

Amplifying student voice: Male pre-service teachers' experiences in a female-dominated teaching environment

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The underrepresentation of male teachers in the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) challenges educational equity, particularly in community schools lacking relatable role models. This qualitative phenomenological study in the Western Cape explores the lived experiences and motivations of male pre-service Foundation Phase teachers at a University of Technology. Employing traditional and critical phenomenology, the research examined how personal motivations intersect with socio-cultural constraints. Data collection involved 22 survey respondents, 15 focus group participants, and 10 individuals interviewed one-on-one. Key themes included family influence, cultural representation, and the desire to serve as male mentors. Participants reported societal suspicion, limited emotional expression, and gendered isolation but found affirmation through learner engagement, mentorship, and recognition as role models. Findings highlight the transformative potential of increasing male teacher representation in early education and advocate for more inclusive initial teacher education that challenges normative gender discourses and supports equitable learning environments.

Keywords: Critical phenomenology, cultural representation, educational equity, educational policy, male teachers, mentorship and phenomenological research study

INTRODUCTION

Male Underrepresentation in the Foundation Phase

In South Africa, the Foundation Phase refers to Grades R–3, typically comprising children aged five to nine (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The significance of male educators in this phase has been consistently highlighted (Cruickshank, 2019; Moosa & Bhana, 2022; Skelton, 2012). However, policy frameworks such as the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (Department of Social Development, 2015) remain largely silent on gender equality in practitioner representation (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021). This silence reinforces gendered stereotypes, marginalizing male student-teachers and hindering efforts to diversify the early education workforce.

The continued scarcity of male Foundation Phase teachers (Mashiya, 2014; Ravhuhali et al., 2019) is compounded by the absence of targeted policies for recruitment and retention. This lack not only narrows learner exposure to diverse role models but also undermines attempts at fostering inclusivity in early learning environments (Okeke & Nyanhoto, 2021).

Societal Perceptions Stigmatization and Gender Norms

Male teachers in early childhood education face deep-rooted societal suspicion and bias. Stereotypes associating care work with femininity often lead to the marginalization of men in these spaces. Some face suspicion or are perceived as threatening due to prevailing social anxieties (Cruickshank, 2019). Concerns about masculinity, sexuality, and social acceptability often render male teachers vulnerable

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to scrutiny, particularly in a country like South Africa, where gender-based violence and hegemonic masculinities remain pressing social issues (Gibbs et al., 2014).

Initial Teacher Education and Gender-Inclusive Pre-Service Teacher Training

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has been shown to enhance the preparedness and employability of pre-service teachers (Jackson et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2022). However, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs often reinforce normative professional identities that fail to account for gender diversity (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996; Trend, 2010). As Bertram (2023) observes, newly qualified teachers are frequently underprepared to navigate the complexities of gendered classroom dynamics.

Embedding social justice principles in ITE is critical for equipping pre-service teachers to challenge implicit bias and promote inclusive pedagogies (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Through WIL, student-teachers can critically engage with real-world school environments, confronting gender norms and inequities first-hand. In this way, teacher education becomes a site not only of professional preparation but also of ideological formation and social transformation.

CONTEXT

A Teaching Practice Program for Foundation Phase Student Teachers

The Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Foundation Phase program at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) is offered at both Mowbray and Wellington campuses and aims to prepare pre-service teachers to meet the evolving demands of primary education. With over a century of experience, the program ensures academic-practical integration, language diversity (English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa), and strong communication and support structures (CPUT, 2025). It complies with the national Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015), incorporating inclusive education, structured monitoring, and extended practicum engagement.

While the MRTEQ policy mandates a minimum of 24 weeks of work-integrated learning (WIL) for a B.Ed. degree, CPUT offers an enhanced 8-week annual placement, totaling 32 weeks over four years. Research supports that prolonged WIL exposure enriches student learning by integrating theory with practice, strengthening professional competencies, and improving employability (Billett, 2009; Eady et al., 2025).

