Gender Stereotypes of Male Preschool Teachers: Taking the Investigation of Changsha International Kindergarten as an Example

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Abstract. While abundant research has been carried out on gender stereotypes faced by teachers in pursuing their careers, inadequate attention has been paid to male kindergarten teachers' dilemmas. This study uses semi-structured interviews with male teachers in an international kindergarten in Changsha to explore the male teachers' experiences. Through investigation and analysis, the study's findings reveal the reasons for working in kindergartens, low job satisfaction among male kindergarten teachers, gender prejudice against this group, and specific problems foreign teachers face in the job market. This paper aims to raise people's awareness of the situation of male kindergarten teachers in China and reduce prejudice towards this group. This paper also gives suggestions for improving their job satisfaction and career development: creating a favorable social environment, improving the interpersonal skills of male kindergarten teachers, and enlarging the job market for male kindergarten teachers.

Keywords: Kindergarten teacher; early childhood education; stereotype; gender discrimination.

1. Introduction

Early childhood education is related to the future of a nation and the world, so it is widely valued on a global scale. In 2017, United Nations Resolution adopted by the General Assembly declared that "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education [1]." The World Bank's new human capital index of 2019 highlights the link between investments in early childhood education and children's success in future labor markets [2]. The improvement of preschool education cannot be separated from the cultivation of preschool teachers.

Among preschool teachers, male kindergarten teachers are a group that is easily overlooked. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, various factors in children's growth ecology should play a role, and diverse early childhood educators can create different experiences for children [3]. However, kindergarten teachers are seen as a feminized profession in China. According to the "2020 Education Statistics" released by the Ministry of Education of China, there are more than 5.198 million kindergarten teaching staff and about 2.913 million full-time teachers, of which about 4.802 million and 2.848 million are women. About 92.39% and 97.78% of the total. Based on this calculation, men account for less than 8% of kindergarten teaching staff, and male kindergarten teachers account for less than 3% of full-time teachers.

Although "gender imbalance" in teaching, especially in early childhood education, has been a serious global issue for decades, the male workforce only increased slightly in higher grades, and many of them move rapidly to lucrative positions [4]. "There are assumptions that boys may learn to become non-sexist if they see male teachers in the kindergarten educating young children" [5], and

that gender equity between men and women will be enhanced if men are involved in early childhood education [5].

In recent years, domestic research has focused on the analysis of the reasons for the lack of male kindergarten teachers, occupational difficulties, and solutions to the scarcity of male teachers in kindergartens. Male kindergarten teachers account for a small proportion, their income is low, and they face social prejudice working as kindergarten teachers even poses a serious threat to men's marriage prospects [6]. It is difficult for male kindergarten teachers with low salaries to support their families based on traditional values [7]. Stereotypical gender norms are still prevalent in China, Yang finds in his research on divisions in Shanghai kindergartens were based on the larger social division of labor between the genders [6]. To encourage more male teachers to choose the profession, Liang recommended that the government and kindergartens take preferential measures and give support to males [8].

There is currently a lack of empirical research on the current situation of male kindergarten teachers and specific research on the workplace problems of male kindergarten teachers. This paper will investigate a private international kindergarten in Changsha and will try to explore the actuality of male teachers in such kindergartens and find out what they are facing in the workplace and society from several perspectives.

2. Method

2.1 Interview Design

This research selected 5 male kindergarten teachers from a private kindergarten in Changsha for formal in-depth interviews, including two Chinese male kindergarten teachers, and three foreign male kindergarten teachers. At the same time, 1 female kindergarten teacher, 1 male teacher who teaches art in this kindergarten, and Grade 1 student in primary school were randomly interviewed

A semi-structured interview was conducted with male kindergarten teachers, which involved seven main questions about their involvement in early childhood education and related issues, involving the motivation of the male kindergarten teachers to choose to engage in early childhood education, their main job content, male teachers' gender advantages or disadvantages, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, their career prospects, their career plans, and prejudice or discrimination they encountered in the career or society.

2.2 Sample Description

The transcripts of the interview of 7 teachers were categorized and analyzed to demonstrate the situation and the attitudes of male teachers in the kindergarten. As table one shows the interviewees' basic information of gender, occupation, nationality, and years of work.

