THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MALE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN SHENZHEN, CHINA

JI YUEYANG

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

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JI YUEYANG

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of male early childhood teachers (MECTs) in Shenzhen, China, focusing on how they navigate occupational gender stereotypes in a female-dominated field. The problem addressed is the significant gender imbalance in early childhood education (ECE) and the societal biases that undervalue male participation. The objectives are to understand the challenges and advantages experienced by MECTs, investigate how MECTs make sense of their lived experiences, and explore their perceptions of their roles in ECE.

The methodology involves a qualitative, phenomenological approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and reflective journals to gather data. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences.

Findings indicate that MECTs face significant challenges, including societal bias, low salary, and low status. They often experience prejudice from various societal groups, with younger individuals focusing on low income and older individuals viewing the profession as requiring less competence. Despite these challenges, MECTs also find unique advantages, such as preferential treatment in job recruitment and a strong bond with children.

The conclusion emphasizes the need for increased societal awareness and support for MECTs to promote gender diversity in ECE. By understanding and addressing the occupational gender stereotypes that MECTs face, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for all children.

Keywords: Male Early Childhood Teachers, Occupational Gender Stereotypes, Early Childhood Education, Gender Diversity

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka pengalaman hidup guru lelaki dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak (MECT) di Shenzhen, China, dengan fokus pada bagaimana mereka mengemudi stereotaip jantina pekerjaan dalam bidang yang didominasi oleh wanita. Masalah yang dibincangkan adalah ketidakseimbangan jantina yang ketara dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak dan prasangka masyarakat yang merendahkan penyertaan lelaki. Objektifnya adalah untuk memahami cabaran dan kelebihan yang dialami oleh MECT, menyiasat bagaimana MECT memahami pengalaman hidup mereka, dan meneroka persepsi mereka terhadap peranan mereka dalam ECE.

Metodologi melibatkan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologi, menggunakan wawancara mendalam dan jurnal reflektif untuk mengumpul data. Pendekatan ini membolehkan pemahaman yang mendalam tentang pengalaman peserta dan makna yang mereka lampirkan pada pengalaman tersebut.

Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa MECT menghadapi cabaran besar, termasuk prasangka masyarakat, gaji rendah, dan status rendah. Mereka sering mengalami prasangka dari pelbagai kumpulan masyarakat, dengan individu yang lebih muda menumpukan pada pendapatan rendah dan individu yang lebih tua melihat profesion ini sebagai kurang memerlukan kompetensi. Walaupun menghadapi cabaran ini, MECT juga mendapati kelebihan unik, seperti layanan istimewa dalam pengambilan kerja dan hubungan yang kuat dengan kanak-kanak.

Kesimpulannya menekankan keperluan untuk meningkatkan kesedaran masyarakat dan sokongan untuk MECT bagi mempromosikan kepelbagaian jantina dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak. Dengan memahami dan menangani stereotaip jantina pekerjaan yang dihadapi oleh MECT, adalah mungkin untuk mewujudkan persekitaran pendidikan yang lebih inklusif dan adil untuk semua kanak-kanak.

Keywords: Guru Awal Kanak-kanak Lelaki, Stereotaip Jantina Pekerjaan, Pendidikan Awal Kanak-Kanak, Kepelbagaian Jantina

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ECE   :   Early childhood education

ECTs   :   Early childhood teachers

MECTs   :   Male early childhood teachers

EECERA   :   European early childhood education research association

NBS   :   National bureau of statistics of China

MOE   :   Ministry of education

OECD   :   Organisation for economic co-operation and development

OHCHR   :   Office of the high commissioner for human rights

UNICEF   :   United nations international children's emergency fund

SCM   :   Stereotype Content Model

SIGs   :   Special interest groups

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Beliefs in inherent differences in abilities between men and women have contributed to distinct career choices and the development of gender-based division of labor in society (Sullivan et al., 2020). Early Childhood Education (ECE) has often been perceived as a predominantly "women's job" due to its association with emotional labor and caregiving (Rohrmann, 2020; Xu, 2020). However, in China, the admiration for masculine qualities has led to a warm reception of men in the ECE profession (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Despite this, the silence of men working in non-traditional roles masks legitimate questions about the prevailing societal norms. This study aims to provide male early childhood teachers (MECTs) with an opportunity to share their experiences and gain deeper insights into their lives within the field of ECE.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the background and rationale behind this study. Following this, a concise problem statement is presented, which leads to the formulation of three specific research objectives and corresponding research questions. The significance and scope of the study are then elaborated upon, highlighting its relevance and potential impact. Lastly, the chapter concludes by defining key terms used throughout this study.

1.2 Background of the Study

In traditional societies, the patriarchal system has maintained men's dominant status, establishing gender differences during social construction. In family dynamics, men

typically take on instrumental roles, providing financially, while women assume expressive roles, focusing on caregiving and childcare (Bales & Parsons, 1956; Fényes et al., 2020). This gendered division of labor extends to the labor market, where men dominate prestigious, technical professions, and women often occupy low-authority, non-technical roles, reinforcing social biases (Connell, 1987).

Early childhood teachers (ECTs) are often seen as an extension of maternal care, making it a female-dominated profession (Xu, 2020). Women are viewed as ideal teachers for young children due to perceived natural maternal instincts (Ailwood, 2007). Conversely, societal norms expect men to display aggression, competitiveness, and ambition (Connell, 2005), with deviations potentially leading to repercussions (Halper et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2015). Female-dominated professions often struggle for recognition and equitable compensation (Kurt Yılmaz & Sürgevil Dalkılıç, 2020).

MECTs face obstacles such as accusations of pedophilia (McGrath et al., 2020; Moreau & Brownhill, 2017), gender stereotypes (McGrath et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2018; Xu, 2020), and stigmatization, which can lead to closer scrutiny and unwarranted suspicions from parents and guardians. This stigma may cause male teachers to leave the profession (Bhana et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2018).

Despite these challenges, men in ECE may benefit from preferential hiring and career advancement opportunities compared to women (Fapohunda, 2018; Turkmen & Eskin Bacaksiz, 2021). However, gender-dominant discourse still influences the field, perpetuating gender inequality (Peeters et al., 2015).

In the context of China, this study sheds light on the situation of MECTs. The call for male teachers in China is driven by concerns over the "boys' crisis" and the perception

of the teaching profession becoming increasingly feminized (Si & Yang, 2022). Over the past few decades, Japanese and South Korean popular culture has captivated Asia, with the portrayal of "pretty boys" gaining immense popularity among the younger generation in China. These boys are characterized by their refined appearance and gentle demeanor, presenting a stark contrast to the traditional image of strong and rugged masculinity. This cultural influence has shaped the perceptions of an ideal male among Chinese youth. Some media, public figures, and academics lament the easy acceptance of these new gender images by the youth and worry that Chinese boys might gravitate towards gender-blurred popular cultures as they mature, veering away from traditional male roles. These concerns intertwine with various challenges faced by boys in education and upbringing, including academic struggles, weakened physical health, emotional fragility, and psychological resilience, alongside the absence of paternal roles in some families.

These apprehensions reflect society's unease about boys deviating from conventional gender norms, contributing to what is now known as the "boys' crisis" in contemporary China (Han et al., 2022; Li, 2019; Luo et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2010).

This phenomenon has sparked significant attention across various sectors of Chinese society, leading to a heightened focus on gender issues and discussions surrounding male qualities in recent years. As the field of ECE undergoes reforms and advancements, concerns about the "boys' crisis" have now extended into the realm of ECE, prompting discussions about the gender imbalance within the preschool teaching workforce. People have begun to recognize that a predominantly female group of ECTs might impede the development of children's personalities and limit the

cultivation of diverse thinking styles, ultimately hindering their comprehensive growth and development (Fan & Huang, 2016; Si & Yang, 2022; Wang, 2018).

As a result, the significance and indispensable role of MECTs have come to the forefront. The call for actively recruiting men into the ECE field has been resonating across society, with many regions implementing preferential policies to attract more male educators into this workforce. As such, the quest for MECTs is deeply connected to the broader societal discussions surrounding masculinity, gender norms, and the evolving roles of men and women in modern China.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

The participation of men in ECE holds great significance. Their involvement challenges ingrained gender stereotypes, fosters professionalization, and expands children's future life and career possibilities (Eidevald et al., 2020). It also advances the goal of achieving gender equality (Rohrmann, 2020). However, cultural norms have traditionally constructed ECE as a female occupation (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018), creating complex dynamics for MECTs regarding gender roles and expectations. Male professionals in ECE face heightened pressure due to societal adherence to gender binaries (Brody et al., 2021). Gender stereotypes not only perpetuate distinct societal expectations concerning the roles, functions, and powers of men and women (Ukraine, 2018, p5), but also contribute to the mutual opposition between different gender roles (Clarke, 2020). This dynamic becomes evident when occupational gender stereotypes manifest, leading to the exclusion of one gender from certain professions considered to be more suitable for the other gender. As ECE is often seen as "women's work" (Warin & Adriany, 2017), it carries inherent biases that discourage male

participation. This leads to bias, discrimination, and social marginalization, limiting the impact of male professionals in shaping early childhood education.

Male practitioners often face cultural sanctions and societal biases, which are primary deterrents in this field, beyond issues of salary and benefits (Peeters et al., 2015; Plaisir et al., 2021). This may explain high turnover rates and low male participation in ECE. Bhana et al. (2022) advocate for a bottom-up approach to challenge the gendered nature of ECE, encouraging introspection to achieve social equity. Male practitioners, as a minority, highlight gender stereotypes and inequality, influencing their interactions with children (Bhana et al., 2021). They play a crucial role in optimizing ECE practices and promoting gender equality (Eidevald et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2020; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019; Xu et al., 2020). While they can drive transformative change, they may also reinforce gender hierarchies by emphasizing traditional masculine traits (Warin, 2019). Understanding their experiences sheds light on how masculinities are asserted, shaped, or resisted, impacting gendered practices in ECE and the broader pursuit of gender fairness.

From a theoretical perspective, international academic studies on men in female-dominated industries primarily concentrate on exploring the challenges and experiences encountered by men entering such occupational fields, alongside the negotiation and reconstruction of their male identity (Chan & Fang, 2021). Notably, a significant proportion of this research has been focused on the nursing profession, with limited literature available on male preschool teachers. Moreover, the scarcity of

publications in English addressing the experiences of Chinese MECTs is quite evident (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Conversely, research in China concerning MECTs predominantly revolves around three key areas: the pre-service training system, the post-entry work environment encompassing management styles, and post-entry training and development. Additionally, it delves into aspects related to identity formation, attrition, and turnover, wherein the emphasis is placed on the perceived challenges in the career development of MECTs (Zhang, 2020). As a result, this study is poised to make a significant contribution by enriching the existing literature on MECTs in China, thereby providing valuable insights to both domestic and international academic research in this vital field.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In the backdrop of the "boy crisis", the call for MECTs in Chinese society reflects deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and essentialist inclinations. Despite the limited empirical evidence supporting any direct link between teacher gender and educational outcomes for boys (see Mengel et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2015; Puhani, 2018; Watson, 2017; Watson et al., 2019), the hiring of male teachers is still widely perceived as a "commonsense" approach to address the perceived "feminization" of the teaching workforce and to tackle concerns about the potential impact of this trend on boys' education. The subdued presence of MECTs in non-traditional roles obscures the crucial need to question the current practices (Yan, 2019). These practices persist due to their perpetuation in public and political discourse, often adopted unquestioningly by certain researchers.