According to 2023 enrolment statistics, 1,590 students were registered in the FP program across both campuses. Of these, 103 were identified as male—10 at Wellington and 93 at Mowbray—constituting approximately 6.5% of total enrolment. While this percentage exceeds global averages (1–3%) for male participation in early childhood education (Mailula, 2024), the gender imbalance remains stark. This is slightly higher than the gender rates in similar programs, as the global early childhood development workforce has a proportion of male staff, ranging from 1% to 3% in most countries (Mailula, 2024).

At the national level, the Department of Basic Education acknowledges a persistent shortage of teachers, especially in the Foundation Phase (Sayed & McDonald, 2017). The Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme, implemented under the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (Green et al., 2014), has contributed to increased enrolment in FP programs. Former Minister Pandor emphasized the need to prioritize subjects such as mathematics, science, technology, indigenous languages, English, and Foundation Phase education (Pandor, 2006; Watson, 2023). Although these bursaries enhance

access to higher education, questions remain about whether recipients pursue teaching as a vocation or as a practical response to financial opportunity.

All 103 male-identifying students enrolled in the B.Ed. Foundation Phase program at CPUT, across both campuses, was invited to participate in the study. Eligibility required self-identification as male and completion of at least one WIL placement. A Google Forms questionnaire was distributed via class representatives, yielding 22 responses (21.3% response rate). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with all names replaced by pseudonyms. Focus groups were conducted in neutral venues to support psychological safety, and interview participants were offered access to CPUT's Student Counselling Services in case of emotional distress.

Participants (aged 18 to 31) reported varied influences on their decision to pursue FP teaching. Seven cited no specific influence, while others referenced family—particularly mothers (4), fathers (3), siblings (2)—as well as past teachers (1), partners (1), or “others” (4).

Exploring the motivations of male students entering a female-dominated program reveals both personal narratives and structural conditions. From a phenomenological standpoint, such narratives illuminate how male student-teachers negotiate identity, vocation, and challenge within a profession historically aligned with femininity. A critical phenomenological lens further interrogates how these experiences are shaped by broader socio-cultural, institutional, and gendered power structures (Brown, 2024; Samuel et al., 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PHENOMENOLOGY AND CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

This study is underpinned by a phenomenological theoretical framework, which foregrounds the lived experiences of male Foundation Phase student-teachers within a predominantly female profession. Drawing on Husserl (1931) and Heidegger (1962), phenomenology offers insight into how participants navigate identity, motivation, and belonging in a gendered educational space. It enables a close reading of how male student-teachers experience both affirmation and marginalization in early childhood education.

The framework aligns with a student voice orientation (Drewery et al., 2026), which centres participant narratives as critical sources of knowledge about institutional structures and relational dynamics in education. Through their reflections, participants disclose the layered complexities of negotiating professional identity in contexts shaped by normative assumptions about care, masculinity, and authority.

This study further draws on critical phenomenology (Guenther, 2020; Salamon, 2018) to interrogate how broader socio-cultural, institutional, and historical conditions shape subjectivity. Critical phenomenology moves beyond individual meaning-making to examine how systems of power, including those embedded in teacher education, reinforce hegemonic gender norms and constrain professional agency.

Together, these frameworks support a multi-level reading of participants' experiences: one that captures their interior worlds while critically engaging the structural forces that render male teachers anomalous in early education.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study sets out employing a mixed-methods exploratory case study, the research seeks to amplify their voices, interrogate the systemic barriers they face, and evaluate how institutional policies, such as the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015), shape their professional identities. This segment specifically focuses on their lived experiences within WIL, contributing to a larger project exploring gendered pathways into teaching, retention, and professional belonging in a female-dominated phase of education.

Specifically, a sequential explanatory design was chosen, where quantitative data were collected by three team members and analyzed first to provide some background information to the males within the ITE programme. The use of a survey questionnaire allows for broad, quantifiable insights into the participants' backgrounds and what led to their decision to study in this feminized field. Furthermore, we aimed to use the results of the survey to inform the initial questioning within focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The data collection occurred in two phases to deepen understanding of male pre-service teachers' experiences. Ethical clearance was granted by the CPUT Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Ref: EDU2024/FP/009). Participation was voluntary and did not require involvement in all three methods: survey, focus groups, and interviews. The sample comprised 22 survey respondents, 15 focus group participants, and 10 individual interviewees. Focus group sessions (n=4) lasted approximately 60 minutes, while semi-structured interviews (n=10) ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. All sessions were recorded with informed consent, anonymized, and pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

AI language models (ChatGPT, GPT-4) were used solely to assist with wording revisions and clarity in manuscript preparation; no AI tools were employed in the data analysis process.

