



Navigating Gender Norms in China's Kindergartens: Male Educators' Perceptions, Challenges, and Strategies in Early Childhood Education

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Author's contribution

Author GC is the sole author of this study. Author GC designed the study, conducted the research, performed data analysis, wrote the protocol and drafted the initial manuscript. Author GC reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the unique challenges faced by male kindergarten teachers within China's predominantly female-centric Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) domain. Utilizing purposive sampling, eight male educators from four kindergartens across Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, and Xiamen were enlisted, encompassing diverse ages, educational backgrounds, years of teaching experience, and specialized age groups of children. Through an integration of focus group discussions and 32 qualitative observational sessions, the research unveils four salient themes: professional gendered challenges, external expectations, confronting biases, and strategies to proactively reshape gender norms. While historical precedence has inadvertently placed male educators in the peripheries, often questioning their nurturing

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capabilities and emotional intelligence, this research shines a light on their resilience and innovative efforts to challenge these deep-seated stereotypes. The findings underline the pressing need for societal and policy shifts in ECEC, transcending gender binaries and prioritizing pedagogical expertise. The research suggests a more inclusive, unbiased ECEC environment, urging a broader perspective that privileges teaching prowess over gendered preconceptions.

Keywords: Male kindergarten teachers; gender norms in ECEC; china's early childhood education; professional gendered challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is marked by a conspicuous gender imbalance, particularly evident from the dominant female representation in countries such as Canada, Germany, and the UK [1]. While nations like Norway, Denmark, and Turkey show a slight movement towards gender parity, China presents an intriguing contrast [2]. Despite over half its population being male, a mere 2% of men serve as full-time preschool educators (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014, cited in Cao & Wu, [3]).

Scholarly investigations have often probed the gender disparities in ECEC roles, attributing them to historical, methodological, and cultural influences [4-6]. Nevertheless, a pronounced gap persists when it comes to understanding the nuances of the Chinese context, with its intricate socio-cultural and political dynamics. The prevailing literature, though vast, provides limited insights into the lived realities of male educators in Chinese kindergartens, particularly within China's unique socio-cultural paradigm. This backdrop, with its blend of time-honoured traditions and contemporary shifts, especially during significant socioeconomic transitions, emerges as a crucial area warranting deeper exploration [7-9].

Positioned against this backdrop, the present research endeavours to bridge this notable void. It delves into the challenges, perceptions, and coping strategies of male educators within China's kindergartens, offering a detailed understanding of the vast canvas of China's evolving gender norms and societal expectations. Furthermore, by juxtaposing this intricate Chinese narrative against a broader international discourse, the research seeks to elucidate contrasts while drawing parallels where relevant.

Geographical diversity within China adds layers to this exploration. The urban-rural divide underscores differential paces of gender norm

evolution [10]. However, a consistent thread is evident across geographies: the sustained influence of traditional gender norms even as emerging trends attempt to redefine them, more so in urban settings [11].

Anchoring this inquiry within the broader ambit of global educational gender dynamics, key works by Connell and Pearse [12] and Pearse and Connell [13] illuminate the overarching challenges and potential advantages of a balanced gender representation in ECEC [2,14,1]. In the Chinese context, insights from Cao and Wu [3], Chen [15], and Han [16] offer a composite picture, elucidating the paucity of male educators, pinpointing the causative factors, and suggesting avenues for redressal.

This study emerges as a novel contribution, aspiring to bridge this existing research gap by weaving together historical perspectives, global gender dynamics, and the tangible experiences of male educators in China. To this end, the research is underpinned by two fundamental objectives:

1. To unravel how male kindergarten teachers perceive and navigate gendered challenges and expectations in their professional roles and to assess the implications of these perceptions on their teaching practices and classroom interactions.
2. To discern the strategies and adaptive measures adopted by male kindergarten teachers in addressing the distinct gender-related challenges inherent to their early childhood educational environment.

In light of these objectives, two pivotal research inquiries guide this exploration:

1. How do male kindergarten teachers perceive and navigate gendered challenges and expectations in their professional roles, and how does this influence their teaching practices and

interactions within the kindergarten setting?