In present-day China, the pervasive societal expectation of adhering to traditional gender norms persists, where "boys should act like boys, and girls should act like girls" (Li & Yan, 2021). The concept of a "boy crisis" has been introduced, hinting at an educational concern (Zhao et al., 2010), although its acceptance remains debated. Nevertheless, male teachers are closely associated with discussions on boys' education.

In contemporary kindergartens, there is a predominant presence of female teachers, raising concerns about potential imbalances in gender representation (see Wang, 2021; Yan, 2019). The inclusion of male teachers is seen as a way to address this issue and rebuild the sense of masculinity that some believe is threatened by the perceived 'feminization' of the education system (Cao & Wu, 2016; Chen, 2018; Luo et al., 2019). Male teachers are expected to embody traditional male traits, serving as role models to guide boys in becoming 'real men' (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018).

Additionally, it is believed that gender awareness developed during early childhood significantly influences children's gender role identity and behavior. As MECTs assume a 'fatherly' role, they become objects of identification and imitation for young children (Luo et al., 2019; Wu, 2013). This transference of the heterosexual family structure into the educational setting leads to concerns that the absence of male teachers might hinder the development of essential qualities such as resilience, bravery, leadership, and independence in children (Xu & Gong, 2021).

By employing male teachers as role models for boys, the prevailing notion that 'boys will become boys' is reinforced, reinforcing essentialist beliefs that males' biological structure uniquely qualifies them to understand and guide boys' needs.

MECTs entering ECE field may enjoy certain advantages due to the cultural appreciation of masculinity in Chinese society, resulting in favorable opportunities for recruitment and promotion. However, alongside these benefits, they also encounter challenges rooted in gender stereotypes, facing accusations of not fitting traditional expectations (Si & Yang, 2022). Bhana et al. (2022) have highlighted that mechanisms advocating for male participation in childcare can paradoxically be used to undermine or resist their involvement.

Data from the Chinese Ministry of Education spanning from 2011 to 2019 reveals a decline in the percentage of male practitioners in ECE, dropping from 8.95% in 2011 to 7.72% in 2019 (see Figure 1.1). This persistent gender imbalance in the field warrants a deeper analysis of the psychological and professional obstacles faced by male educators.

Figure 1.1

The Percentage of Men in Kindergartens from 2011-2019
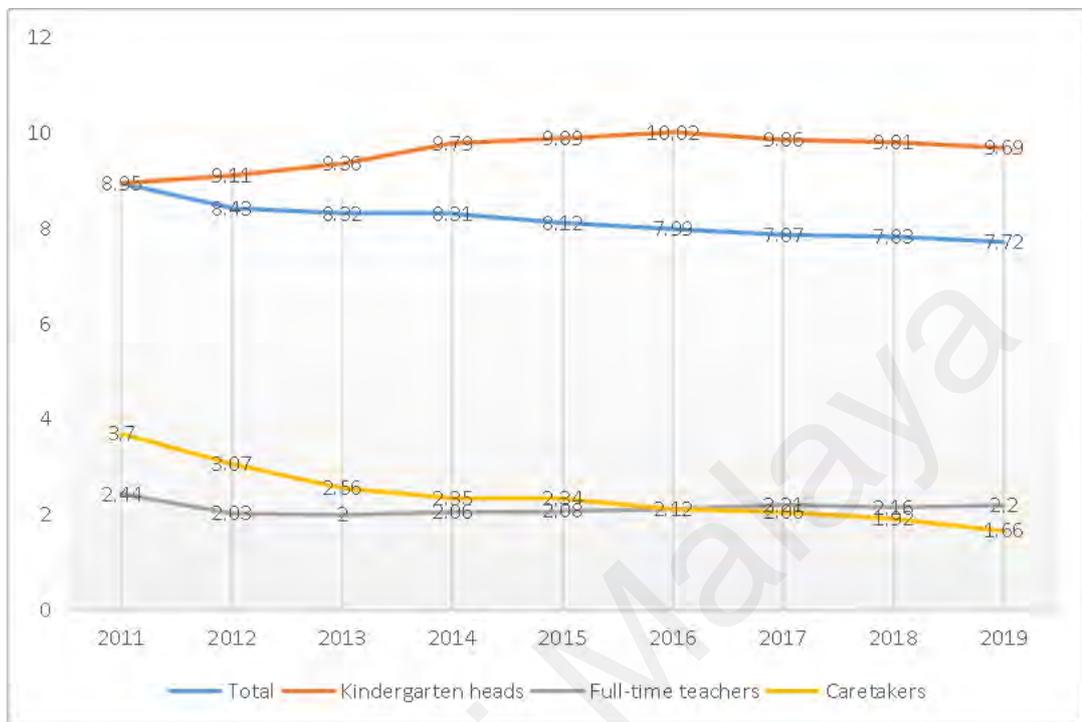
Understanding how male teachers interpret their experiences in ECE can provide valuable insights into their self-perception and how they are perceived by others. Through interviews with male preschool teachers, this study aims to uncover their perspectives on working in the ECE field, shedding light on gender-related issues within early education. By doing so, it can contribute to creating a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse educational environment, offering support and guidance. As previously mentioned, male teachers play a crucial role in discussions about optimizing ECE and promoting gender equality (Eidevald et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2020; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019; Xu et al., 2020). Additionally, the research is expected to raise MECTs' awareness of gender stereotypes, fostering a greater understanding of their roles, and encouraging them to move away from essentialist

thinking. This shift will empower more men to challenge gender stereotypes actively and contribute to advancing gender equality policies, thus fostering positive gender transformation in the ECE workforce (Warin et al., 2021).

In-depth interviews offer a profound insight into the intricate gender experiences of male professionals in ECE, making phenomenological investigation a valuable approach to explore specific challenges encountered by men in female-dominated work environments. By comprehending the life experiences of men in such fields, policymakers, leaders, and female practitioners in ECE can gain a deeper understanding of this group's personal journeys through narratives, ultimately fostering a more gender-sensitive and empathetic workforce.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the lived experiences of MECTs in ECE.

2. To investigate how MECTs interpret and perceive the occupational gender stereotypes they encounter in their professional environment.

3. To examine how these lived experiences shape MECTs' perceptions of their role in ECE.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions posed stem from the research objectives of this research. The following are the four research questions posed throughout this research.

1. What are the lived experiences of MECTs?

2. How do MECTs make sense of their lived experiences？

3. What are male teachers' perceptions of their role in ECE based on their lived experiences?

1.7 The Significance of the Study

This study is conducted to provide insights to upper managers such as kindergarten heads in China's ECE industry. The call for men in ECE is in line with the global trend, but the increase in men has been restrained in traditional gender discourse. As the women's campaign for equality has shown, the field of employment should not be limited to a single gender. The limited number of men who choose to engage in ECE can be seen as a campaign for equality. In many ways, men engaged in ECE are not very different from those of women who have challenged gender stereotypes in what used to be traditional male professions such as finance and military. ECE should not be considered feminine and more efforts should be made to involve more men.

This study provides a new way for policymakers to switch from the perspective of strengthening masculinity to a new perspective to rethink the purpose of recruiting more men in ECE, which may will lead to the promotion of relevant industries to formulate appropriate training strategies for the healthy career development of MECTs.

In addition, there is a common phenomenon in domestic kindergartens in China that many boys are used to play with building blocks while girls would like to draw and read story books that seems to be relatively quiet, which may not be unrelated to the teacher's subconscious guidance. Just like the experiment about girl toys versus boy

toys conducted by BBC STORIES in 2017, when a little girl wears boy's clothes, the volunteer adult tends to provide the child with toys that usually boys like to play with, such as toy cars and robots, vice versa. This study may help to evoke reflection on gender equality education for ECTs to a certain extent by examining gender stereotypes and the roles of male teachers.

1.8 Limitation

There may be some potential limitations that need to be mentioned in this study. The sample population is in Shenzhen city, which may not be representative of the general population of male teachers in ECE of China as well as the finding of this study may not be representative of other parts of China. The sample size of only five MECTs returns limited data. In addition, the collected data only bases on male perspective may be a limitation, either.

This study employs semi-structured interviews via social media Wechat and interviewees are volunteers or selected on purpose that an sufficiently close rapport with participants may not be established fully but the duration of the interview will be promised. This study only adopts the interview protocol but multiple interviews with MECTs in different positions may to the greatest extent help overcome this limitation in that allows either the participants' perspectives to be clarified or more details to be elicited. The main language used in interviews is Chinese, which will be translated into English when analyzing and coding. Language conversion will reduce the accuracy to a certain extent, but accuracy will be pursued to the greatest extent.

1.9 Scope of the Study

In the context of patriarchy globally, the gender stereotypes encountered by MECTs in China have common characteristics with other countries, but also have their particularities due to the cultural and historical development of different countries. At the same time, the foothold of gender stereotypes is still on the understanding of gender relations. Therefore, this study will cut in from the perspective of China's historical and cultural development and the elaboration of gender relations.

This study will take a qualitative approach. Due to the need to collect data on the subjectivity, life experience and opinions of each participant, this research will adopt a phenomenological research method, so that the participants can have an in-depth explanation of the research problem.

In addition, China has a vast territory and a large population, and there are gaps in economic and educational levels between different regions. The target city of this study is a developed city, so it may be more open to male teachers participating in ECE. Therefore, if future research can be carried out at different geographical locations in China, especially in rural areas and in different gender, it will gain rich data and have a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of gender stereotypes and the role of male teachers.

Last but not least, this study on MECTs belongs to the field of gender balance, but it does not elaborate the participation and role of male teachers from the perspective of the dominant female teachers in ECE. Studying problems from the single dimension

of male teachers may cause the data analysis results to be skewed to one side. Moreover, as a female researcher, my personal experiences with and perception of male teachers may bias my data analysis.