Phase 1 involved a structured survey divided into three sections: demographics, experiences of male Foundation Phase students in WIL, and open-ended reflections. Section A collected biographical data; Section B explored challenges and opportunities in FP teaching and study, focusing on relationships with mentors and colleagues, and learner interactions. Section C invited participants to reflect on WIL experiences beyond the structured questions, capturing personal and emotional insights, for example, challenges related to being male teachers. A pilot study preceded finalization of the survey instrument, which was refined based on feedback.

Phase 2 focused on qualitative data collection, which was carried out through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The primary aim of the qualitative data was to provide a deeper understanding of male pre-service teachers' experiences within their WIL component. Focus group discussions were organized according to participants' year of study in their degree program, facilitating discussions that allowed participants to share their experiences in a collective, supportive environment. An example of a question asked as a follow-up from Phase 1 is: Have you ever felt judged or stereotyped during your time in the Foundation Phase? These discussions aimed to uncover the underlying factors influencing their experiences, such as mentorship, relationships with colleagues, and their perceptions of working with young learners in the FP context. In contrast, semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on personal experiences in a one-on-one setting, offering a more private space to discuss sensitive topics that may not have been shared in the group setting. The combination of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews provided a robust data set, with each method serving a distinct purpose in amplifying participants' voices.

The inclusion of Section C was particularly significant because it aimed to uncover the more nuanced, personal reflections of the participants, which were not fully captured in the structured sections of the survey. This section allowed participants to share experiences that may not have fit neatly into predefined categories, offering richer insight into their individual WIL journeys. By asking participants to reflect on any aspect of their WIL experience, this section helped to reveal the emotional and relational dynamics of their teaching practice—insights that are essential for a deeper understanding of their development as teachers. Thus, Section C was not simply an additional component but a critical part of amplifying the voices of male pre-service teachers in a way that highlighted the importance of their lived experiences within both university and school settings.

In summary, this multi-phase data collection design provided a comprehensive framework for exploring the diverse experiences of male pre-service teachers. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data, coupled with an emphasis on personal reflection, enabled a deeper understanding of how these students navigate the complex realities of their WIL placements, their relationships with learners, mentors, and colleagues, and how these experiences shape their growth as future educators.

Purposeful sampling was employed using two key criteria: participants who identified as male and those who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree program specializing in the Foundation Phase. A list of all the students who were registered for Foundation Phase studies in the Education Faculty at a UoT was received from the faculty office at the institution. All males were extracted and considered for this part of the research study. However, they were not obliged to give their consent to participate in this study, as participation was voluntary.

Following the analysis of the survey data, focus group interviews were conducted to explore further and clarify the survey results. Year groups organized the focus groups to capture any differences in experiences between cohorts. Participants for the focus groups were drawn from those who completed the survey, with purposive sampling used to ensure diversity in perspectives (e.g., gender, age, academic performance).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the key themes and patterns emerging from the survey data. Both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. These themes were compared with the quantitative findings to identify convergence or divergence in the data. The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated during the interpretation phase. The qualitative findings from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to explain or expand upon the trends identified in the survey results. This process of data integration ensures that the findings provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify key trends and relationships among variables. The results informed the development of the focus group interview questions. The host institution granted ethical clearance for the study. This methodological design facilitated a multi-layered understanding of the phenomenon by combining both broad, generalizable data from the survey with in-depth, personal insights from the qualitative interviews. The approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of male pre-service teachers' experiences, offering both a wide view of common trends and a deep understanding of individual lived experiences within the context of their work-integrated learning placements.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized into three major themes that capture the continuum of experiences of pre-service male teachers' racial identities during work-integrated learning (WIL), or teaching practice, within the South African context. This approach ensures their perspectives are authentically represented, highlighting challenges faced and opportunities for professional growth. The analysis integrates the concept of male race² within verbatim transcripts to explore how gender and racial identities intersect and shape their classroom experiences.

