) the low number of males in preschool could be due to the fact that they felt uncomfortable and isolated in their teaching career. Male preschool teachers have also been reported as facing enormous challenges including being seen as potential sexual abusers, being labelled as homosexuals and not being perceived as real men, not to mention that they also felt that their women counterparts did not support them (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Drudy, 2008; Farquhar, 1997; Gushman, 2005). Moreover, due to recurring events in which young children are raped, many parents have an exaggerated suspicion of paedophilia. This has led to some parents not entrusting male teachers with their children, making preschool establishments to prefer female over male teachers (Mashiya *et al.*, 2015).

Few studies have been done to assess the influence of preschool teachers' gender on the strategies that are used to scaffold SEC in children. A study by Kalsen, (2012) observes that lack of many comparative studies in female dominated occupation like preschool teaching makes it difficult to interpret men's experiences. In his study, Ngure, (2014), on dynamics of gender in Kenyan preschools for example, found disparity among male and female teachers of young children. Female teachers were more caring and interacted more with children than their male counterparts. Inline with these observations, Ngure recommends that children need care and attention from both male and female caregivers to enhance growth and development. Male preschool teachers need to be encouraged to give more care to the children without reservation. This is consistent with Yoshikawa and Kabay's (2015) research which found that children with a more significant male presence at school did better at achievement test and had less SEC problems.

In an earlier study, Blee and Tickamyer, (1995) found that the attitudes of men and women towards appropriate gender roles have a significant influence on teaching preschool children. According to Blee and Tickmayer, the South African education sector did not encourage the involvement of males in the education of young children.

In addition, Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelson, (2005) investigated the effect of gender bias on children by comparing strategies employed by men and women teachers in teaching elementary children in Sweden. They found that male teachers were more direct with children, asked less questions and were subject-centred. The women on the other hand were more indirect, asked more questions and were student-centred. This is consistent with what Durkin, (1987) established about gender and preschool teaching; that male teachers were more dominant and authoritarian, conducted their classrooms with greater control and had better organisation. Female teachers according to Durkin provided warmer instructional environments, asked more questions and created greater opportunities for risk taking in children.

On the contrary, Good and Brophy, (2003) study found that both gender treated girls and boys differently with boys being given a greater opportunity to expand their ideas. The study concluded that there was no significant effect of gender on how children were treated in the classroom although there were more women than men in preschool teaching. The current study was interested in examining whether gender influenced the strategies that preschool teachers used to scaffold SEC in children.

According to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], (2012), the fact that preschool teaching has been feminised and the fact that it has a lower status or pay should be something to worry about. It points out to a greater societal problem with regard to women's status, power and position within a society. Such status, as observed by OECD points out a situation that is not good for women as well as men in preschool teaching. The current study was therefore important in that it is a contribution to the gender debate as it examined the influence of preschool teacher's gender on the strategies used to scaffold SEC in children. The study was guided by three research questions; (1) what is the male to female proportion of preschool teachers in Eldoret town, Kenya? (2) What is the relationship between gender and the type of preschool? (3) How does gender influence the strategies preschool teachers use to scaffold SEC in children?

Theoretical Development

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory informed the study. In this theory, it was conceived that an individual's development is affected by the surrounding environment. Bronfenbrenner thus divided a person's environment into five different levels; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The Preschool children's environment is best explained by the microsystem level as that environment which is first closest to a child. The children's interactions are with their preschool teachers and the other children in class but are ignored by the theory. This paper looks into the part of the preschool teacher focusing on their gender. This paper, therefore examines how the gender of preschool teachers influences the development of children's Socio-Emotional Competencies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study espoused a mixed methods research design where convergent parallel model was used to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. Pragmatism, an approach that embraces dualism, therefore, influenced the current research (Creswell, 2014).