2. What strategies and adaptive measures do male kindergarten teachers employ to overcome or address the unique gender-related challenges they encounter in the early childhood educational environment?

In essence, this study endeavours to foster an enriched, multifaceted comprehension of the complex interplay of gender norms, societal biases, and real-world experiences that male educators in China navigate daily. By delving into the historical contexts, gender dynamics, firsthand narratives, and potential remedial strategies, the research seeks to weave a comprehensive tapestry, enhancing both academic and practical discourse on this significant subject.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The gender disparities within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) field, especially regarding male educators, have garnered attention over the years. While international perspectives have been documented, understanding the unique context of China remains imperative. Through a systematic review of the literature, this section seeks to highlight significant findings from previous studies, emphasizing gaps that signal the necessity for the present research.

As Table 1 indicates, in 2005, Blaise highlighted the prevalent gender discourses within early childhood classrooms. Her work brought forth the importance of understanding gender norms and how these norms could impact career decisions for male educators [17]. While Blaise focused on the broader gender discourses, the specific impact of these norms on male educators' career decisions in Chinese preschools remains underexplored.

Brody [14] offered international perspectives on men in the ECE field, shedding light on the broader global landscape. However, a distinct gap was observed regarding the nuanced experiences, challenges, and perceptions of male preschool educators in China, accentuating the importance of localized studies.

Liu and Feng's [18] exploration into the dilemmas faced by male kindergarten teachers in China underscored the unique challenges they encounter. While they highlighted these

challenges, there exists a need to explore institutional support structures in China that can provide necessary scaffolds for male educators.

Moving forward, Brandes et al. [1] brought attention to the gender-based differences in pedagogical activities within ECE. While they discussed these differences, the comparative analysis between pedagogical approaches of male and female educators, especially within the Asian ECEC context, remains sparse.

Brownhill [2] delved into the 'role model' concept, particularly concerning male ECE educators. His work raises questions about how this concept is perceived in Asian settings and the inherent challenges male educators in Asia might face when positioned as role models.

Chen [15] raised concerns regarding the shortage of male teachers in kindergartens. She emphasized the need to assess the broader implications of this shortage, especially how children's evolving perspectives on gender roles might be affected in settings that lack male representation.

Notably, global perspectives by Connell and Pearse [12] discussed the enduring gender norms in educational arenas. Their work prompts an understanding of how these international norms intersect with local practices and potentially influence male educator roles in China's ECEC landscape.

Moreover, other studies focused on specific challenges faced by male educators, the implications of their scarcity on child development, their roles within early education, and potential countermeasures to address their shortage [3,16,19-21].

To distil, while abundant research touches upon aspects of male educators in ECE settings, a comprehensive understanding of male educators' perceptions, challenges, and strategies within China's kindergarten framework remains largely untouched. This study, titled "Navigating Gender Norms in China's Kindergartens: Male Educators' Perceptions, Challenges, and Strategies in Early Childhood Education," intends to bridge this gap. By anchoring on the identified gaps, the research aims to provide insights into male educators' unique challenges in China's ECEC landscape and the innovative strategies they employ, paving the way for potential reforms and heightened inclusivity in the realm of early childhood education.

Table 1. Literature Review Overview: Male Educators in Early Childhood Education and Care