Theme 1: Challenges Faced by Males in the Foundation Phase During Teaching Practice

The study revealed a range of adverse experiences encountered by male pre-service teachers in the Foundation Phase, which highlights the challenges associated with navigating a female-dominated profession and provides insights into the complexities that influence the identity and practice of male teachers.

Suspicion and unease from parents

Many participants reported experiencing skepticism and unease from parents, particularly fathers. For example, one participant recounted: "Female learners' fathers sometimes looked at me funny when dropping off their children, and some parents seemed uneasy seeing a male student teacher" (Brandon, aged 25 and identifies as Coloured).

The term "funny"³ in the above quotation refers to a sense of uneasiness emanating from the stares of the parents because of the specific gender that Brandon embodies, leading to him feeling emotions of discomfort, self-consciousness, and insecurity.

Another participant indicated how choosing where to complete his teaching practice was a difficult decision as "it will be hard for parents to warm up to me and accept their children that are in my hands" (Peter, aged 24 and identified as Coloured). His reflection highlights how societal perceptions and parental biases toward male teachers, particularly in the Foundation Phase, extend beyond the classroom and shape the dynamics of trust and acceptance. This suggests that male teachers must navigate not only pedagogical challenges but also broader social attitudes that influence their relationships with both learners and parents.

Another respondent discussed the community's tendency to spread negative rumors, which could lead to parental complaints and concerns about their presence in the school. He said: "As you know, communities often spread negative comments everywhere, so I was actually very worried that if I were seen as hating children, parents would complain, and the school might end up asking me to leave" (Thando, aged 19, identifies as Black South African).

Thando's fear illustrates how societal perceptions and community gossip can shape professional realities, reinforcing feelings of isolation. His experience highlights that identity is not solely self-defined but also shaped by external judgments within institutional spaces. One respondent discusses the skepticism and challenges due to gender dynamics, suggesting that there might be some unease or

² In South Africa, the racial terms "Coloured," "Black," "Indian," and "White" originate from apartheid-era classifications based on ancestry. Though officially abolished, these categories continue to influence social, economic, and political identities. Their use remains sensitive, reflecting the country's history of racial segregation and discrimination.

³ The explanation following the participant's use of "funny" is interpretive, provided by the researchers to contextualise the term within broader socio-cultural perceptions of male teachers in early childhood education

surprise from the community or family members about their role as male teachers in the Foundation Phase.

One participant received disbelief from his own family, who, on numerous occasions, asked if he was sure he wanted to pursue teaching younger children. He said: "My uncle would ask, and I would say FP, and he would laugh and say, 'don't play with me'" (Avela, aged 20, identifies as Black South African). This indicates a level of disbelief or surprise from family members, which could reflect broader societal perceptions or unease about men in early childhood education roles. Participants also reported instances where their career choice was openly questioned by family members, peers and colleagues.

Another participant explained: "Sometimes, teachers would question my choice of course, making me feel underestimated" (Athi, aged 21, identifies as Black South African). This questioning often led to feelings of doubt and a need to justify their presence in the Foundation Phase constantly. A further challenging aspect of conducting teaching practice as a male in the Foundation Phase was rendered by Mark. He said: "It will be hard for parents to warm up to me and accept that their children are in my hands" (Mark, aged 18, identifies as Coloured).

The experiences of Avela, Athi, and Mark reveal that challenges for male pre-service Foundation Phase teachers extend beyond external pressures to include familial disbelief and skepticism. Reactions from relatives, such as Avela's uncle, reflect broader societal discomfort with men in nurturing roles, undermining their sense of identity and professional legitimacy.

Male student teachers often find themselves caught between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Persistent questioning can either undermine their confidence or strengthen their resolve to challenge stereotypes. These experiences underscore the emotional complexities male teachers navigate in the Foundation Phase.