1.10 Operational Definition

In order to enable readers to better understand this study, several items used in this study will be conceptually and operationally defined as follows:

1.10.1 Early Childhood Education

In previous research, ECE is broadly defined as programs serving children from birth to eight years old (UNICEF, 2012; Kapur, 2018). Kapur (2018) explains that ECE helps children "acquire a smooth understanding of the entire education from the level of play group to pre-primary and from pre-primary to the level of primary" (p. 1) and encompasses "skills, knowledge, attitudes, habits, communication, cognitive skills, intellectual abilities, wisdom, astuteness, righteousness and honesty" (p. 2). The OECD describes ECE as a "holistic concept that involves developing cognitive and social-emotional skills that are inter-related and mutually reinforcing" (n.d.). Cascio (2021) defines it as "formal programs offering group instruction for children younger than the standard eligibility age for public education"(p. 1).

In this study, ECE specifically refers to the care and education of preschool children aged three to six in China. According to the MOE of China (2001), education at this stage should integrate care and education, promoting comprehensive development in physical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic aspects. Physical education focuses on

physical development and cultivating healthy habits. Intellectual education involves enhancing language, environmental understanding, and practical skills. Moral education emphasizes developing good morals, behavior, and habits, such as honesty and politeness. Aesthetic education encourages an appreciation for beauty and creative expression.

1.10.2 Male Early Childhood Teacher

In Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2008), teacher refers to "one skilled in teaching" (p. 525), therefore, the male early childhood teacher refers to the male full-time one skilled in teaching serving children between the ages of three to six years old in this study.

1.10.3 Occupational Gender Stereotypes

According to gender role theory, stereotypes emerge from observing the roles played by women and men in society. In essence, stereotypes are formed based on the observed distribution of different gender groups across various social structures (Eagly & Sreffen, 1984; Haines et al., 2016). Occupational stereotypes, on the other hand, develop when individuals witness individuals in a particular profession fulfilling their typical occupational roles (He et al., 2019), and essentially, these stereotypes are a manifestation of gender biases. To be more precise, occupational stereotypes are defined by King et al. (2006) as "preconceived attitudes about a particular occupation, the people employed in that occupation, or even one's own suitability for that profession" (p. 1145). Koch et al. (2015) further elaborated that gender-based

occupational stereotypes encompass collective beliefs about the expected gender of typical members in a profession and the gender attributes deemed necessary for success in that occupation. He et al. (2019) asserted that occupational stereotypes relate to "the specific professions or jobs held by individuals and the individuals employed in those occupations" (p. 2). These stereotypes significantly contribute to the perception and formation of occupational role expectations among members of the professional group (Walker, 1958).

In this study, occupational gender stereotypes refer to preconceived attitudes and beliefs about specific professions or jobs, including the people employed in those occupations, based on their perceived gender. These stereotypes arise from observing the distribution of different gender groups in various professions and the roles they typically play within those occupations.

1.10.4 Role of Male Early Childhood Teachers

Roles are significant in our lives, as Ganguly (2020) mentioned that "roles help in maintaining some kind of social order and predictability in interactions" (p. 132). In the last century, role theorists have reached a consensus that the basic concerns of role are "characteristic behaviors, parts to be played, and scripts for behavior" (Biddle, 1986, p. 69). Biddle suggested that role should be "generated by norms, beliefs, and preferences" (Biddle, 1986, p. 87). Turner (2001) argued that role deal with "the organization of social behavior at both the individual and the collective levels" (p. 233) and he further pointed out that at both levels, role refer to " a cluster of behaviors and

attitudes that are thought to belong together, so that an individual is viewed as acting consistently when performing the various components of a single role and inconsistently when failing to do so" (p. 233) . Role is also defined in the organization associated with identities. According to Sluss, van Dick and Thompson (2011), "the concept of identity within organizational research has traditionally focused upon how a collective (e.g., organization, team, occupation) or social category (e.g., gender, nationality) influences one's self-concept and, in turn, behavior. Nevertheless, organizational roles and their subsequent relationships also have a central influence on one's identity at work" (p. 2).

In this study, the role of MECTs refers to the specific position and distinctive contributions that men in ECE should have in the ECE setting.

1.11 Summary

In China, the serious imbalance gender structure of teachers in ECE has led to the worries about the feminization of boys. At the moment, it seems that it is more acceptable to hope that children's masculinity will be cultivated by the increase in the number of male teachers. The root of the masculine education actually comes from gender stereotypes. Therefore, this study will explore the impact of gender stereotypes on China's ECE and bring reflections on ECE and its stakeholders who excessively pursue "masculinity".

This study also aims to advocate the transformation of the role and identity of MECTs, calling for improving the gender sensitivity of ECE industry teachers, so that every

child has the opportunity to fully participate in society, participate in various activities in kindergartens, and get a comprehensive and rich life experience instead of restricted by gender.

The second chapter will first review the relevant literature on the theory of gender organization and introduce key concepts of gender, masculinities, body-reflective practice and doing gender. Second, I will briefly introduce the development of early childhood education in China to provide basic information about the historic and cultural roots of gender stereotypes of ECTs. Finally, this chapter ends with a review of the latest research findings on this topic.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study examines the lived experiences of MECTs in Shenzhen, exploring relevant theories and past studies. The theoretical foundation comprises (1) Connell's theory of masculinities, emphasizing how societal norms shape masculine identities; and (2) body-reflective practice, which explores how male teachers navigate gender expectations within their roles. Additionally, (3) doing gender theory investigates how male teachers interact within a gendered workplace, while (4) gendered organizations theory examines structural barriers affecting gender diversity in the field. The conceptual framework centers on occupational gender stereotypes, which influence the recruitment and retention of male teachers and impact their job satisfaction. It will also review previous studies focusing on men in traditionally female occupations, men in the field of ECE, and MECTs in China. This review aims to shed light on the complexities of gender dynamics in the ECE profession and contribute to fostering a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

2.2 Connell's Theory of Masculinities

Connell focuses on the issue of masculinities within social relations and historical contexts (Zhan, 2015), a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts in Connell's theory of masculinities helps to understand how and why gender stereotypes

are constantly replicated and sustained in the ECE industry, which lay the foundation for the discussion of the role of MECTs in China.

2.2.1 Masculinities

Connell (2009) defines gender as the structure of social relations centered on the reproductive arena and the practices that differentiate bodies in social processes (p. 11). This concept is not based on biology but is a historical process involving the body, making gender a form of social embodiment shaped by personal life history, discourse, ideology, and institutions (Connell, 2009). Connell (2005) describes masculinity as a position in gender relations and the practices through which individuals engage with these positions, resulting in specific bodily experiences, personalities, and cultures (p. 71). Masculinity, therefore, is not inherently tied to biological sex and can be constructed through gender practice (Zhan, 2015). It is often defined in contrast to femininity, and many stakeholders in ECE focus on simplified gender discussions, leading MECTs to conform to these expectations (Rohrmann, 2020).

Connell (2005) further explains that multiple masculinities exist within a hierarchy: hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity is considered the ideal type, promoting patriarchy and men's dominance over women, characterized by traits like heterosexuality and physical strength. Complicit masculinity includes men who benefit from patriarchal structures without embodying all traits of hegemonic masculinity, such as those who do housework and respect women. Marginalized masculinity involves the intersection of masculinity with other

structures like race and class, often lacking dominance, exemplified by marginalized groups like black men or the disabled. Subordinate masculinity includes those oppressed by patriarchy, such as homosexuals and feminized men. These types of masculinities are fluid and interact dynamically.

Figure 2.1

Hierarchy of Connell's Masculinities
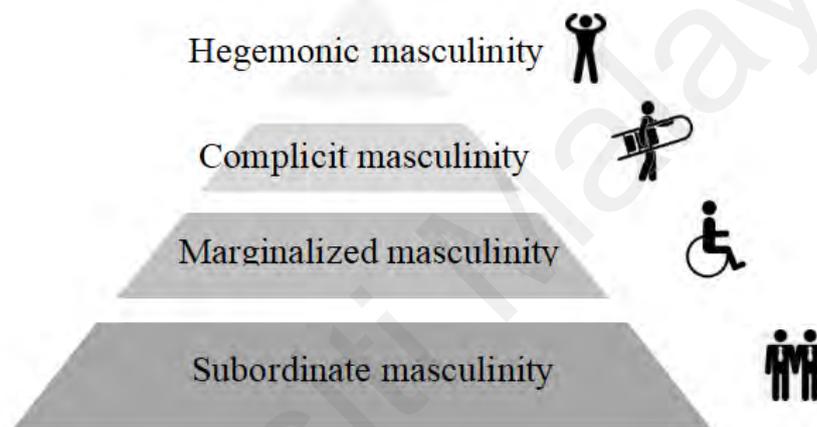
Gender and education scholars recognized the subordinate masculinity of men in the field of education, in the meanwhile, men working in female-dominated occupations will be marginalized and punished for challenging orthodox masculinity (Connell, 2005). Men working in female-dominated occupations will encounter many challenges and difficulties, similar to the experience of women working in male-dominated occupations.

Connell (2005) noted that because hegemonic masculinity legitimizes patriarchy, it's natural for men to dominate high-paying, high-status jobs. However, this legalization may hinder the development of the career, because men in female-dominated

occupations are considered illegal, vice versa. Much research pointed out that stereotyped assumptions about men have led to negative attitudes towards MECTs in society (e.g., McGrath et al., 2020; Moreau & Brownhill, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2020; Xu, 2020).

Eidevald et al. (2021) believed that the perception of society puts MECTs under scrutiny and tremendous pressure, which affects their career trajectory. First, parents usually react negatively to the care of MECTs, such as changing diapers, hugging and having young children sit on their knees, etc. Therefore, MECTs will deliberately avoid physical contact with young children. Second, they must prove to colleagues and parents that in the field of ECE, men and women have the same professional competitiveness and importance, for instance, men will diversify ECE (Bhana et al.,2021). Third, masculinity is mainly constructed based on gender binary, which privileges heterosexuality. When MECTs cross the line to engage in "women's work" (Warin, 2014, p. 97) and educate young children, they may lose the advantages that the patriarchy gives to men in male-dominated occupations, such as concessions and sacrifices in salary and social status, their identities as men will be challenged. Therefore, their motives will be questioned and faced risk of being stigmatized as sissy, homosexual, and suspected of being a potential pedophile (Bhana et al., 2021).

Finally, when they sacrifice money for career choices, they find themselves in a huge dilemma. Johnson (2008) clearly pointed out that "social standing of teaching has suffered greatly throughout history due to its close association with two marginalized

groups: women and children" (p. 5). Martino (2008) argued that the lure to be a "real man" is the core of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, men in a female-dominated occupations may make every effort to "associate with masculinity and disassociate with femininity" (Anderson, 2009, p. 51). And because society often associates men with hegemonic masculinity, men's gender stereotypes are stricter than those for women. Men tend to show more gender stereotypes than women and maintain these stereotypes, which also will consolidate their rightful place in social order by rejecting modern-day changes that bring more opportunities to women and more threat to men (Hentschel et al., 2019).