Year	Author(s)	Main Findings	Identified Gaps
2005	Blaise [17]	Uncovered gender discourses within early childhood classrooms.	Need for a detailed exploration of gender norms and their impact on career decisions of male educators in Chinese preschools.
2014	Brody [14]	Presented international perspectives of men in early childhood education.	Limited data on the daily experiences, challenges, and perceptions of male preschool educators in China.
2014	Liu & Feng [18]	Delved into the dilemmas faced by male kindergarten teachers in China.	A detailed investigation into the institutional support structures that can alleviate the identified challenges faced by male educators in China is essential.
2015	Brandes et al. [1]	Highlighted differences in pedagogical activity based on gender in ECE.	Lack of comparative analysis between pedagogical approaches of male and female educators in the Asian ECEC context.
2015	Brownhill [2]	Explored the 'role model' concept for male ECE educators.	How the "role model" concept is perceived in Asia and the specific challenges faced by male educators in adopting this role.
2015	Chen [15]	Explored the reasons for the shortage of male teachers in kindergartens.	Assessment is needed on the potential implications of the male teacher shortage on children's evolving perspectives on gender roles.
2015	Connell & Pearce [12]	Discussed enduring gender norms in educational arenas worldwide.	The gap exists in understanding how global gender norms influence pedagogical practices and male educator roles in ECEC.
2015	Hu [29]	Compared cultural differences in quality measures in Chinese kindergartens.	An evaluation is required to determine if male educators possess unique approaches that can bridge the identified cultural differences in quality measures.
2015	Li [24]	Discussed the impacts of male preschool teachers on child development.	Research is needed to understand how a more balanced male-to-female educator ratio could influence child development in China's ECEC.
2016	Cao & Wu [3]	Examined reasons for the lack of male kindergarten teachers in China.	Exploration is required on how societal and cultural norms contribute to the underrepresentation of male educators in Chinese preschool settings.
2016	Han [16]	Analyzed the shortage of male kindergarten teachers in China.	Further insights are needed into potential interventions and strategies that could address the evident shortage of male educators in Chinese kindergartens.
2016	Jing [19]	Discussed the implications of the lack of male kindergarten teachers on children's gender development.	Research is necessary to understand how the absence of male kindergarten teachers affects gender norm formation and challenges in early education.
2016	Moss [20]	Discussed the role of men in early childhood education.	A focused study is needed to examine the specific challenges, opportunities, and unique roles of male educators in China's ECEC landscape.
2016	Nagai et al. [30]	Analyzed perceptions of preschool teachers in Japan	A comparative study is essential to gauge the perceptions and experiences of male

Year	Author(s)	Main Findings	Identified Gaps
		regarding classroom management and aggressive behaviours in children.	kindergarten educators in China versus their Japanese counterparts.
2016	Pan & Li [21]	Investigated the shortage of male teachers in kindergartens in China and proposed countermeasures.	Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term effectiveness and educational implications of the proposed countermeasures for the male educator shortage.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

This research employed purposive sampling, zeroing in on male kindergarten teachers from four distinct kindergartens across China: Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, and Xiamen. The sampling ensured a holistic representation, with teachers varying in age, educational backgrounds, years of teaching experience, and their specialized age groups of children, as informed by Cao and Wu [3], Chen [15], and Li and Lu [22].

Table 2 elucidates the profile of each participant, including two university-affiliated observers with specializations in Education and Child Psychology. The teachers range in age from 26 to 43, and their teaching tenures span from 4 to 20 years. While some teachers possess

bachelor's and master's degrees in education and early childhood, others have a background in child psychology or have earned diplomas in childcare. Interestingly, their teaching environments cover a range of age groups, from the youngest at 3 years to the eldest at 6 years.

Table 3, on the other hand, offers an overview of the kindergartens where these educators teach. While all four institutions focus on a general kindergarten curriculum, they vary in terms of operational years, student population, and average class sizes. Kindergarten A and C, based in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, have been operational the longest, serving a relatively larger student population. In contrast, Kindergarten D in Xiamen is relatively new, with five years in operation, yet has a student count comparable to the more established Kindergarten B in Hangzhou.