Table 1. The interviewees' basic information

Interviewee	Gender	Occupation	Years of work	Nationality
Participant 1	Male	Teacher	2 years	British
Participant 2	Male	Art teacher and Grade 1 teacher	7 years	British
Participant 3	Male	Teacher	5-6 months	British
Participant 4	Female	Teaching Assistant	7-8 years	Chinese
Participant 5	Male	Teacher	4 months	British
Participant 6	Male	Teacher	3 years	Chinese
Participant 7	Male	Teacher	2-3 years	Chinese

3. Result

3.1 Professional Motivation of Male Kindergarten Teachers

This study collects qualitative data, so thematic analysis is used to interpret the data. First, the Researcher analyzes the reasons for engaging in the infant industry and the motivation to persist. Among them, the most mentioned is that engaging in this work can bring a sense of achievement. Only five people gave a more detailed answer to this question, and three of them mentioned that gaining children's trust and seeing children's growth can make them gain a sense of achievement. The original sentence of one of them is "To help children develop relations and to see them getting mature is the most rewarding thing". Other reasons include that work is relatively easy, there are many opportunities to improve oneself, and my home is relatively close to the kindergarten. The dissatisfaction with kindergarten work is mainly divided into three reasons. It is tiring to take care of children, difficult to communicate with children, and lack experience as a kindergarten teacher. Among them, it is believed that spending a lot of time listening to children and paying attention to their safety are the main reasons for work fatigue. In the interview with four male foreign teachers, one mentioned that language is a communication barrier. The only female teacher in the interview also said that age also makes it difficult for teachers and children to understand each other's ideas.

3.2 The Work Status of Male Kindergarten Teachers

The situation of male kindergarten teachers working in kindergartens has also been explored. According to the data collected, it can be roughly divided into three categories, work treatment, work division, and work bias. Among them, the most mentioned is the division of work. Four teachers mentioned that the kindergarten denied male teachers to help students go to the toilet, change diapers, watch lunch and change clothes. All this work should be done by female teachers. The purpose of this is not only to dispel parents' concern that male preschool teachers may infringe on children but also to reduce the probability of 'bad things.' Therefore, there are more restrictions on male preschool teachers than female teachers when working in kindergartens. But on the contrary, the workload of male teachers is not as much as that of female teachers. "The kindergarten management worries that parents might feel uncomfortable with which avoid the unnecessary complications." Salary treatment is also attracting attention. As the only female teacher interviewed, she showed that male teachers have more priority in their work, the turnover rate is low, and there is a lot of space for promotion. One male foreign teacher and one Chinese male teacher also said that the salary was competitive, while the other Chinese male teacher said that the salary structure was flexible, and the greater the ability, the more money he made. Most male teachers are relatively satisfied with their salaries.

3.3 Gender Dilemma in Male Kindergarten Teachers' Careers

The next theme is the impact of social concepts and gender dilemmas in male Kindergarten Teachers' careers. The first part is divided into three categories, namely, the opinions of relatives and friends, professional gender, and nationality/race. A total of four teachers talked about the impact of the concept of relatives and friends on their careers. The answers of the two male foreign teachers and the two Chinese male teachers are not quite the same. The fathers of the two male foreign teachers are very supportive of their industry, but the father of the Chinese male teacher, who is subject 6 holds different views. The father of subject 6 thinks that his son should not do early childhood education, but rather hope that subject 6 can do middle school education, take examinations, and become a high school teacher. Traditional thinking and social prejudice will make parents think that private and non-governmental schools are unstable, and graduate students will be inferior in teaching children. Similarly, another Chinese male teacher also had the idea of "taking a teacher preparation examination" at the beginning. Social prejudice against professional gender was also mentioned. A male foreign teacher and a Chinese male teacher both said that in society, people think that women can treat their children more carefully than men, and parents also prefer female teachers. At the same time, a male foreign teacher also pointed out that under the same conditions, the school prefers female

teachers and will deliberately reduce the opportunities for male teachers to interact with students. This shows that as an educational institution, there is still prejudice against teachers of different genders. Because the study interviewed 4 foreign teachers, the researchers also asked whether teachers were affected by different races. Everyone replied that they had not been discriminated against and that the Chinese were very friendly. But one of the foreign teachers shared a little story, about what happened to his African American friend. Because of his dark skin, his many job opportunities were denied.