It can be said that the power of the dominant definition of masculinity continues to influence how men position themselves and are positioned in ECE (Skelton, 2012).

2.2.2 Body-reflective Practice

Connell (2005) noted that the body is not the biological basis of gender, but a "reproductive arena", that is, a place where various gender discourses occur rather than restricted by biological determinism. The body is the object of the structure of gender relations, and the gender practices carried out by the body are always regulated by the structure of gender relations. At the same time, the body is also the agent of gender practices. The gender practice involved in the body not only constructs the structure of gender relations, but also affects the development trajectory of the individual's gender, which is called the "body-reflexive practice". That is to say, "through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives formed; a social world is formed" (p.

64). Therefore, in the process of gender practices, the body is both the giver and the receiver, possessing both the agent and the object. In short, the structure of gender relations is generated by the body's gender practices, and the structure of gender relations in turn restricts the body's gender practices, which forms a kind of circular relationship, that is "social embodiment" or could be called "body-reflexive practice" (Connell, 2009, p. 67). The above contents are shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2

Body-reflective Practice/Social Embodiment
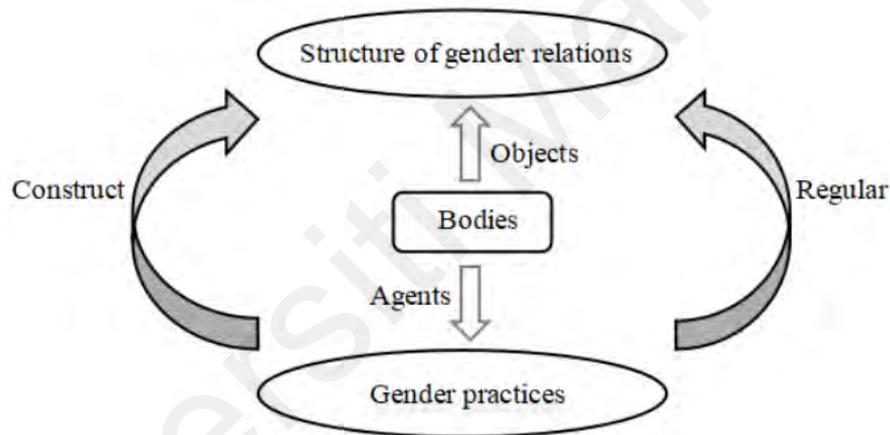
Since 2010, local governments in China have actively carried out the policies of free normal education for male in ECE major and strive to train more male talents to engage in ECE. However, Zeng and Luo (2020) believed that the tendency to preferential policies for men seems to be an encouragement for men to participant ECE, but it will invisibly aggravate gender binary and potential gender discrimination. As a representative symbol of masculinity, men are introduced into ECE aligning with essentialist understanding, which will cause MECTs to distinguish from another gender actively or passively in the way they teach their children, the division of

teaching work, the arrangement of positions, etc. When more and more daily practice of MECTs is presented as "a role model, a role challenger, an energiser, an emotional balancer and a handyman – all roles presented as female deficits" (Sullivan et al., 2020, p. 8), it will replicate and deepen the gender stereotype of MECTs in turn. Then MECTs themselves have not only failed to fully present their professional capabilities and contributions at work-educating and caring for young children but will become representatives of masculinity according to other's expectations.

However, body-reflexive practice means that people do not simply repeat some of the norms they have been given before. Connell (2005) believed that bodies can be actively recalcitrant, which means that bodies participate in social life and are the objects of gender practice in social relations, in the meanwhile, they will destroy and overthrow the social arrangements into which they are invited. Therefore, people are not passive learners, but active producers. MECTs can use their gender sensitivities that attach to specific behaviors to produce various influences and resist existing gender norms. For example, joining ECE by MECTs is a good example. Their practice is shown to preschool children that gender will not determine their career choices. This can be interpreted as one of the efforts to change gender roles, "regarding in what ways and by whom preschool teaching is done and former traditional gender-coded associations need to be critically analysed" (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017, p. 2). This kind of effort to reconstruct or regular gender normative discourse is conducive to improving the public's gender stereotype of male preschool teachers and creating a more friendly workplace environment for them.

2.3 Doing Gender

"Doing gender" refers to the social process of creating and reinforcing differences between girls and boys, and men and women, which are not natural or biological but socially constructed (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This process involves actions and displays that continuously reproduce gender norms through social interactions, holding individuals accountable to the expectations of their assigned sex category (West & Zimmerman, 2009). These norms uphold the gender binary, projecting distinct roles for men and women (Kelan, 2018; Mensi-Klarbach, 2014). The accountability mechanism of gender reinforces patriarchal structures, often elevating masculinity over femininity (Schilt & Westbrook, 2019; Connell, 1987).

In ECE, often seen as female-dominated because it involves emotional and caring labor, gender stereotypes are particularly prominent (Thorpe et al., 2020). Men tend to avoid such roles due to societal perceptions that align masculinity with rationality and authority, while femininity is associated with emotional management (Hochschild, 2012; Schöttle, 2019). As a result, men in ECE may gravitate towards management positions, a phenomenon known as the "glass escalator effect", where men in female-dominated fields advance to prestigious and higher-paid roles (Turkmen & Eskin Bacaksiz, 2021; William, 1992).

Teaching requires significant emotional labor, impacting teachers' well-being (Wang et al., 2019). Male teachers are often seen as calm and authoritative, adopting a disciplined and rational approach (Sak et al., 2015; Simpson, 2009). In contrast, female

teachers are expected to exhibit emotional labor closely tied to interpersonal relationships, reflecting societal expectations of femininity (Connell, 2009; Schöttle, 2019). Men in ECE, deviating from traditional gender norms, face societal scrutiny and pressure, which can lead to higher levels of fatigue and intentions to resign (Yin, 2015). Balancing the expectations of masculinity and the emotional demands of ECE can be challenging, highlighting the complexities of gender dynamics in this profession.

2.4 Gendered Organizations Theory

Acker's (1990) gendered organizations theory is central to understanding gender stereotypes and the roles of male teachers in ECE. This theory posits that organizations inherently have normative gender expectations that disadvantage women and favor men, thereby perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination. Acker challenges the notion of gender-neutral organizations, asserting that all organizations are gendered and that gender is embedded in the creation and conceptualization of social structures (Acker, 1990).

Acker (1990) argued that gender is involved in the control processes within organizations, where masculinity and femininity are constructed through various practices. This aligns with the concept of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), indicating that gender roles are continuously enacted and reinforced in different contexts. The theory identifies four dimensions of gendered processes: (1) gender divisions, (2) gender symbolism, (3) gender interactions, and (4) gender identity

(Acker, 1990; 1992; 2006). These dimensions highlight how gender influences organizational dynamics, roles, and identities.

2.4.1 Gender Divisions

When carrying out the procedures and activities required to maintain the organization's operation, such as hiring, promotion, allocation of work and breaks, etc., it will lead to gender divisions in the organization. In gender divisions, men are considered more capable and therefore almost always occupy the highest position of organizational power. Women are prone to encounter the glass ceiling (Peus et al., 2015), and the majority are engaged in clerical work that is not considered to require much skill, such as preschool and primary teachers, or registered nurses. Because men and women are confined to different job functions and their respective responsibilities, gender divisions will also lead to the persistence of gender segregation in work organizations. Gender divisions strengthen the hierarchy in the workplace, which can be reflected in the huge differences in pay and the distribution of power in the organization (Acker, 1992).

2.4.2 Gender Symbolism

Acker (2006) argues that "People in organizations create images, symbols, and forms of consciousness that justify, legitimate, and even glamorize the persistent gender divisions" (p. 182). Acker further proposed that gender symbolism functions ideologically, playing a significant role in strengthening and consolidating gender divisions and naturalizing power relations. The mass media (such as movies, TV,

books, newspapers or magazines, etc.) are used to portraying the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) of men such as bravery and perseverance and the image of breadwinner, while portraying femininity of women such as gentleness and obedience and the image of nursing and raising children, which enhances the gender role stereotypes in traditional discourse and creates an illusion that hierarchy is neutral (Acker, 1989), but actually gender divisions are already embodied in work organizations. For example, caring jobs that are believed to be innate to women and only require a basic education are feminine, and jobs that require long-term training and skill-oriented are masculine. Such beliefs will affect the evaluation of hiring, promotion, and salary (Acker, 1989; Jones & Causer, 1995).

2.4.3 Gender Interactions

Gendered processes are evidenced through the multiple modes of interactions between individuals or groups that permeate the organizations, which "create dominance and submission, create alliances and exclusions" (Acker, 2006, p. 183). For example, men working in female-dominated fields may feel isolated and lonely, while women working in male-dominated fields may easily feel excluded. In many workplaces, men are less likely to seek help from another gender than women. Under the same competitive ability and qualifications, men are more likely to be promoted than women as women are considered to be easily distracted from taking care of their families. In addition, women with successful careers are easily called iron maidens, while men with weak personalities are easily called sissy. It seems that masculine words are usually used to express praise, while feminine words are the opposite. Therefore,

gender difference, gender inequality and gender discrimination are created in everyday interactions based on how individuals from a particular gender relate with others, which will strengthen stereotypical gender image, either.

2.4.4 Gender Identity

Organizational gendered processes help to produce gendered individual identity as men and women "come to understand the organization's gendered expectations and opportunities, including the appropriate gendered behaviors and attitudes" (Acker, 2006, p.184), which will influence individuals in their clothing, choice of work, language use and their presentation as gendered organization members (Acker, 1990). When men show hegemonic masculinity and women show feminine tenderness, they are considered to be showing an identity commensurate with their gender. For example, it's believed that early childhood female teachers are supposed to teach and speak softly, and male teachers are more suitable for teaching outdoor activities because they have more control over students. In formal occasions, women with makeup are considered to demonstrate politeness, but men with makeup may be criticized.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrates the theoretical perspectives to comprehensively examine the lived experiences of MECTs. This framework is designed to understand how occupational gender stereotypes influence their roles, career trajectories, and interactions within a predominantly female profession. The framework operates on multiple levels:

Individual Level: Examines how individual MECTs construct and negotiate their gender identities using Connell's theory of masculinities and body-reflective practice.

Interactional Level: Analyzes the everyday interactions and performances of gender by MECTs in their professional roles using doing gender theory.

Organizational Level: Investigates the broader institutional and structural factors that influence the experiences of MECTs using gendered organizations theory.

This multi-level approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how occupational gender stereotypes impact MECTs' recruitment, retention, job satisfaction, and career advancement.