Table 2. Participant profiles

Participant ID	Age	Educational Background	Tenure (Years of Teaching)	Teaching Environment	Age Group Specialized In
Teacher 1	26	Bachelor's in Education	4	Kindergarten A	3-4 years old
Teacher 2	32	Master's in Early Childhood	6	Kindergarten A	3-4 years old
Teacher 3	37	Bachelor's in Child Psychology	14	Kindergarten B	4-5 years old
Teacher 4	43	Diploma in Childcare	20	Kindergarten B	4-5 years old
Teacher 5	28	Master's in Education	4	Kindergarten C	5-6 years old
Teacher 6	34	Bachelor's in Education	8	Kindergarten C	5-6 years old
Teacher 7	38	Diploma in Childcare	15	Kindergarten D	3-6 years old
Teacher 8	41	Bachelor's in Early Childhood	15	Kindergarten D	3-6 years old
Observer 1	32	PhD in Education	5	University	N/A
Observer 2	29	Master's in Child Psychology	5	University	N/A

Table 3. Kindergarten profiles

Kindergarten ID	Location	Number of Students	Years in Operation	Average Age Group Size	Main Teaching Focus
Kindergarten A	Guangzhou	150	10	25-30 students	General Kindergarten Curriculum
Kindergarten B	Hangzhou	120	8	30-35 students	General Kindergarten Curriculum
Kindergarten C	Shenzhen	95	15	23-28 students	General Kindergarten Curriculum
Kindergarten D	Xiamen	110	5	27-32 students	General Kindergarten Curriculum

Together, these tables provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse educational settings in which male kindergarten teachers navigate their professional roles, laying the groundwork for the insights and challenges explored in this study.

3.2 Data Collection

Data gathering for this study was methodically executed through two primary mechanisms: focus group discussions and qualitative observations. Two focus group sessions, each lasting 60 minutes, were convened, with all eight selected teachers participating in each. Conducted in neutral environments, these sessions were designed to elicit collective perspectives on the experiences of male kindergarten teachers in China, addressing their professional trajectories, inherent challenges, and gender-influenced experiences, as informed by frameworks from Brandes et al. [1] and Brownhill [2]. The research process then transitioned into a meticulous observational phase, where each of the eight teachers was closely monitored across four separate lessons, totalling 32 observation sessions. These observations homed in on teachers' daily interactions with students, the reactions of students, and the interaction between teachers and parents and the nuances of their teaching methods, drawing parallels with insights from Craig [23], Li [24], and Moss [20].

3.3 Data Analysis

Central to the study's analysis are the transcriptions from the focus group sessions. Utilizing the NVivo software, a comprehensive thematic analysis was undertaken. This process

combined both inductive and deductive coding methodologies, as advocated by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane [25]. An enhanced understanding was achieved by comparing themes from the focus groups with specific details from observations, thereby providing a holistic view of the experiences of male kindergarten teachers in China.

To ensure the authenticity and credibility of the findings, triangulation was employed, synthesizing insights from both focus groups and observations. This methodological approach aligns with the practices underscored by James and Busher [26]. Further rigour was added through member checking, where participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to ensure the research conclusions accurately depicted their experiences, a technique inspired by Koch and Farquhar [27].

Participants were briefed comprehensively about the research objectives. Given the sensitive nature of certain discussions, utmost confidentiality was maintained in data storage, adhering to the standards set by Yu and Li [5] and Yin and Lee [4].

The analysis yielded profound insights, articulated using direct quotes from discussions complemented by detailed observational notes. Beyond data representation, the research aimed to contextualize the wider implications for early childhood education in China, specifically addressing gender dynamics. Based on these insights, recommendations were formulated to address gender-specific challenges in the field.

Throughout the research process, a stance of reflexivity was maintained. Efforts were directed

towards recognizing and mitigating potential biases, ensuring they did not skew the research conclusions.

In conclusion, this methodological approach, steeped in qualitative research techniques, sheds light on the complex gender dynamics faced by male kindergarten teachers in China. The resultant insights offer a renewed perspective on gender roles in early childhood education, drawing from pivotal works such as those by Skibsted and Cortes [8] and Wang and Mao [28].

4. RESULTS

In China's kindergartens, male teachers encounter unique challenges shaped by deep-seated gender norms. This study, combining focus group discussions with qualitative observations, highlights four core themes:

professional gendered challenges, external expectations, confronting biases, and reshaping gender norms. These findings underscore the male educators' journey as they both adapt to and challenge the traditional perspectives, aiming for a more inclusive early childhood education landscape in China.