A total of 480 preschool teachers who were obtained from 160 registered private and public preschools in Eldoret town, Kenya formed the study population. From this population, 98 preschools were selected to participate in the study comprising 78 private preschools and 20 public preschools. The teachers at the preschool level are considered care providers of the children who are perceived to be at the most critical stage of their development. Because of their day to day engagement with the preschool children, these teachers are better informed and that is why they were considered for the study. Socio-Emotional Competencies are skills better disposed to preschool children because at this stage, they are malleable and can acquire these skills with less effort (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Feldman, 2014). Stratified sampling was adopted thus two strata formed the public and private preschools with a 5% margin of error and a confidence level of 95% based on Peeters, (2007) sample calculator. For representation, the preschools were randomly selected for the study (Serem *et al.*, 2013). The selected schools, however, had to meet the following criteria: (1) consent from the school administration and the teachers (2) had the children taught in three developmental levels (baby class, middle class and top class). Only one teacher was considered per class. Where there was more than one teacher, a further random sampling was done. The regular teachers for preschool children were preferred for the study other than those on teaching practice.

Qualitatively, the study used six preschool teachers; purposively selected based on the following criteria; (1) typical of other teachers in relation to strategies they used to scaffold SECs, (2) from private and public preschool, (3) high scores from the questionnaire, (4) over 20 children in their classes, and (5) willingness to participate in the study. The teachers were interviewed in their respective schools but a follow up interview was done by the researcher on phone to clarify results. A total of 301 teachers were engaged in the study. In respect to qualitative data, six teachers (one male and five females) were interviewed.

Questionnaires and interview schedules were used for data collection, allowing the possibility of making deduction from both qualitative and quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This perspective expanded the understanding of preschool teachers' strategies that were used to scaffold SEC components in children (Ayiro, 2010; Creswell, 2014). Finally, descriptive Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 and inferential statistics (t-test) were the methods of analysis employed for quantitative and qualitative data respectively (Kothari, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Description of participants

The study established the gender of preschool teachers from the selected schools in Eldoret town and results are as shown in Figure 1.

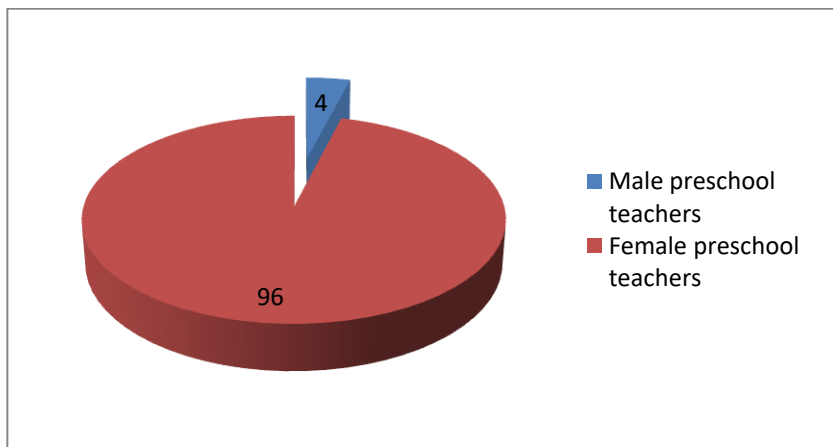


Figure 1: Proportion of male to female preschool teachers in Eldoret town, Kenya

The study found that majority (290) of preschool teachers in Eldoret town was female. The few male teachers were mainly in private preschools (90%) and only one (9%) in public preschool. This confirms previously done research which has documented that females dominate preschool teaching (Gakii, 2003; Neuman *et al.*, 2015; Waithaka, 2002). However, there are other studies that have found a significant number of male preschool teachers in preschool teaching (International Labour Organization (2012); Education International [IE] (2010)) in Tanzania, Liberia and Gambia.

Having good gender representation of preschool teachers is important for children's development (England, 2010; Kalsen, 2012; Ngure, 2014; Solberg, 2004). Good representation of male and female preschool teachers is likely to: expand children's understanding and construction of gender roles; provide positive male role models for the boys; prevent early externalising of problems common with boys (Bennet & Lipman, 1999; McComark & Brownhill, 2014).