Limited physical affection toward learners

One of the most frequently cited challenges was the inability to express care through physical affection. Male participants shared concerns about societal perceptions, as illustrated by one participant who noted: "One of the most common negative experiences is not being able to hug my learners like female teachers can. I also fear whether parents and learners will feel comfortable and trust me as a male teacher (Peter).

Peter's concern highlights the tension male teachers face in showing care within rigid gender norms. These boundaries limit their ability to express affection, complicating trust-building in a profession where nurturing is essential.

This raises questions about how gender roles shape professional identity, as male teachers navigate between nurturing instincts and societal expectations. It also challenges whether limiting affection hinders the development of meaningful teacher-student relationships.

A further remark expressed by Rajesh was his discomfort with physical affection from students due to concerns about societal issues, such as cases of harassment. He was quoted:

Sometimes I will be scared; sometimes I will be like scared to touch [be affectionate, or reciprocate because they like to hug. I am not comfortable and want to hug me because, ah, we have got issues like here in South Africa since there are cases of rape and harassment and stuff, so I say

maybe parents they don't feel like comfortable having males with their children since like Grade R, Grade 1. (Rajesh, Aged 25 and identifies as Indian)

This limitation often made participants feel constrained in their interactions, affecting their ability to build rapport with learners. Maintaining a professional, even a constrained relationship with younger kids was needed, as the following participant stated:

I don't allow them to, to, to have social contact with me, just to have maybe, test sometimes with them during break time, just to get to know them. So, I created a professional relationship between me and my learners. (Ntobeko, aged 28, identifies as Black South African)

Rajesh and Ntobeko highlight the tension male teachers face in expressing physical affection due to fears of misinterpretation, especially within South Africa's context of heightened awareness around harassment. Rajesh reflects on self-imposed caution, while Ntobeko notes the emotional toll of maintaining distance, which can hinder trust and connection in early education.

These remarks highlight the ethical tension in teaching, where societal fears restrict male teachers' capacity to nurture. This constraint compromises the relational core of education, forcing a balance between empathy and professional distance that limits meaningful connection.

Lack of support from mentors

The attitudes of mentor teachers toward male pre-service teachers further compounded these challenges. Logan described his experience during teaching practice, stating: "During my Grade R teaching practice, my mentor didn't believe a male should teach Grade R, which affected my teaching style during that session" (Logan, aged 25 and identifies as Coloured).

Such attitudes not only undermined their confidence but also hindered their professional growth. As explained by Frankie: "My challenge was my mentor teacher. She is old. Her patience is not there anymore. She is strict, she is firm, and her children are not free when they are with her" (Frankie, aged 23 and identifies as Coloured).

Logan and Frankie's accounts reveal how unsupportive or biased mentors hinder male pre-service teachers' growth. Logan's mentor doubted his suitability for Grade R, undermining his confidence, while Frankie faced emotional distance and lack of guidance, leading to professional isolation. Both highlight how mentor attitudes can restrict development and reinforce gendered barriers in early education.

These accounts raise philosophical concerns about mentorship in teaching. Logan and Frankie's experiences show how mentor bias can hinder growth, highlighting the need for inclusive, supportive mentorship that values diversity and fosters professional development for all educators.

Another respondent named Axola mentions having to manage the class alone due to the mentor teacher's frequent absences, which implies a lack of support. He stated:

I think for a week my mentor teacher was absent because she was sick... and took two days [leave] to go for, I think, those one-day workshops. Yeah. So, she went there for two weeks, and when she came back, she was there for two days. (Axola, aged 23 and identifies as Black South African)

These quotes reveal that respondents felt unsupported by their mentor teachers, either because of the mentor's attitude or absence. While this issue affects all FP student teachers, male teachers perceived it as an additional challenge.

Some participants noted instances where their gender was exploited by their mentors for physical tasks unrelated to teaching, thus representing at one could define as an exploitation of physical labor; as David stated: "Mentors sometimes take advantage of me, asking me to carry boxes and run errands unrelated to teaching" (David, aged 21 and identifies as Coloured). Such experiences reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and detracted from their professional development.