4.1 Focus Group Discussions

In-depth focus group discussions provided insights into the distinct challenges encountered by male kindergarten teachers in China. Table 4 delineates four primary themes, encapsulating their experiences, societal expectations, coping strategies, and proactive initiatives to reshape gender norms. These narratives, complemented by direct quotes from educators, offer a lucid perspective on the intricacies of their professional landscape.

Table 4. Gender-based challenges faced by male kindergarten teachers

Theme	Findings	Quotes
Theme 1: Gendered Challenges in a Professional Context	Most male teachers have faced scepticism about their nurturing capabilities or emotional intelligence in their professional roles.	Teacher 1: "I've had parents ask me indirectly if I have the same 'gentle touch' in teaching as my female counterparts." Teacher 3: "There was hesitation in some parents' eyes, an unspoken question – 'Can he nurture as well as a female teacher?'" Teacher 4: "I was once excluded from a workshop on emotional intelligence. The underlying assumption seemed to be that this wasn't my strong suit." Teacher 5: "During my initial days, parents would frequently ask if there was a female teacher assisting me as if my ability to manage was in question."
Theme 2: Parental and Colleague Expectations	Male teachers often encounter predefined expectations from both parents and colleagues regarding their teaching style, disciplinary approach, and classroom management.	Teacher 6: "A parent once remarked that it's great to have a 'strong male figure' in the classroom. It made me ponder on the weight of that expectation." Teacher 7: "I sometimes feel like the school's unofficial bouncer. It's an odd expectation just because of my gender." Teacher 8: "Many have this preconceived notion that male teachers are more about rules and less about empathy. It's a balance I strive to achieve every day." Teacher 2: "Colleagues sometimes

Theme	Findings	Quotes
Theme 3: Challenges, Biases, and Navigational Strategies	In the professional realm, male teachers detect both overt and covert biases, necessitating the development of strategies to cope with, challenge, or even leverage these biases to their advantage.	ask me to handle students they label as 'troublesome.' They think I have a magic touch, but it's just about connection and understanding." Teacher 1: "I remember being handed the more 'masculine' props during events. Guitars, drums, never the flutes or tambourines." Teacher 2: "Parents assume I'm stricter. So, I set clear classroom rules but combined them with a listening ear, bridging both expectations." Teacher 5: "During school fairs, I often found myself at the sports or science booths. I enjoy them, but sometimes, I wish I could showcase art or crafts too." Teacher 7: "I've turned the 'class dad' label into an advantage, blending the supposed firmness with warmth and understanding."
Theme 4: Addressing and Challenging Gender Norms	Recognizing their distinct position, male teachers believe it's imperative to actively challenge and reframe traditional gender norms, making use of their platform for positive transformation.	Teacher 3: "I started a 'Hero of the Week' segment, showcasing men and women from various professions, ensuring children see beyond traditional roles." Teacher 6: "I regularly incorporate storybooks that challenge gender norms, showing that heroes come in all genders." Teacher 8: "I've organized workshops where boys can explore activities traditionally seen as 'feminine' - from cooking to ballet. It's eye-opening for them." Teacher 4: "Each year, I have a session dedicated to discussing careers, emphasizing that passion, not gender, should be the driving force."

Table 4 meticulously unpacks the multifaceted gender-driven challenges and perceptions faced by male kindergarten teachers, organized into four illuminating themes, and offers insights pertinent to research question 1. The initial theme, "Gendered Challenges in a Professional Context," sheds light on the pervasive doubts about male teachers' nurturing capabilities and emotional intelligence. Their recounted experiences—such as parents questioning their 'gentle touch' or being excluded from workshops on emotional intelligence—demonstrate the scepticism they regularly face. Such doubts may inadvertently compel them to emphasize or

overcorrect these perceived deficiencies in their teaching methods.

The subsequent theme, "Parental and Colleague Expectations," delves deeper into external perceptions. Male educators are often boxed into roles that prioritize strictness and discipline due to assumptions that they should serve as the 'strong male figure' or the school's 'unofficial bouncer.' This pigeonholing likely influences their classroom management styles and interactions as they navigate the delicate balance between societal expectations and genuine connections with their students.