3.4 Male Kindergarten Teachers' Expectations for Future Careers

Finally, it is the teachers' expectations for the future. The theme is divided into three categories. They are changing careers, staying in kindergartens, and others. Among the seven teachers interviewed, a male foreign teacher who is subject 5 prefers to be a primary school teacher because he has no sense of security in kindergarten and feels nervous and afraid. Subject 5 wants to teach older children instead of kindergarten children. The rest of the teachers still want to stay in kindergartens. But they also have different ideas about staying in kindergarten. These ideas can be broadly categorized as promotions, changing projects, and maintaining the current situation. Subject 6 wants to work hard for promotion, while the other two foreign teachers tend to teach senior students and teach in the classroom. As the first interviewee, subject 1 tends to maintain the current situation, which wants a stable income and save money that is ready for marriage. Others are calling for more people in the preschool education industry. Chinese female teachers expect more male teachers to join this industry, while foreign male teachers expect more foreign female teachers to work in Changsha kindergartens.

4. Discussion

4.1 A Growing Satisfaction and Fulfillment of the Job

The shortage of male kindergarten teachers—the lowest proportion at all levels of school—has been a chronic problem ahead of the kindergartens and the Ministry of Education. Many explanations have been proposed to account for the scarcity of male kindergarten teachers. Meni Tsigra pointed out that little improvement in the infrastructure, working conditions, and teacher salaries were to blame for the problem. However, most of the teachers interviewed show a high level of job satisfaction. The explanation for it largely lies in the compensation system, working environment, and administration.

In the interviews, all the participants are satisfied with the salary. Subject 6 with a master's degree in the policy of Early childhood education was content with the salary despite the strenuous and exhausting work. He once worked at an international school in Shanghai. When he found Beemee, a kindergarten situated in the inland part of China, offered a competitive salary, he decided to apply for the job. Subject 2 is a male teacher from London, and he got a certificate in education 9 years ago. He maintained that to change the status quo that there is a long-lasting disproportionate representation of males in preschool education the only way to fill the gap is to raise the pay. Located by the picturesque Xihu lake, Beemee boasts an ideal place for both learning and working which is one of the reasons why Subject 2 chose to work there. She once worked in a public kindergarten and was tired of the crowded and ill-ventilated classroom. After working in the preschool area for over 7.5 years, she put job satisfaction over other concerns. At Beemee, she was content with the flexibility and took delight in what she had done in her career path.

When asked about the training and promotion opportunities, all the participants gave positive feedback. The training has been a weekly routine for the staff, ranging from pedagogy to child psychology. Guided by the regulation and equipped with adequate training courses, the teachers could better assess the children's cognitive and psychological development and tackle the emergency. More importantly, a sense of belonging and of community is cultivated during the process.

4.2 A Conflicting Attitude towards the Male Kindergarten Teachers

Beyond the expectation, the kindergarten where the research was carried out was taught exclusively by male foreign teachers. When asked whether it was a coincidence or a deliberate act, "It is a coincidence", subject 3 replied without any hesitation. He added that "most schools would prefer female teachers if they were equally qualified and experienced". Male teachers are not allowed to get children to bed or get them dressed, not to mention change the diapers. He felt it hurt because "in my previous kindergarten, I helped the kids to get dressed and change the pajamas but here is different. During nap time, the male teachers are told to go and leave. He considered it a safety concern, given that recent decades have witnessed an increase in the scandals of bullying and sexual abuse in China and the kindergartens have to stress zero tolerance against such illicit behaviors and "avoid the unnecessary complications." His feeling is confirmed by Sarah-Eve Farquhar's discovery in which many parents (especially the mothers) have suspected the male teachers of being a child abuser and sexual harassment [9].

While subject 3 lamented that male teachers were denied getting more involved in the care of the children, subject 7, a Chinese male teacher responsible for physical exercise, and Subject 4, a female Chinese teaching assistant, told the opposite. They believed that male teachers are gaining growing popularity and that kindergartens are in desperate need of more male teachers. Many parents express concern that in the absence of a constant male influence, children, especially boys tend to be feminine, and they are not content with the fact that feminine gender-typed activity options greatly outweigh masculine gender-typed ones in kindergartens. Female teachers are more likely to get the children involved in role-plays, read the stories to them, or sing them a song, rather than to do the physical lessons like playing soccer, doing hands-on science experiments, or helping them play with complex construction toys [10].

It is found that girls normally perform better than boys in literacy as well as in kindergartens as early as kindergarten [11]. Some parents blame the discrepancy in the performance on the absence of male teachers and the gender-typicality of the activity. Based on the study conducted by P. Koperna, an overwhelming majority of the parents stressed the need for more male teachers, believing that "a man shapes a positive adult pattern in pre-school children" and "a man working in kindergarten teaches children to break gender stereotypes [12]."