In his study, Ngure, (2014) revealed that one of the reasons that led to the low number of male teachers in preschool teaching is poor remuneration and non-conducive terms of service. According to Neuman, Josephson, and Peck, (2015) remuneration is a vital indicator of the attractiveness and the status of the ECDE professionals particularly among the male teachers and this may also affect the teacher's motivation and job satisfaction. Therefore, low salary for ECDE personnel may deter qualified and committed male teachers from entering the profession (OECD, 2012). The high number of females can be supported by the argument that ECD teaching has historically and culturally perceived as a maternal task (Shaeffer, 2015). OECD (2012) observes that

while research has not linked gender to the quality practices in the classroom, it can be argued that both girls and boys need a male role model in the school from an early age to help ‘counter traditional views of women in child rearing and ensure that school and learning remain gender neutral’.

Another reason likely to attract more female teachers to preschool teaching could be parental preferences (Ngure, 2014). According to Ngure reasons given by parents included: cultural norms based on gender stereotype where the responsibilities of bringing up children are relegated to women. Parents who preferred male preschool teachers had boy children. This brings to the light that gender stereotyping and cultural norms has a role to play in the gender of the preschool teachers in Kenya and other countries. In this regard, many concerted and policy efforts have been and are being made to increase the number of men working in the ECD with limited success (UNESCO, 2006).

This paper further examined the influence of gender on the strategies that preschool teachers use to scaffold SEC by first examining scores of preschool teachers by gender and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean SEC Component Scores by Gender

SEC components	Teachers' Gender					
	Female			Male		
	N	\bar{x}	SD	N	\bar{x}	SD
Self-management	290	39.9	5.3	11	38.1	4.7
Self-awareness	290	33.6	5.2	11	31.7	3.7
Social-awareness	290	41.7	4.4	11	40.0	5.4
Relationship management	290	43.2	4.4	11	43.0	5.0

Generally, the results indicated that female preschool teachers had slightly higher mean scores than males. However, an independent samples t-test was conducted to test the effect of teachers' gender on each of the four SEC Components: Self-management, Self-awareness, Social awareness and Relationship management. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the scores for males and females preschool teachers in the four SEC components: Self-management $t(299) = -.080, p = .281$; Self-awareness $t(299) = -1.163, p = .246$; Social awareness $t(299) = -1.196, p = .233$; Relationship management $t(299) = -.162, p = .871$.

These results suggest that gender does not have a statistically significant effect on strategies that preschool teachers use to scaffold the four SEC components. The current study therefore concluded that teachers' gender alone does not influence their SEC competence with preschool children. Regardless of their gender, preschool teachers were more concerned with the children's social awareness and relationship management more than self-awareness and self-management. This was further supported by qualitative results.

According to interview results the same strategies were used by both female and male preschool teachers to scaffold different SEC components but the approaches used varied. For example, ‘calling out children's names’ to warn them or caution them was a

strategy used by both male and female preschool teachers to scaffold self-management. Jane* explained that she often called the children once, twice or even thrice and sometimes for the fourth time to warn them or caution them before taking action while Francis* clarified that he only called a child once and his tone was enough to send a strong message to the children on what would follow next.

The study findings also revealed that the school culture determined unique strategies for specific SEC components. For example, to scaffold self-management, one private preschool used what was called ‘essential agreement’ whereby at the beginning of each day preschool children agreed on some norms that guided their behaviour throughout the day. The study also found that specific teacher characteristics determined strategies used. For example, non-verbal cues were strategies common with the experienced teachers. This confirms the observation of scholars that experience affects performance (Wang, Chai, & Haron, 2016). Communication need not just be verbal. Alternative communication as long as it brings about the exchange of information about desires, needs, wants, perception is equally efficient. Studies have in the past suggested that approximately 93% of effective human communication is non-verbal passes (Wang et al., 2016). Preschool teachers, however need to be aware that non-verbal communication must be understood by the children as it is also culture and context specific.