"Challenges, Biases, and Navigational Strategies," the third theme, lays bare the overt and subtle biases male teachers confront. From being allocated stereotypically 'masculine' props to facing expectations of inherent strictness, these biases could inadvertently channel their teaching practices in a particular direction. However, the theme also celebrates their resilience. Some educators craft innovative strategies not only to confront but to artfully utilize these biases, recalibrating their teaching methods to offer a unique blend of firmness and understanding.

Concluding with "Addressing and Challenging Gender Norms," Table 4 emphasizes the instrumental role male kindergarten teachers play in redefining gender norms for their young students. They proactively incorporate initiatives—whether it's the "Hero of the Week" segments, gender-neutral storybooks, or workshops—that challenge traditional gendered

perceptions. By doing so, they not only foster a more inclusive environment but also subtly model for their students that one's profession and passions should not be constricted by gender-based stereotypes.

4.2 Qualitative Observations

This section offers an in-depth examination of male kindergarten teachers' approaches to handling gender challenges within their classrooms, as observed by two distinct observers. The observations span various dimensions, from teacher-student interactions to the nuances in teaching methodologies, providing insights into the evolving dynamics of gender norms in early childhood education. The intricate balance between traditional expectations and progressive teaching strategies becomes evident, illuminating the teachers' pivotal role in shaping young minds against societal biases.

Table 5. Results of qualitative observations

Observational Areas	Findings	Detailed Observations (Observer 1 & 2)
Teacher-Student Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eagerness for physical play with male teachers. - Selection of stories challenging gender roles. 	<p>Observer 1: "In Teacher 5's class, I noticed several instances where stories contained strong female protagonists or male characters in nurturing roles. This seemed to stimulate conversations among students that veered from traditional gender expectations."</p> <p>Observer 2: "Students in Teacher 2's class, particularly the 6-year-olds, showed a notable preference for involving their male teacher in physical activities. They would tug at his hand, urging him to join their games, indicating trust and bonding."</p>
Reactions of Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3-year-old students oblivious to gender norms. - 6-year-old students making gendered comments. 	<p>Observer 1: "Classes with 3-year-old students, especially in Teacher 1's class, expressed genuine curiosity without any apparent gender biases. For instance, both boys and girls were equally excited about playing with dolls or trucks."</p> <p>Observer 2: "In classes with 6-year-old students, I overheard a boy remarking, 'Girls shouldn't play with cars,' hinting at emerging societal influences. It's in stark contrast to the younger age group's behaviours."</p>
Teacher-Parent Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents seeking advice from male teachers on gender-neutral parenting. - Occasional apprehensions about male teachers. 	<p>Observer 1: "A couple approached Teacher 6 seeking advice on how to discourage their son from gender-specific toys after the class. The teacher patiently addressed their concerns, suggesting a diverse range of play activities."</p> <p>Observer 2: "I noticed a parent hesitating to leave their child alone with a male teacher. Upon inquiry, the parent expressed a culturally rooted apprehension, which the teacher gracefully addressed, highlighting his training and dedication to the profession."</p>

Observational Areas	Findings	Detailed Observations (Observer 1 & 2)
Teaching Methods and Content	- Role-playing beyond gender norms. - Diverse teaching aids for all.	Observer 1: "During role-playing sessions, it was heartening to see children being encouraged to choose roles organically. A 6-year-old boy willingly took on the role of a 'mother,' while a girl of the same age chose to be the 'doctor,' challenging traditional gender roles." Observer 2: "Teaching aids in classrooms were varied and seemed designed to prevent early gender stereotyping. In Teacher 3's classroom, for instance, boys and girls collectively engaged with a mix of dolls, kitchen sets, and toolkits, illustrating the school's commitment to a holistic approach."
Teacher's Self-Presentation and Role Modeling	- Older teachers comfortable in roles. - Younger teachers actively challenge norms.	Observer 1: "Teacher 4, being among the more experienced educators, effortlessly infused lessons with examples that subtly questioned gender norms. He didn't overemphasize the gender-neutral approach but rather made it an organic part of his teaching." Observer 2: "Teacher 1, despite being one of the newer educators, showed remarkable commitment to breaking gender stereotypes. He actively participated in 'house play', cooked pretend meals, and even donned a tiara during a role-play session, driving home the message that activities aren't gender-specific."