In response to the complaints from the parents and society, the kindergartens are taking concrete steps to draw in more male teachers to mitigate male femininity and cultivate masculinity. Under such circumstances, the male teachers are seen as the "panda teachers". "It is true that male teachers have the physical strength and can provide the children with a sense of security," subject 4 said. In recognition of the unique gender role and the relief they carried to the kindergartens," the male teachers are paid more and more likely to be promoted", subject 4 added, congruous with the statement made by Chan that "male teachers enjoy easier access to career advancement [13]."Although most of my college classmates did not choose to be a kindergarten teacher, I am committed to this job, and I feel the value of respect from the feedback from the parents and kids."Subjects 7 said with conviction.

4.3 The Underlying Gender Stereotype in Male Kindergarten Teachers

Despite the effort to attract more male teachers to get involved in the preschool sector, the prospect looks dim, and the disproportionate representation of males is likely to persist. Overall, low pay is only partly to blame. More precisely, this is a product of systematic prejudice and gender stereotype, both at home and abroad.

Parents pay to send their child to this kindergarten, hoping that being exposed to an English environment could help the kid to pick up the language at an early age. Aware of their role, most of the foreign male teachers were getting used to just being language teachers. For them, it is more appropriate to call this job "an English teacher" rather than a male kindergarten teacher. "Language barrier makes me a friendly and popular teacher and it is more difficult for me to be strict." Subject 2 admitted the language barrier and the unintended benefit.

When the foreign male teachers were asked about their motives for this job, answers varied. Most of them have been teaching English ever since they moved to China. Subject 1 moved to China after he graduated from the UK 3 years ago. For him, it is just another job of teaching languages. "Aided by the TAs who can speak English, communication is not an issue". Among the four foreign teachers interviewed, only Subject 3 showed enthusiasm and interest the preschool education. The deeply-embedded bias is not new to them. "Back home you find the vast majority are female teachers, not just in the kindergartens but in the primary schools and they are dominated by female teachers". "There is a social stigma that man can be seen as a predator. Over the years, the expectation from the society is "women take care of the children and men work and work." Subject 3 confessed. At home or abroad, society still devalues the role of early childhood educators [14], regarding early childhood education as a feminized profession where women are dominant [15]. Born and raised in a place where such a notion prevailed, the foreign teachers felt reluctant to be true kindergarten teacher who was expected to be attentive to the children's need and build an intimate relationship with them.

The interview reveals that compared to their western counterparts, Chinese parents were less open-minded and supportive of their children's work. Subject 6 quoted slang that his father usually said to answer our question about his family and friends' perception of the current job he was doing. The slang is as long as you managed to feed yourself, do not be a teacher of the toddlers. His father insisted that a young male with a master's degree should pursue more and higher. The men who engage the preschool education have long been seen as "male babysitters" or "male auntie", which stems from a deeply rooted bias. In the post-covid era with the frail economy and rampant unemployment, people are seeking steady jobs and high social status. Unfortunately, kindergarten teacher is not on their wish list.

For the foreign male teachers, the challenges are more about the biological features. Subject 3 was keen on education and was committed to this cause. He confessed that the first meeting with the kids turned out to be the most challenging. He, a male with hairy arms and a large figure, "looks intimidating for the young, especially for the first-year kindergarteners". Luckily, children quickly got acquainted with him and gradually they begged him to carry them around the school. The trust built up soon. He found it rewarding to watch the kid grow and get mature.

Surprisingly, racial discrimination extends to the workplace in China. Subject 3 cautioned us that discrimination against colored people, especially black people did exist. His friend, a black American and native speaker, was denied job opportunities many times in China and always got eliminated in the first round. Instead, white people from the English -speaking countries are preferred by many kindergartens and schools. It reflects not only aesthetic values but also deliberate or unintentional discrimination.