2.6 Occupational Gender Stereotypes

Occupational gender stereotypes play a crucial role in shaping individuals' career choices, influencing recruitment, employment, compensation, and promotions (Gatton et al., 1999). These stereotypes reflect and reinforce gender segregation in the workforce, perpetuating occupational segregation (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Clarke, 2020). Typically, female stereotypes include traits like nurturing and empathy, while male stereotypes emphasize rationality and leadership (Clarke, 2020; Yavorsky et al., 2016). Such stereotypes lead to horizontal segregation, where certain jobs are labeled as "male" or "female", and vertical segregation, where men often occupy higher-status positions while women are relegated to lower-paying, lower-skilled roles (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2018; Gatton et al., 1999; He et al., 2019). This

segregation perpetuates gender disparities and limits career advancement opportunities for women (Yavorsky et al., 2016).

Research identifies gender and prestige as primary dimensions influencing occupational gender stereotypes (Gottfredson, 1981). These stereotypes often steer individuals toward professions that align with their gender identity, leading to limited career choices based on traditional gender roles (Adachi, 2013; Clarke, 2020; He et al., 2019). Consequently, occupational segregation persists, with women underrepresented in high-prestige, high-paying fields and overrepresented in lower-prestige, lower-paying roles. Male-dominated professions are often associated with higher prestige and salaries, attributed to the valorization of masculine traits (Frear et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2020).

Traditional gender stereotypes direct women toward careers in education, public services, and caregiving roles, such as nursing, childcare, secretarial work, and hospitality. These fields generally offer lower technological content, lower wages, and fewer career advancement opportunities (Forsman & Barth, 2017; He et al., 2019; Yavorsky et al., 2016). Conversely, men are encouraged to pursue technically oriented fields like engineering, physics, law, and automotive repair, which are often seen as more prestigious and better compensated. Traditional gender roles also allocate caregiving and child-rearing responsibilities to women, while men are expected to be the primary earners. This division often results in women accumulating less workplace experience due to family responsibilities, thereby limiting their career training,

development opportunities, and overall career advancement (Frear et al., 2019). In contrast, men generally have more opportunities for career progression as their work experience increases, making them more attractive candidates for recruitment, training, and promotions.

He et al. (2019) introduced the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) to further explore occupational gender stereotypes through the dimensions of warmth and competence. Warmth involves qualities like being gentle and kind, indicating how much a target group is liked, while competence is linked to traits such as independence, confidence, leadership, and intelligence, reflecting the respect a group commands (Fiske et al., 2002). According to SCM, women are often associated with warmth but perceived as less competent, whereas men are seen as more competent. Koenig and Eagly (2014) also classified occupational stereotypes using the dimensions of agency and communion, corresponding to masculine and feminine traits, respectively. These dimensions overlap with gender and prestige, as they offer a broader explanation of occupational stereotypes beyond gender-related factors.

In male-dominated societies, when women become the majority in certain professions or organizations, the perceived feminization can lead to reduced wages, prestige, and status. This phenomenon, known as the "devaluation of women's work", reflects a bias against feminized professions (Bose & Rossi, 1983). As a result, women may find it challenging to achieve higher status within these fields. On the other hand, while women have economic motivations to enter male-dominated fields, men are often

discouraged from crossing into female-dominated professions due to lower prestige, status, and salaries. Men who choose to work in traditionally female fields frequently face bias and discrimination for violating gender norms (Halper et al., 2019; McGrath et al., 2020; Moreau & Brownhill, 2017; Peeters et al., 2015; Torre, 2018).

Despite a notable increase in women entering non-traditional occupational fields, changes in men's representation have been limited (Brannon, 2017; Croft et al., 2015; Haines et al., 2016). Men often exhibit greater satisfaction with traditionally male-dominated work and hold onto gender stereotypes more strongly than women (Adachi, 2013; Brannon, 2017; Janssen & Backes-Gellner, 2016; Koenig, 2018; Reby et al., 2022). Moreover, men are more likely to rigidly adhere to these stereotypes, despite being victims of such strict gender norms themselves (Barth et al., 2015; Brannon, 2017; Forsman & Barth, 2017).

Eagly and Steffen (1984) emphasized that the use of gender stereotypes is dependent on the presence of role cues associated with gender information. When these cues change and no longer reflect traditional gender arrangements, stereotypes become less applicable. This suggests that shifts in role distributions and societal expectations can lead to changes in gender stereotypes over time (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

2.7 Men in Traditionally Female Occupations

Men working in female-dominated professions often face three primary challenges: barriers as minority men, negotiation of masculinities, and reconstruction of masculinities (Chan & Fang, 2021). When men enter these workplaces, the clash

between gender and occupational stereotypes can lead to prejudice and discrimination, affecting these minority men negatively (Clarke, 2020). Interestingly, such prejudice often originates from external societal norms rather than the work environment itself (Clow et al., 2015). In a patriarchal society dominated by hegemonic masculinity, feminized work is devalued, resulting in lower status and wages (Gatton et al., 1999; He et al., 2019; Swiatek & Dill, 2021). Men in these roles challenge traditional cultural expectations that men should be ambitious and economically independent (Connell, 2005). This deviation can result in perceptions of men as atypical, with male nurses being stigmatized as weak or homosexual and MECTs facing suspicions of inappropriate behavior with children (Bradley, 2011; McGrath et al., 2020; Moreau & Brownhill, 2017).

"Reputational penalties" (Jacobs, 1993) can further impact these men, resulting in both financial and status losses and pressures from family and peers who may question their career choices (Chan & Fang, 2021). This societal stigma can deter men from entering or remaining in female-dominated professions, as engaging in such fields is often perceived as a threat to their masculinity (Forsman & Barth, 2017). Crawley (2014) noted a significant stigma attached to men expressing interest in these professions, with barriers extending beyond salary concerns to the mere presence of women (Swiatek & Dill, 2021). Block et al. (2019) pointed out that it is not the potential for high salaries that deters men but rather the association with femininity. This societal pressure can lead some men to prefer unemployment over accepting roles in female-dominated professions, regardless of the potential for good pay and career

advancement (Epstein, 1989). This preference perpetuates occupational gender segregation (Cottingham, 2014; Yavorsky et al., 2016; Torre, 2018).

Despite these challenges, men who navigate these barriers and remain in female-dominated professions may benefit from the "glass escalator" effect, where they experience hidden advantages (Williams, 1992). As society often values masculinity, the presence of men in these fields can increase the prestige and wages associated with these professions, making them more welcoming environments (Williams, 2015). Men are traditionally associated with leadership roles, and even without actively seeking them, they may find themselves encouraged to pursue higher administrative positions (Hussein et al., 2016; Kmec et al., 2010). For men who stay, negotiating their masculinities and attempting to reclaim traditional masculine identities can be a strategic career move. Hussein et al. (2016, p. 35) note that "gender is conveyed through structures of power and authority, with men tending to be concentrated in positions of power". This often leads men to seek upward mobility, distancing themselves from the feminine stereotypes that may be associated with their roles (Lupton, 2006).

On the other hand, some men actively seek work in female-dominated fields to embrace non-hegemonic masculinities, especially younger men who hold more egalitarian views on gender roles (Hardie, 2015). In these fields, internal pressures are generally less significant (Barber, 2008), and the minority status of men can sometimes make it easier for them to compete for leadership positions (Lupton, 2006).

Brannon (2017) argued that men must affirm their masculinities to succeed, resisting effeminacy and rejecting femininity to maintain their male identity. While some men enjoy working with women (Simpson, 2004) and children (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018), more evidence suggests that men in female-dominated professions reshape their masculinities to align with societal expectations. Men often choose roles that allow them to emphasize acceptable masculine qualities, such as technical skills or managerial authority, over caregiving abilities (Hussein et al., 2016; Lupton, 2000). They may highlight traits like authority, discipline, and rationality, rather than emotional labor (Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Yang & McNair, 2021). This tendency to distance themselves from femininity is especially pronounced among older men, who might resist activities associated with femininity (Cottingham, 2014) and instead engage in physical labor (Pietilä et al., 2013).

Younger men, however, might use their positions in female-dominated fields to achieve economic success and prestige by emphasizing traditional male values and minimizing feminine aspects (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002). Huppatz and Goodwin (2013) highlighted that "femininity may be a necessary resource for men in feminized occupations", and that "both masculine and feminine capitals can be wielded by men operating in the new economy" (p. 305). This dual strategy allows men to maintain their masculine identity while adapting to the demands of their roles, thereby challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms within the workplace.

2.8 Men in the Field of Early Childhood Education

ECE has been traditionally viewed as a female-dominated field due to its association with emotional and caring work, as opposed to intellectual pursuits (Thorpe et al., 2020). Hochschild (2012) introduced the concept of "emotional labor", noting that men often avoid such careers because they can access resources like money, power, and status without engaging in emotional labor. Women typically manage caregiving roles, while men enforce authority (Schöttle, 2019). Bolton (2007) remarked that emotional labor in teaching is seen as inherent to women, leading to perceptions of ECE as emotional and unprofessional, which limits male opportunities (Laere et al., 2014).

MECTs face scrutiny and pressure due to the demand for emotional labor (Eidevald et al., 2021). Parental biases often lead to negative reactions to male caregiving actions, resulting in male teachers avoiding physical contact (Moosa & Bhana, 2021). This bias prevents them from receiving proper recognition (Eidevald et al., 2018). Consequently, many men prefer traditional male roles, such as technicians or physical education teachers (Eidevald et al., 2020; Munk et al., 2013). MECTs must demonstrate professional competence to diversify the field (Bhana et al., 2021). Experience and time are essential for their professionalization as they navigate the associated risks (Brody, 2015).

ECE often reinforces gender stereotypes, resulting in a lack of male representation (Sargent, 2005). Male teachers in this female-dominated profession may face stigma

and questioning of their masculinity, potentially being viewed as effeminate or suspected pedophiles (Bhana et al., 2021). To maintain their male identity, men may conform to traditional norms of masculinity (Martino, 2008).

The discourse on MECTs often intersects with the notion of "feminization" and the complementary roles of genders, particularly in the context of father absence (McGrath et al., 2020; Moreau, 2014; Warin, 2017; Xu, 2020; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018; Yang & McNair, 2019). The "glass escalator" effect can lead to men disproportionately occupying leadership roles (Sargent, 2005; Warin, 2018). The role of MECTs as father figures has been debated, with no evidence suggesting a need to compensate for paternal absence in single-parent or same-sex families (Martino & Kehler, 2006; Short, 2007).

Recent studies, drawing on social constructivism and feminist post-structuralist theories, emphasize individual personalities over gender in role fulfillment. Some male teachers, such as in Scotland, see themselves as caring role models (Xu, 2020). The discussion has shifted towards gender flexibility (Warin & Adriany, 2017). Increasing male participation could elevate the profession's status and enrich teaching diversity (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2020; Xu, 2020). Professional development and focus on practitioners' character, rather than gender norms, could break down traditional perceptions of ECE as "women's work" (Warin & Adriany, 2017). Xu et al. (2020) argued that restricted gender identity limits ECE practitioners'

skills. Bhana et al. (2021) noted that masculinities are contextual, impacting male teachers' experiences in different ways.