Table 5 indicates that male kindergarten teachers in China employ deliberate strategies to reshape early childhood perspectives on gender. Their choice of stories introduces broader gender narratives, fostering discussions that challenge traditional views, and their close rapport with students, evident from the eagerness for physical play, emphasizes mutual trust. This contrasts with the growing gender awareness seen in older students, hinting at societal influences that necessitate early educational interventions. The nuanced teacher-parent dynamics reveal both respect for educators' expertise and underlying cultural apprehensions. In classrooms, diverse teaching methods, from role-playing to varied teaching aids, underscore a dedicated effort to counter gender stereotypes. Interestingly, seasoned educators subtly weave gender neutrality into their lessons, while newer teachers take a more audacious stance against entrenched norms. Overall, these observations highlight the pivotal role of male kindergarten teachers in navigating the complex landscape of gender norms, showcasing their commitment to fostering a progressive and inclusive early educational environment.

4.3 Summary of Findings

Within China's kindergartens, this comprehensive study, employing both focus group discussions and qualitative observations,

unveils the multifaceted challenges male kindergarten teachers face, challenges deeply rooted in longstanding gender norms. A significant revelation of this research is the scepticism male educators routinely face about their nurturing abilities and emotional insight. This scepticism, borne out of embedded societal beliefs, often obliges them to amplify and accentuate their nurturing aspects.

Furthermore, these educators are ensnared in a web of external expectations. Parents and colleagues often hold preconceived notions about their teaching methodologies, viewing them predominantly as disciplinarians or as symbolic 'strong male figures.' Such stereotypes exert pressure on these educators, compelling them to constantly refine and adjust their teaching styles. They aim to strike a harmonious balance between meeting these expectations and remaining authentic to their intrinsic teaching philosophy.

Amid these challenges, male teachers also encounter both blatant and subtle biases in their professional sphere. They're frequently typecast into 'masculine' roles during school events or perceived as naturally more strict. However, a noteworthy finding is the resilience and adaptability displayed by many of these educators. Rather than being stifled by these biases, they ingeniously transform them into

innovative teaching approaches, offering a unique fusion of firmness and empathy.

Perhaps the most salient takeaway is the proactive role these male kindergarten teachers undertake to challenge prevailing gender norms. Recognizing their influential position, they implement several initiatives that both question and reframe traditional gender perspectives. Through diverse teaching aids, role-playing activities, and story selections, they conscientiously cultivate an inclusive classroom environment. Their endeavours extend beyond mere education; they actively shape young minds to embrace a more expansive worldview that eschews restrictive gender-based stereotypes.

In conclusion, male kindergarten teachers in China, while navigating a complex terrain laden with gender biases, emerge as pioneering agents of change. Their persistent efforts underscore a commitment to not only challenge but also reshape societal gender norms, fostering a more inclusive and progressive early educational milieu.

5. DISCUSSION

The study's findings present a detailed understanding of the challenges confronted by male kindergarten teachers in China, illustrating their transformative journeys in an educational landscape predominantly occupied by women. Historically, women have been at the forefront of early childhood education, which has often marginalized male educators and, in some instances, questioned their nurturing abilities and emotional insights [15]. This perception of marginalization and scepticism aligns with the insights provided by Pan and Li [21], which spotlighted societal concerns regarding the emotional competencies of male educators.

The narratives derived from this research unravel the complex layers of societal and professional stereotypes faced by male educators. They frequently reveal feelings of pressure to emphasize their nurturing qualities, countering prevailing societal doubts. Such sentiments highlight societal stereotypes but also counter them, showcasing the innovative teaching methodologies employed by these male educators. These methodologies, often melding firmness with empathy, dispute conventional binary perspectives on gender roles in the educational sphere.