5. Suggestions For Improving the Job Satisfaction of Male Kindergarten teachers

5.1 Minimize Gender Stereotypes and Provide a Favorable Social Environment for Male Kindergarten Teachers

The results from the research carried out show that male kindergarten teachers face various social stigmas. They are called "Male aunties" and are confronted with bias. In addition, the parents of Chinese male kindergarten teachers are unsupportive of their work and consider the job of a man in kindergarten to be "undignified". Li suggested that it is significant to change people's traditional idea of early education to improve the recognition of male kindergarten teachers in society [16]. This paper suggests that the government should make policies and initiate media campaigns to increase people's awareness of the training objectives, methods, and achievements of male kindergarten teachers, and let more people recognize the outstanding performances of male kindergarten teachers. This campaign can make male kindergarten teachers better accepted by society, and as suggested by Liang, remove the pressure from the public and embrace a sense of mission [8]. In addition,

"understanding the experiences of men who teach early childhood education in a variety of settings can lead to practices that encourage more men to pursue this profession" [6], and create a supportive environment for the growth and development of the group of male kindergarten teachers in China.

5.2 Improve the Interpersonal Skills of Male Kindergarten Teachers

According to the results from the interviews, the biological features of male teachers will sometimes scare the kids. Apart from that, safety concerns like sexual abuse associated with male figures cause male kindergarten teachers to feel not as equally qualified as female teachers: they are not allowed to enter the kids'dorms and help them get dressed. This dilemma can be solved by enhancing male teachers'social skills so that they can get along well with the kids by better understanding the thoughts and needs of the kids and effectively communicating with them. Li asserts that male and female teachers have different gender features and different teaching styles [16]. Thus, male and female teachers must communicate and learn from each other. Zong suggested that by integrating the teaching methods of female teachers, male teachers can set up their unique working styles and take advantage of the favorable aspects of their gender features, fully exploiting their potential in teaching and taking care of kids [17]. By cooperating with female groups, male teachers can know more about other groups' ways of doing things, and they can quickly fit into the environment in the kindergarten.

5.3 Enlarge the Job Market for Male Kindergarten Teachers

As reported by one male teacher and one female teacher in Beemee Kindergarten, the current job market for male kindergarten teachers is small. Gender stereotypes, social prejudice and the inadequate demand for male teachers, and excess supply results in the conundrum that many of them cannot find a job. The unfavorable situation in the job market causes many undergraduates and graduates previously focusing on the educational field to switch majors and leave the educational field. To solve this problem, it is suggested that the government and social organizations do some promotion to enlarge the job market and increase male teachers' interest in the educational field. More attention should be paid to increasing the opportunity for male university students to contact relevant courses in early childhood education [18]. This can increase the likelihood of retaining more male educators. In addition, the government should do more promotions to the public's awareness of the training systems and goals of cultivating more male kindergarten teachers and increasing kindergartens' demand for more male educators working in the early childhood education field [16]. This can help male teachers achieve self-actualization and have higher job satisfaction and more confidence to stay in the educational field.

6. Conclusion

Four foreign male teachers, two Chinese male teachers, and one Chinese female teacher were interviewed in this research. The qualitative data collected in the interview can be roughly divided into five parts: 'Reasons for working in kindergartens', 'Dissatisfaction with kindergartens', 'Working situation in kindergartens', 'Social prejudice', and 'Prospects for the future'. There has been ambivalence towards the male kindergarten teachers and the impact they have on the children. On the one hand, the fixed gender role and the stereotype in which what the male kindergarten teachers do is contrary to the public expectation and the social norms discourage males from participating in preschool education. On the other hand, in favor of masculinity and strength, society is desperate for more male teachers in preschool education, hoping to create a more masculine teaching environment. Under such circumstances, the male kindergarten teachers are confronted with an array of biases and notion that privileges them. The difference is the stereotype is well established, while the latter has emerged recently, calling for more coordination between society and the individual. Based on the research, gender prejudice against male and female kindergarten teachers will limit and negatively affect both male and female kindergarten teachers. As a result, female

kindergarten teachers must undertake more childcare work, and male kindergarten teachers will also have a lot of fear and focus on classes and education instead of mothering children, which will also deepen the prejudice against parents, and male kindergarten teachers are not suitable for taking care of children. This paper intends to provide a method and idea for solving the problem of the scarcity of male kindergarten teachers. At the same time, it is important to understand the mental journey of these male kindergarten teachers, the current situation faced by male kindergarten teachers in International Kindergartens of China, as well as the gender advantages of male kindergarten teachers to help kindergartens better recruit male kindergarten teachers, and let society reduce the prejudice against male kindergarten teachers. In the future, male kindergarten teachers in the international kindergarten of Changsha can be tracked and investigated, and the scope of the research can be expanded, such as expanding the study and comparison of male kindergarten teachers in public kindergartens. The career development of male kindergarten teachers in the future requires the efforts and cooperation of individuals, kindergartens, and education departments.

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