Gender imbalance and isolation in the classroom

Male pre-service teachers in predominantly female Foundation Phase programs often felt alienated. Ricardo noted, "I feel like this course isn't for me because most students are female." This gender imbalance heightened their sense of being "othered." Many participants, including Evan, reported feeling underestimated or mistrusted in their roles as male teachers, a doubt they believed was amplified by societal views of men in early childhood education. This undermines their professional identity and complicates their acceptance in the field.

These perceptions created emotional barriers to male pre-service teachers' professional identity. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address biases, mentorship, and institutional support for male educators.

Theme 2: Beneficial Influences of Males in the Foundation Phase During Teaching Practice

The participants in this study highlighted numerous positively charged experiences and affirmations during their teaching practice placements, emphasizing the constructive role of male teachers in the Foundation Phase.

Positive recognition and support

Firstly, participants consistently described receiving encouragement and recognition from various stakeholders in the school community. Vusi noted: "I received more positive praise and recognition for the space I am entering. I also received encouragement from the school principal and other teachers, boosting my confidence" (Vusi, 21, identifies as Black South African).

This acknowledgement from leadership and colleagues not only validated their role as male educators in a predominantly female domain but also fostered their professional self-esteem. Furthermore, Peter shared how the school staff, particularly the teachers from their former school, expressed pride and used them as an example during assemblies:

They were very, very proud. They made an example of me at the Assembly. They wanted to show me [to the rest of the school]. There's I, I am supposed to be here. He would attest to that. They wanted us to go to Grade 7 and be the motivation for them.

Peter's public recognition by school leadership boosted his sense of belonging and affirmed his role as a male educator in a female-dominated field. Such validation counters marginalization and highlights the power of positive reinforcement in reshaping professional and societal views.

Another participant named Khanya affirmed this sense of pride the school had in him. He was quoted: "There were some reactions, but mostly they were proud of me because I went back to the school where

I was doing my I was doing my, my, primary school" (Khanya, aged 21, identifies as Black South African).

Khanya's return to his former primary school as a teacher brought pride and a strong sense of belonging. Familiarity and community recognition boosted his confidence and professional identity as a male Foundation Phase educator. His experience shows how former learners become role models, challenging traditional gender roles and highlighting the importance of representation and continuity in education.

Male student-teachers in the Foundation Phase have a transformative nature to their placements within Foundation Phase classrooms. This becomes evident in the remark made by Clayton:

There was absenteeism [from the learners], but when I started doing my teaching. They wanted to come to school. They wanted every day, even, even if a child is sick, he or she would not want to go home because she knows she would miss out. (Clayton, aged 31, identifies as Coloured)

Clayton's reflection shows how male student-teachers boost Foundation Phase students' motivation and engagement, with students eager to attend school even when unwell, highlighting the positive impact of male role models in female-dominated environments. The male teacher's role extends beyond content delivery to deeply motivating and reshaping attitudes, fostering emotional and educational engagement. Male educators have the potential to challenge norms and drive positive change in early childhood education.

Siya mentioned that their mentor teacher was happy to have a male figure in the class, which indicates a form of encouragement and positive recognition:

My mentor teacher. She was amazed because of having a male figure in her class. And the learners as well. They were, they were extremely happy because they had a little chance because I was there for a short period of time. So, they were happy, the bottom line. (Siya, aged 22 and identifies as Black South African)

Mentorship from supervising teachers and evaluators was crucial in building male Foundation Phase student-teachers' confidence. Siya noted that their belief in his readiness motivated him and boosted his confidence. This support affirmed their abilities, strengthened their commitment, and deepened their passion for teaching.

Theme 3: Role Model for Male Students

In terms of relationships with learners, the participants expressed that their presence as male teachers brought unique value to the classroom. Many male learners were particularly enthusiastic about having a male teacher, as described by Vusi: "A positive experience was that male learners were happy and excited to have me as their teacher since they were used to being taught by female teachers."

Vusi's statement highlights how male student-teachers serve as rare role models for male learners in a female-dominated Foundation Phase, fostering inclusion and new authority models. Introducing male teachers challenges traditional gender roles, creating a more inclusive environment that shapes both learning and identity.