Both male and female teachers bring valuable diversity to ECE, requiring reflexivity and sensitivity (Thorpe et al., 2020). Børve (2017) highlighted that specialized training helps practitioners critically engage with gender practices.

2.9 Male Early Childhood Teachers in China

While ECE globally is often seen as a feminized profession (Laere et al., 2014), distinct social and historical contexts shape its nature in different countries.

In China, the marginalization of ECE discourages men from entering the field (Suo, 2013; Zeng, 2015). Historically, early childcare was home-based and focused on care rather than formal education, with caregivers predominantly women, who had not undergone formal training in ECE and had limited cultural literacy, from lower social strata, leading to low prestige and socioeconomic status for ECTs. Although regulations from 1904 to 1922 mandated formal school training for childcare providers, they were still commonly referred to as "nannies". It wasn't until 1989 that China officially recognized "preschool teacher" as a professional title, yet even today, ECTs are primarily associated with physical and emotional care rather than educational roles, thereby differentiating them from primary and secondary school teachers in their roles of imparting knowledge (Suo, 2013; Wang, 2021; Zeng, 2015). A comprehensive social survey by Li (2005) highlighted this disparity, showing that university teachers ranked 8th, middle school teachers 12th, primary school teachers 35th, while ECTs

were placed at the lowest position among all teacher categories in terms of professional prestige.

In Chinese society, men are often regarded as the cornerstone of the family, and any decline in their social status within the family can significantly impact the family's overall social standing. As a result, many men hesitate to pursue careers in ECE to uphold their family's status (Zeng, 2015). Consequently, male teachers in the field are often perceived as incapable, feminized, and effeminate (Nie et al., 2019; Zeng, 2015). Terms like "male nanny" and "male babysitter" are commonly used in media and academic literature to refer to MECTs (Dou, 2020; Jiang & Wang, 2019; Peng & Peng, 2019; Zhang, 2020).

Despite these stereotypes, MECTs are increasingly appreciated for their perceived ability to address the "boy crisis" (Xu, 2018; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018) by providing diverse gender role models and influencing children's gender identity. The inclusion of MECTs in ECE settings is seen as a way to offer young children, especially boys, role models who display bravery, resilience, strength, and open-mindedness, which are traits traditionally associated with masculinity (Wang, 2018; Xu & Gong, 2021; Zhou, 2018). Zeng (2015) also noted that males might be better suited for slightly older children who can recognize gender differences between male and female teachers, thereby contributing to their gender awareness. Furthermore, MECTs play an essential role in addressing the absence of fatherly education in school and family settings. They often serve as substitute father figures for children from dual-earner and single-parent

families, providing them with the male companionship they might otherwise lack (Wu, 2019; Yu et al., 2015). As a result, an increasing number of parents are opting for kindergartens and classrooms with male teachers, seeking to shield their children from an overly feminized environment and ensure the cultivation of qualities like independence, strength, and bravery typically associated with masculinities (Jia, 2021).

MECTs are highly appreciated by kindergarten administrators and female colleagues for their indispensable role in teaching practice (Wu, 2019). Surveys suggested that MECTs are often perceived to possess additional professional competencies compared to their female counterparts (Zhou, 2018). These competencies include expertise in physical education, modern equipment and technology utilization, organizing and managing large-scale activities, and safety management (Wang, 2018; Wang, 2018). Their interactive teaching methods, which often involve play and engaging activities, foster hands-on skills, social growth, and independent thinking among young learners. The physical presence of male teachers, combined with their distinctive vocal qualities, further captivates children's attention and facilitates the conveyance of strong and resolute attitudes (Li, 2017; Wang, 2018; Zhou, 2018). Additionally, male teachers' openness and creativity are seen as beneficial in nurturing problem-solving abilities and fostering strong bonds with the children (Wu, 2019).

The appreciation for masculinities in China also extends to leadership positions, deeply rooted in the country's history. Early Chinese early childhood teacher education exclusively enrolled female students, and it wasn't until 1925 that the first male early

childhood teacher emerged in China. These pioneering MECTs strongly linked ECE with the nation's future (Ke & Chen, 2020). They not only established China's first formal kindergarten but also founded the first public kindergarten normal school, developing the first generation of localized curriculum systems. As a result, they became significant figures and trailblazers in the field of ECE in China. During this time, female educators in ECE were still striving to gain professional recognition as teachers. Furthermore, Chinese history records that most advancements in philosophy, literature, arts, and other cultural pursuits were accomplished by men (Louie, 2014), contributing to the perception that men possess leadership qualities and pioneering abilities. From 2011 to 2019, while the proportion of male teachers declined from 8.95% to 7.72%, the proportion of male kindergarten principals increased from 8.95% to 9.69% and even surpassed 10% in 2016 (MOE of China, 2011-2019, see Figure 1.1). In contrast, the proportion of MECTs among full-time teachers remained below 3%.

Currently, MECTs in China face numerous challenges, including low recruitment and high turnover rates (Huang et al., 2021). Research suggests that a teacher's sense of professional identity is closely related to the educational level they teach. Generally, as teachers progress from kindergarten to primary and secondary schools, and then to high schools and universities, their professional identity strengthens (Chen, 2021). However, the low wages and limited career advancement opportunities in preschool teaching make it challenging for male teachers to meet their economic needs, leading to a decline in their social status and sense of professional identity (Gao, 2013; Zeng, 2015). Additionally, newly recruited MECTs often face unclear job assignments, as

many kindergartens try to reduce costs by assigning multiple roles to them. Employers consider parental approval in task allocation, resulting in vague job descriptions and an overwhelming workload that hampers their ability to focus on education (Dou, 2020). Consequently, MECTs struggle to utilize their strengths effectively and face resistance from some parents. Concerns over male teachers' attentiveness, patience, and potential misconduct, particularly with female students, further complicate their professional experience (Chen, 2021; Liu & Wu, 2020). These issues can dissuade boys who are genuinely interested in ECE from pursuing or continuing in this field.

To address these challenges, scholars and policymakers emphasize the importance of combining government support with market mechanisms to support MECTs and encourage more men to enter ECE (Huang, 2021; Jia, 2021; Wu, 2019; Kang, 2016; Wang, S. 2018). Measures include publicly funded training programs, such as those initiated in Jiangsu, and the establishment of the Nanjing Preschool Male Teachers Alliance. Additionally, improving teachers' remuneration and status, especially for MECTs, is deemed crucial for fostering a sense of dignity within the profession. This includes opportunities for MECTs to participate in prestigious teacher studios and key training programs, which offer professional guidance and support, leading to increased job satisfaction (Xu & Gong, 2021). Enhancing media publicity to promote the importance of MECTs in kindergartens is also recommended to highlight their vital role in children's development and to boost societal recognition and appreciation of their work (Dou, 2020). These initiatives aim to create a more inclusive and supportive

environment for male teachers in ECE, ultimately enriching the field and benefiting young learners in China.

2.10 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in several key theoretical perspectives that shed light on the experiences of MECTs within the context of a predominantly female-dominated profession. These perspectives include Connell's theory of masculinities and body-reflective practice, Acker's theory of gender organization, and West and Zimmerman's theory of doing gender (see Figure 2.3). By drawing upon these theories, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender dynamics and societal expectations influence male teachers' lived experiences, career choices, and professional identities in the field of ECE.

Figure 2.3

Theoretical Framework of this Study
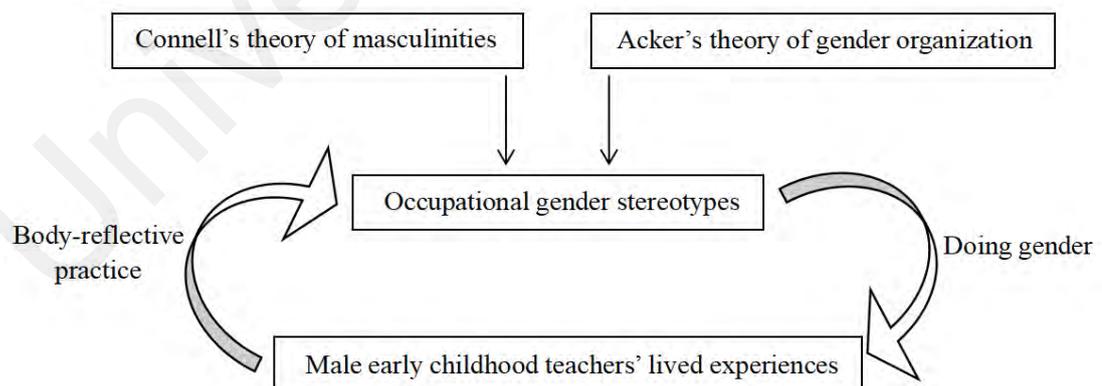
MECTs often confront occupational gender stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in society's perception of gender roles. To gain a comprehensive understanding of and

address these stereotypes, we can draw upon Connell's theory of masculinities and Acker's theory of gender organization.

Connell's theory highlights that masculinity is not a fixed, singular concept but rather a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural and historical contexts. By exploring how MECTs negotiate and navigate their gender identities within the broader societal context, this study seeks to uncover the complexities of masculinity in a profession traditionally associated with femininity.

Acker's theory of gender organization contributes to the framework by emphasizing the role of organizational structures and practices in perpetuating gendered norms and stereotypes. In the context of ECE institutions, where female teachers have historically dominated the workforce, Acker's theory helps illuminate the gendered power dynamics and the ways in which organizational practices may influence the experiences and opportunities of male teachers.

The theory of doing gender, as proposed by West and Zimmerman, highlights how individuals actively perform and reproduce gender roles in their everyday interactions. MECTs who enter ECE will encounter occupational gender stereotypes, they may experience pressure to conform to traditional gender norms and demonstrate behaviors considered "masculine" in order to counteract potential emasculation or challenges to their masculinity. Understanding how male teachers "do gender" in their daily interactions provides valuable insights into their experiences, as well as the ways in which their actions may be shaped by prevailing gender norms within the profession.

Body-reflective practice, as a concept derived from Connell's theory, encourages individuals to critically reflect on and reshape their bodily behaviors and practices in alignment with their chosen gender identity. In the context of MECTs, body-reflective practice involves examining and redefining their expressions of masculinity within the caregiving and nurturing roles they fulfill. For male teachers, engaging in body-reflective practice may have a positive impact on their experiences in the field and help challenge occupational gender stereotypes.

2.11 Summary

This literature review primarily centers on Connell's definition of masculinities and Acker's theory of gendered organizations, providing a solid groundwork for the subsequent examination of gender-related issues and processes within the workplace. Delving into the daily practices of MECTs reveals a dynamic interaction between "doing gender" and engaging in body-reflective practices, akin to forces and reactions. This interaction evokes both negative and positive social attitudes towards men working with young children.