These insights have implications that reach beyond just the realm of education. They touch upon the more extensive dynamics of gender and societal norms. As these educators navigate the intricacies of external expectations and gender biases, they underscore the pressing need for a societal shift away from entrenched gender norms. Their challenges and the methods they use to counter these biases indicate that conceptions of effective educators should evolve, free from gender constraints.

In the wider societal context, the initiative taken by these educators to challenge and reshape gender perspectives exemplifies the critical role educational institutions can play in framing inclusive societal narratives. In comparison with the existing body of work, this study finds both alignments and novel perspectives. The challenges posed by societal expectations for male teachers, as highlighted by Wang [28], find strong echoes in the testimonies gathered from the focus group discussions of this study. However, a distinguishing feature of this research is its emphasis on the adaptability and resilience displayed by male educators, highlighting their strategic approaches to leveraging these biases to their advantage.

While prior studies, like the one conducted by Moss [20], focused predominantly on the adversities faced by male educators, this research underscores their proactive roles. The emphasis lies in their agency in actively challenging and redefining gender norms within their educational environments. However, certain limitations of the study warrant acknowledgement. The research methodologies used, specifically focus group discussions and qualitative observations, inherently possess subjective elements. Geographically, the study centres on specific regions within China, which may not capture the diverse experiences of male educators elsewhere in the country. Furthermore, while the research delves deeply into the narratives of educators, it might not encompass the full range of perspectives from students and parents.

In summation, the roles and experiences of male kindergarten teachers in China, as elucidated by this study, mirror the broader clash between established societal norms and the evolving dynamics of gender in education. Despite facing numerous challenges, these educators emerge as pioneers, advocating for a more inclusive and progressive early educational system. Their

experiences emphasize the urgent need to approach education without gender biases, focusing on the foundational principles of effective teaching and genuine student connections.

6. CONCLUSION

In synthesizing the crux of this research, it becomes evident that the experiences of male kindergarten teachers in China serve as a compelling microcosm of larger societal discourses on gender roles and expectations. The study illuminates not just the challenges these educators face but also their tenacity and resilience in navigating a traditionally female-dominated terrain. Their narratives highlight both the systemic barriers posed by entrenched societal norms and the innovative strategies they employ to challenge and reshape these norms within their classrooms. Such a nuanced understanding contributes significantly to the academic field, broadening the perspective on gender dynamics in early childhood education. Their transformative journeys echo the broader call for a more inclusive educational landscape, where educators are judged not by their gender but by their capability, commitment, and compassion. Furthermore, based on these findings, it is recommended that educational bodies and policymakers introduce policies that promote gender inclusivity, devise training sessions tailored for male educators to counter gender biases, and integrate curriculum topics that challenge traditional gender norms. This holistic approach ensures that young learners are exposed to a balanced perspective, thereby laying the foundation for a progressive society that values equity over stereotypes.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the intricate experiences and challenges faced by male kindergarten teachers in China, as elucidated in the study, it is recommended that educational institutions and policymakers actively promote gender inclusivity in the early childhood education sector. Initiatives should be taken to challenge and deconstruct pre-existing gender stereotypes that question the emotional and nurturing capacities of male educators. Professional development workshops should be inclusive, ensuring male teachers are not sidelined or excluded based on presumptions about their emotional intelligence. Schools should actively create platforms for open dialogues involving parents, educators, and

administrative staff to address and dispel any unfounded apprehensions regarding male educators. Furthermore, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the educational milieu, future research should expand its scope to incorporate perspectives from students, parents, and diverse regions within China. By adopting these recommendations, the educational sector can move towards fostering an environment where pedagogical expertise is prioritized over gendered stereotypes, thereby ensuring that every child benefits from a rich tapestry of diverse educator experiences.

CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and standards of Taylor's University. Ethical approval for the research, including the recruitment of participants, data collection, and data analysis, was obtained from Taylor's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the commencement of the study. The research procedures followed relevant guidance and rules.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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