Another participant named Elvis elaborated on the significance of serving as a role model, stating, "A positive experience I have is with my male students, who see me as a role model and are quick to

emulate how I carry myself" (Elvis, aged 21, identifies as Black South African). Similarly, as highlighted by David, he also experienced a warm and respectful reception from the broader school community. He stated: "I was welcomed with open arms and always treated with the same respect as the staff at the school." Another reported "At every school I've been to for teaching practice, I've received positive feedback and had amazing experiences. Teachers were supportive and even encouraged me to return after earning my qualification."

Finally, participants reflected on how their positive engagement with learners reinforced their passion for teaching and strengthened their professional identity. Thando noted: "I really enjoyed the field of education, connecting and interacting with learners in a positive way. I believe that in the coming years, I will become a qualified teacher."

These narratives reveal the multifaceted benefits of male educators in the Foundation Phase, enriching both their own professional growth and the experiences of learners and schools. They also highlight how male teachers actively navigate and transform learning environments, fostering meaningful student relationships. These insights underscore the need for systemic reforms that validate diverse professional identities and challenge entrenched norms within teacher education.

Policy Implications and Broader Relevance

To foster inclusive environments in ITE, institutional policies must actively challenge gendered assumptions within WIL placements. Such policies could include mentor sensitization workshops on gender bias, recruitment targets for male student-teachers in early childhood education, and guidelines supporting equitable engagement across all practicum settings. Models from countries like Norway and New Zealand—where gender diversification in early education is state-supported—illustrate how systemic interventions can reshape public perceptions and institutional cultures (Peeters et al., 2015). More broadly, WIL programmes across disciplines should examine how identity markers (such as gender, race, or class) intersect with workplace dynamics, potentially shaping student agency and professional integration (Smith et al., 2022). Embedding equity-driven frameworks into WIL design is thus critical to expanding both access and belonging.

DISCUSSION

This study explored male student-teachers' experiences in the Foundation Phase during teaching practice, highlighting both challenges and affirmations. This discussion reflects on these experiences, the agency developed by participants, and potential future paths for male educators in the Foundation Phase. This study is limited by its single-institution focus and reliance on a self-selected sample, which may affect the generalisability of findings to broader contexts. Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation introduces the possibility of response bias, as those with particularly strong or reflective experiences may have been more likely to contribute.

Challenges vs Affirmations

The findings reveal early challenges for male student-teachers, including societal bias against men in a female-dominated field, stigma around physical affection, and lack of mentor support undermining their professional identity. Despite this, affirmations like recognition from school leadership and enthusiasm from male learners boosted their confidence and passion, reinforcing their growth as Foundation Phase educators.

Agency and Professional Leverage

This study examined whether male student-teachers developed agency or felt defeated by challenges. Despite obstacles, most participants showed agency, navigating societal norms and limited mentor support with resilience. Clayton and Thando's commitment and student engagement illustrate this strength. They also envisioned future roles as role models, confident in their ability to contribute uniquely to education. Positive feedback from learners and colleagues reinforced their professional agency and motivation.

Hope and the Future of Male Teachers in the Foundation Phase

The participants' reflections centered on hope for a meaningful career in education, grounded in real experiences of connection and recognition. Despite challenges like societal biases and difficulties forming close relationships with students, their hope prevailed. These obstacles highlight the need for better support and mentorship tailored to male teachers. Positive interactions with learners and staff motivated them to persist, demonstrating agency and a commitment to inspiring future generations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, despite significant challenges, male student-teachers in the Foundation Phase demonstrated resilience and agency, shaping their professional identities and maintaining hope for successful careers. Their positive impact on learners and support from colleagues reinforced their commitment. This study highlights the need for further research using critical phenomenology to deepen understanding of male educators' experiences and to improve mentorship and support. Ultimately, male teachers can play vital roles in creating inclusive learning environments, but systemic barriers must be addressed.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion and conceptual* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion and conceptual articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, IJWIL seeks manuscripts describing an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Reference

Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (2023). Defining work-integrated learning. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of work-integrated learning* (3rd ed., pp. 29-48). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156420-4>

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning

ISSN: 2538-1032

www.ijwil.org

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Publisher: Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ)

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