Through a comprehensive review and comparison of existing literature, it becomes evident that adopting a phenomenological methodology offers the most suitable approach to explore occupational gender stereotypes surrounding MECTs. In Chapter three, further in-depth discussions will be conducted to delve into this topic.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter first explains the rationale for conducting qualitative research. The emphasis is presented on the specific research design, phenomenology, and relative procedures that will be employed in this study. More information then will be introduced in detail to population of the study, sample size, sampling method, sampling criteria, location of the study, researcher role, instruments utilized in this study, validity and reliability of Instruments, data collection techniques, ethical concerns, pilot test and data analysis.

3.2 Research Design

This study seeks to delve into the lived experiences of MECTs in Shenzhen, with a specific focus on understanding how occupational gender stereotypes influence their practices in the gendered field of ECE and how they navigate their masculinities within this context. By exploring these lived experiences, we aim to gain valuable insights into the profound impact of occupational gender stereotypes and identify opportunities to promote inclusivity and gender equality within the profession. When we want to explore the stories behind MECTs and listen to their voices, it is more appropriate to conduct qualitative research, which, according to John Lofland (2006), is sensitive to the individual existence of the participants and has the conditions of being close

enough to the people and situations being studied to gain insight into the details of what is happening. Patton (2015) also noted that when it comes to studying a group, identifying variables that are not easily measured, and exploring a problem or issue, qualitative research is useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of the background or context in which the participants in the study are placed, for thinking about the underlying ideas behind the participants' various behaviors and responses, and for fully capturing the complexity of the problem or issue we are studying.

This study targets a specific group of MECTs and aims to explore the essence of these experiences of occupational gender stereotypes they encounter in their everyday practice. Creswell and Poth (2016) noted that phenomenology as a qualitative approach focuses on human's lived experience and provides insights into common experience, which can be valuable to groups such as teachers and policy maker, etc. The focus of phenomenological research is not on the lives of individuals, but on understanding the lived experiences of individuals around a phenomenon. Patton (2015) further stated that in order to get a sense of how people experience phenomena, we must engage in in-depth communication with those who have experienced the phenomenon and describe the common meaning of the phenomenon for those who have experienced it, reducing the experience to the essence of the experience. Phenomenology is not interested in the specifics of a particular instance, for example，a male early childhood teacher changing a young child's clothes and drawing reprimand from parents: when this happened, what the outcome was, and whether it will happen again, these are not the focus of phenomenology, which is concerned only

with what meaning the issue represents and what its essence is. And when studying the possible structures of meaning in the lived experiences of MECTs, we need to fully grasp what it means to be a man in the world, while considering the ways in which men exist in the world and the deeply meaningful socio-cultural and historical traditions. Thus, Merleau-Ponty (2013) and Van Manen (2018) both briefly summarize phenomenology as the study of essences.

This study goes further by explicitly using hermeneutic phenomenology, which is one of the schools of phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the understanding of texts (Cohen & Daniels, 2001) and research is the interpretation of the "text" of life (Van Manen, 2018, p. 4). Although there is no specific set of rules and methods, Van Manen (2018) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as "a dynamic interplay among six research activities" (p. 30), which is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Six Research Activities of Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Van Manen, 2018, P. 30-31)

Activity 1	turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
Activity 2	investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
Activity 3	reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
Activity 4	describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
Activity 5	maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
Activity 6	balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is considered to start "with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself" (van Manen, 2014, p. 27), and to maintain an "abiding concern" for phenomena that are of strong interest (van Manen, 2018, p. 31).

Investigating the experiences in our lives is about learning to see the world anew, to experience it and to make connections with the original experiences without any preconceived ideas. The underlying themes are also established in this process and we go on to reflect on what constitutes the essence of this lived experience. After a thick description of the phenomenon by way of writing, the text constructed must maintain a close relationship with the topic of the enquiry. Consideration should also be taking into account to balance the parts and the whole of the writing.

Through the qualitative approach of hermeneutic phenomenology, this study describes the lived experiences of MECTs in three kindergartens of Shenzhen, and deconstructs and analyses the texts obtained from interviews and transcriptions in order to reveal the essence of the phenomenon of gender stereotypes commonly experienced by the group of MECTs.

3.3 Population of the Study

In the human sciences, population most often refers to "the group of interest to the researcher, the group to whom the researcher would like to generalize the results of the study" (Fraenkel et al., 2018, p. 92). According to Fraenkel et al. (2018), target population and accessible population make up two types of population. The target group refers to the group of interest that this research wants to generalize. However, because the number of members of interest is so large and geographically dispersed, it is difficult to reach all of them as it is too time-consuming and costly. Accessible population is the population that "the researcher is able to generalize" (p. 92).

In this study, target population refers to all MECTs in China. Accessible population refers to all MECTs in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, China. In the study, the more precisely we define our population, the easier it will be to gather a representative sample.

3.4 Sample of the Study

Patton (2015) noted that qualitative research usually focuses on a relatively small sample to gain an in-depth understanding and description to a phenomenon, and that the sample size usually depends on the sufficiency of the data collected and is not strictly defined. Fraenkel et al. (2018) suggested that the number of participants in a sample for qualitative research is typically between 1 and 20.

Phenomenology values the common experience of a phenomenon by a group of individuals, under the premise, "a heterogeneous group is identified that may vary in size from 3 to 4 individuals to 10 to 15" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 78). Some researchers have suggested that a sufficient sample size can lead to data saturation (Douglas, 1976; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). However, in the context of interpretive phenomenology, achieving data saturation is challenging, as Ironside argues that new possibilities for understanding are limitless. In this study, five participants were selected because their experiences were deemed to provide similar information, resulting in a reasonably comprehensive collection of data.

Table 3.2
Participant Background

Participant Pseudonyms	Age	Marital Status	Educational Background	Work Experience in ECE	Currently in ECE
Aaron	25	Single	Bachelor	3 years	Yes
Ben	29	Single	Bachelor	3 years	No
Charles	27	Single	Bachelor	5 years	Yes
Darren	30	Single	Bachelor	7 years	Yes
Eli	26	Single	Bachelor	4.5 years	Yes

The table above (see Table 3.2) provides an overview of key characteristics of the individuals who have taken part in the study. The pseudonyms assigned to the five participants reflect their sequential involvement, with the initial three being the earliest. Notably, due to his busy schedule, teacher Ben's final two interview sessions were conducted in April, following a delay of over a month. Amid the interview process, two participants left after just one session, prompting a fresh recruitment effort. Teacher Darren joined in March, subsequent to initial interviews held in February. While teacher Eli initially committed, his busy work schedule allowed for his participation only in April, concurrent with the third round of interviews. His second and third interviews were scheduled together on April 16, accommodating his limited availability that month, necessitating a wait until May. Given the dynamic participation and extended interview intervals in this study, and to mitigate unforeseen disruptions, I combined teacher Eli's interviews, securing his consent beforehand. These remarkable male teachers exemplify the commitment and passion that shape the

future of youngest learners. Their diverse experiences and backgrounds enrich the landscape of ECE in Shenzhen, reflecting the importance of a supportive and inclusive teaching community.

3.5 Sampling Method

Two main sampling methods were employed in this study, snowballing and criterion sampling.

Snowball sampling is a method used to locate information-rich key informants, and the process begins by asking people who are in a good position (Patton, 2015). After graduating from a university in China, I pursued my education career overseas, lacking experience in domestic kindergartens. Finding suitable participants for my research on MECTs proved challenging due to their scarcity. Fortunately, a friend working in a kindergarten in Shenzhen came to know about my research and took the initiative to recommend male colleagues from her workplace.

To widen my participant pool, I joined an ECE WeChat group comprising professionals from across the country. With the group owner's permission, I posted recruitment information, attracting several male teachers. However, due to certain constraints, the number of qualified candidates fell short of the desired level.

Thankfully, one of the recruited male teachers showed immense enthusiasm and volunteered to help by promoting recruitment posters. With his valuable assistance, I

successfully recruited two more male teachers who met the research criteria. This is the process of recruiting male teachers using a snowball sampling method.

Once a sufficient number of MECTs had been recruited through snowball sampling, I then screened them through criterion sampling, which emphasizes the need for participants to meet pre-determined critical criteria (Patton, 2015). The focus of phenomenology is on selecting individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and collecting data (van Manen, 2014). Therefore, participants in phenomenological research cannot be randomly selected, but must have first-hand lived experience and be able to articulate it consciously, which is crucial for the researcher to explore the essence of the phenomenon. By setting relevant selection criteria, I selected five of the recruited MECTs and explored their experiences through in-depth interviews. The selection criteria are presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Recruitment Criteria for Study Participants

Criteria for Participants	Male
	At least 3 years working experience in ECE
	Bachelor's degree and above
	From a qualified kindergarten in Shenzhen

3.6 Location of the Study

Shenzhen, situated in China's Guangdong Province, holds the status of a first-tier city in the country. Shenzhen is known for its extraordinary economic growth and development in recent decades. As one of China's first Special Economic Zones, it has experienced significant urbanization and modernization. Being a cosmopolitan city

with a diverse population, Shenzhen presents an array of educational institutions catering to families from various cultural backgrounds. This diversity allows for a rich and diverse pool of participants, enhancing the study's potential to capture a wide range of experiences.

In recent years, China has placed increasing importance on ECE as a crucial stage of child development. Shenzhen, as a progressive city, has been actively expanding and improving its ECE facilities and programs. According to recent data from the Shenzhen Education Bureau (2021), the city is home to 2,713 schools, with a substantial 1,881 kindergartens, comprising approximately 69% of the total schools. Being a first-tier city, Shenzhen leads the way in the widespread adoption of ECE in China.

The remarkable progress in both economic and educational sectors has turned Shenzhen into a compelling destination, attracting a multitude of education professionals from across the nation. The city's status as a magnet for ECTs facilitates a more abundant presence of MECTs compared to other cities. This favorable representation of male teachers provides a distinct advantage for recruiting and selecting the sample for the study. Furthermore, Shenzhen, as a progressive city, has been actively expanding and improving its ECE facilities and programs. By conducting the research in Shenzhen, the study can benefit from a diverse pool of MECTs with varying educational backgrounds, teaching experiences, and cultural influences. This diverse pool of participants offers a comprehensive and well-rounded perspective,

enriching the findings and allowing for an in-depth examination of male teachers'

experiences within this evolving educational landscape. It sheds valuable light on the

dynamics of gendered processes in the field of ECE.