The summary of strategies that were commonly used by both male and female preschool teachers to scaffold SEC competences is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Preschool teachers’ strategies of scaffolding SEC components in children

SEC components	Strategies
Self-Management	Instructions: (making demands, warning, reprimands); Non-verbal cues (silent moments, ignoring)
Self-Awareness	Appreciation (appreciating self and others); Task giving; Freedom of expression; Modelling
Social Awareness	Peer monitoring; Empathy; Embracing diversity; Turn taking
Relationship Management	Modelling (listening, helping behaviour); Monitoring (calling out names, discouraging mean comments, settling disputes)

The findings from this study are consistent with those from previous studies on gender and the different styles of teaching (Sturbeck, 2009; Islahi & Nasreen 2013; Laird, Garver, & Niskode, 2007). Female teachers have often been found to be: more supportive and expressive, nurturing, informal and more open towards children, spend more time encouraging and allowing children’ participation, give more compliments as well as maintain class control in a way that helps children develop relationship management competence (Maner, 1987; Rashidi, & Saher, 2012; Statham *et al.*, 1991; Wood, 2012) . In the same way, male preschool teachers style of being domineering, emphasising structured activities, and asking more display questions make them have short exchanges with children and helps children develop relationship management competence. Just as female teachers are a symbol of love and care, male teachers are a symbol of authority and security (Chavez, 2000; Wood, 2012). Both traits and characteristics are important to the growth of preschool child.

The study made an attempt to get explanations from the male and female preschool teachers on why they stressed more on social awareness and relationship management competence compared to self-awareness and self-management. One female teacher Jane* had this to say:

“...we watch over them so that they don’t hurt each other or themselves. Parents are very sensitive and we avoid conflict with them as much as we can for the sake of our jobs” (Jane, personal communication, 16th April, 2016).

Studies show that social awareness and relationship competence in children is an asset to teacher (Bascia, 2010; Ngure, 2014; Whitehurst & Chingos, 2011). With social-awareness and relationship management skills, children are likely to have decreased behaviour problems and are more likely to be able to deal with aggression, stress and negative behaviour from other children. Even in a large classroom, preschool teachers are able to manage such children better (Bascia, 2010). Secondly, because of their young age, many parents view preschools as institutions where their children are prepared for the next level of education as well as where they are protectively taken care of (Opper, 1962). Preschool teachers therefore double as both teachers and care givers to children and children’s competence in relationship management and social awareness skills make their tasks lighter.

The fact that there was no significant effect of preschool teachers’ gender on strategies used to scaffold SEC in children was interesting given that studies indicate that men and women have different contributions to the development of children (Buschmeyer, 2013; Lacey, Saleh, & Gorman, 1998; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelson, 2005; Singer, 1996; Tennhoff *et al.*, 2015). In particular, Buschmeyer, (2013) observed that women are not able to meet the needs and interests of boy children satisfactorily, just like men are not able to meet the needs and interests of girl children satisfactorily. A study by Skelton (1991) also revealed that children imitate rather than re-interpret what they observe. The preschool boys therefore need male preschool teachers while the girls need female teachers to imitate. Integration of both males and female teachers in the SEC development of children is important.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the different classroom contexts at preschool level, there is no one strategy that can work for all children. However, teachers should systematically teach, model and facilitate the application of SEC competencies in all aspects of teaching to allow children to apply them in their day to day lives. As long as teachers are intentional, children will learn because they learn better through imitating. Both male and female preschool teachers have an important role in scaffolding the right Socio-emotional competencies in children.

It is therefore recommended that children need to develop socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively and linguistically; these developmental needs cannot be postponed or delayed. Socio-emotional development results in the acquisition of SEC components such as: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management which enhance interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. The strategies used by preschool teachers to scaffold these competencies in children are

an important aspect in the child's form of development. This paper provides a wide range of knowledge for preschool teachers on a gender basis in addressing children issues and promoting growth and development. Further study should be done on developing an integration model for both male and female teachers in a preschool environment to ensure an all-round development facet in children.

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