Figure 3.1

Location of the Study

Shenzhen comprises ten districts: Bao'an, Dapeng New Districts, Futian, Guangming,

Luohu, Longgang, Longhua, Nanshan, Pingshan, and Yantian. For this study, five

participants were selected from totally different districts, namely Bao'an, Longhua,

Luohu, Nanshan and Pingshan, as depicted in Figure 3.1. All five participants are

affiliated with public kindergartens in different districts, ensuring a varied

representation of experiences across different educational settings.

Among the five participants, four of them work in public kindergartens that follow the

standard curriculum, with one exception. This particular participant is not currently

employed in the ECE field as he resigned from a public Montessori kindergarten before joining the study. His teaching experience presents unique characteristics due to the Montessori educational background of his former kindergarten.

3.7 Role of the Study

In this qualitative research, my role as the researcher is instrumental and multifaceted. Qualitative research necessitates that I, as the researcher, have direct access and proximity to the participants and phenomena being studied. The personal experiences and insights I bring to the research are crucial components of the research process (Patton, 2015).

As the researcher, my responsibilities begin with a thorough review of the relevant literature to ground the study in existing research. I then determine the research design based on the study's objectives, craft interview questions, and navigate the interviews, including making judgments and intervening in responses as appropriate. Additionally, I am tasked with making timely adjustments to the study based on feedback received, ensuring the research remains responsive and adaptive.

Throughout the research process, it is essential for me to focus on the meanings held by the research participants rather than imposing my interpretations. This includes understanding the perspectives of interviewees, my supervisor, and other stakeholders involved in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). My preparation and ongoing reflexivity add to the integrity, credibility, and value of the findings.

In phenomenological research, the researcher serves as a crucial guide to understanding the research methods and the particular phenomenon of interest (Kafle, 2011). My personal history and experiences as an inquirer shape the direction of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) describe the researcher as a "multicultural subject," where personal history, traditions, ethics, and politics form the starting point for inquiry. Raised with a sensitivity to gender issues and having worked in education for many years, I am particularly interested in gender issues in education. The topic of masculinity in Chinese education has become a significant subject of debate on social media, sparking my curiosity about the extent to which gender stereotypes are shared by male early childhood educators. This curiosity motivated the study.

As a qualitative researcher in phenomenology, I must remain open to personal preferences, assumptions, and positions. Van Manen (2018) highlights the challenge of phenomenology as describing direct experiences without being obstructed by preconceptions and theoretical notions. In this study, I strive to give a 'male voice' to a female-dominated perspective, continually reflecting and suspending my preconceptions and judgments until definitive evidence is revealed in the data, thereby transcending any biases from previous understandings.

3.8 Instruments of the Study

The instruments used in this study include Seidman's three interview series, reflective journals, and video recordings.

3.8.1 Interview Protocol

Dibley(2014) understood the background as "the world into which a person is born, a world which shapes and is shaped by their being" (p. 78). According to Heidegger's philosophy, individuals exist in the world and, through their life experiences, continuously refine, update, and revise their understanding of existing things by drawing upon their background knowledge. This ongoing process of reinterpretation and reflection leads to the development of new insights and understandings, making interpretation an integral part of the process of understanding. For this study, the research approach adopted is Seidman's three-interview series, which effectively combines hermeneutic phenomenology's core principles with qualitative research (Dilley, 2004). Seidman's (2006) approach necessitates each participant to undergo three interviews: the first interview explores the participants' life history to provide essential background context, the second interview aims to reconstruct their experiences as MECTs, and the third interview encourages participants to reflect on the significance of their lived experiences in this role. Bevan (2014) argued that Seidman's method explicitly constructs context to provide meaning, allowing for a deeper understanding of participants' behaviors within their unique context. As Patton (1980) pointed out, without context, it is impossible to explore the meaning of experiences. In line with van Manen's (2016) recommendation against unstructured or open-ended interviews in phenomenological research, all three interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, facilitating researcher engagement and support while encouraging participants to revisit and reflect on their lived experiences.

In the initial interview, participants were invited to engage in a reflective journey through their past lives, spanning 90 minutes, until they became ECTs. The primary objective of this interview was to encourage participants to reconstruct and share their experiences related to family life, educational journey in schools, dynamics of peer relationships, and social experiences leading up to their decision to become ECTs.

In the second interview, the focus is on the participant's work experiences as an early childhood teacher, spanning from their first year in the profession until the present. The interview aims to explore various aspects of their career, including: the participant's job application experiences, any changes in positions over time, opportunities for training and engagement in educational research within the ECE domain, their involvement in curriculum and activity allocation, specific details of their interactions and engagements with the children, experiences collaborating with school administrators, interacting with female colleagues, and engaging with parents, the presence and development of other MECTs within their kindergarten, and a description of a typical day of teaching, starting from when they wake up until the moment they finish their work.

The success of the third interview relies on establishing a foundation from the previous two interviews (Seidman, 2006). To comprehend and create meaning, participants must first reconstruct their past lived experiences and examine how various factors from their history interacted, ultimately shaping their current circumstances. In the final interview, the study will delve into a reflective exploration of the significance of

the participant's lived experiences as a male early childhood teacher. The focus is to explore the participant's perceptions regarding the influence of their gender on their decision to pursue and engage in ECE, as well as the limitations or hindrances they may have encountered in this profession due to their male identity. Additionally, the interview aims to understand the ways in which the participant perceives their gender to be beneficial in their choice to work in ECE. Furthermore, the participant will have the opportunity to articulate how they personally identify themselves as a male teacher and share their career aspirations within the field of ECE. Through this reflective interview, the study aims to gain valuable insights into the participant's lived experiences and their perspective on the role of gender in the context of early childhood teaching.

3.8.2 Reflective Journals

Heidegger's philosophical understanding of phenomena follows a spiral pattern, where comprehension evolves from partial understanding to a holistic grasp and then returns to a more profound partial understanding, driven by the introduction of new data (Peoples, 2020). In employing Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it is essential to use reflective journals to articulate personal biases or judgments before analyzing the data. By critically examining these biases and judgments, rather than trying to suspend them, researchers can refine their interpretations and continuously deepen their understanding of the research subject.

In this study, I promptly wrote reflective journals by combining on-site recorded notes to document my thoughts and reflections that emerged before and after each interview. These 15 journals were meticulously crafted using Microsoft Word 2016. Within these journals, I candidly recorded potential biases that I might have held, my subjective reflections, unexpected details that surfaced during the interviews, predictions formed while seeking understanding, and any pertinent aspects requiring further clarification. Throughout the subsequent interviews, I continuously followed up and delved into these reflections until a clear understanding of the meaning is achieved, enabling me to objectively approach the phenomenon under study.

3.8.3 Observation Protocol

Peoples (2020) suggested that 65% to 70% of communication is conveyed through nonverbal cues. Therefore, in this study, video recording was utilized to capture both verbal and nonverbal cues, but it was not used as a research instrument. The primary reason for this approach is to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the interview data without influencing the natural behavior and responses of the participants.

Prior to the interviews, individual folders were created on Google Drive and Baidu Cloud for each participant, facilitating their access to the interview videos for review and verification of the interview process details. Moreover, this served as a secure backup and means of interactive communication with the participants.

In addition to video recordings, reflective journals were maintained to document the observations. The reflective journal entries included detailed notes on nonverbal cues,

verbal interactions, and the context of the observations. This practice allowed for real-time recording of insights and reflections, enhancing the depth of the data collected.

The extensive review of the interview videos, coupled with the reflective journal entries, provided valuable insights that were recorded and used to prompt adjustments and improvements in subsequent interviews. By utilizing video recordings alongside in-depth interviews and reflective journals, the study employed a triangulation approach to enhance the overall validity of the study, allowing for cross-checking and validation of the findings, ultimately increasing the study's reliability and credibility.

3.9 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

According to Fraenkel et al. (2018), in educational research, "validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness of the inferences researchers make based specially on the data they collect, while reliability refers to the consistency of these inferences over time, location and circumstances" (p. 413). Patton (2014) emphasized that the reliability of a study is closely linked to its validity, meaning that ensuring the study's validity also contributes to its reliability. In any research, the subjectivity and judgement of the researcher may influence the process of what they see, hear and analyze, therefore it is important to identify bias and adopt the necessary techniques to reduce it in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. In this study, procedures such as prolonged engagement, triangulation and member checking are all considered to enhance and strengthen validity and reliability.

3.9.1 Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement allowed for a deep and meaningful interaction with each participant, fostering a strong rapport and trust, which in turn enhances the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected. By conducting three in-depth interviews with each participant, the study ensured that multiple perspectives and insights were captured, reducing the risk of bias and providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences in ECE.

By occasionally extending the interview durations, ranging from 90 minutes to three hours, while always respecting the participants' preferences, this study allowed the participants to share their experiences in a more detailed and profound manner. Additionally, the decision to conduct four interviews with one participant exemplifies the study's commitment to ensuring data saturation and exhaustiveness. This iterative process of data collection ensures that no valuable information is overlooked, allowing for a rich and nuanced exploration of their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions, thereby increasing the data's richness and validity and enhancing the reliability of the findings.

3.9.2 Triangulation

Triangulation, as defined by Fraenkel et al. (2018), involves cross-checking data from multiple sources or collection procedures. By utilizing various investigators, methods, data sources, analysis approaches, and theories, triangulation reduces the risk of errors associated with using a single approach in data analysis. Detecting inconsistencies and

subtle deviations between different data types inspires researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the investigation, ultimately enhancing the validity and reliability of research findings and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2015).

This study primarily employed data and theoretical triangulation.

The use of multiple data collection instruments, including Seidman's three-interview series, reflective journals, and video recordings, enhances the validity of the study through triangulation. By cross-referencing information from different sources, researchers can validate the consistency and convergence of the findings. Triangulation ensures that the research results are not reliant on a single method, reducing potential biases and increasing the overall reliability of the study.

Theoretical triangulation in this study involves grounding the research in multiple key theoretical perspectives that provide insights into the experiences of MECTs within a predominantly female-dominated profession. These theoretical perspectives include Connell's theory of masculinities and body-reflective practice, Acker's theory of gender organization, and West and Zimmerman's theory of doing gender. By triangulating multiple theoretical perspectives, the study enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, as different theories provide complementary insights that validate and enrich each other's interpretations. This integration of diverse theoretical perspectives strengthens the overall theoretical framework and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how gender dynamics and societal expectations

influence male teachers' lived experiences, career trajectories, and professional identities in the ECE field.

3.9.3 Member Checking

Member checking refers to soliciting participants' perceptions of the accuracy and the credibility of the research results and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Fraenkel et al., 2018), which were even considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314).

Member checking is incorporated by sharing the research findings with the participating MECTs. Participants are given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and video recordings. Their feedback and input help validate the accuracy and authenticity of the data interpretation, thus enhancing the reliability of the study. Member checking ensures that participants' perspectives are accurately represented and that their voices are reflected in the research outcomes.

Figure 3.2

Triangulation for Validity & Reliability
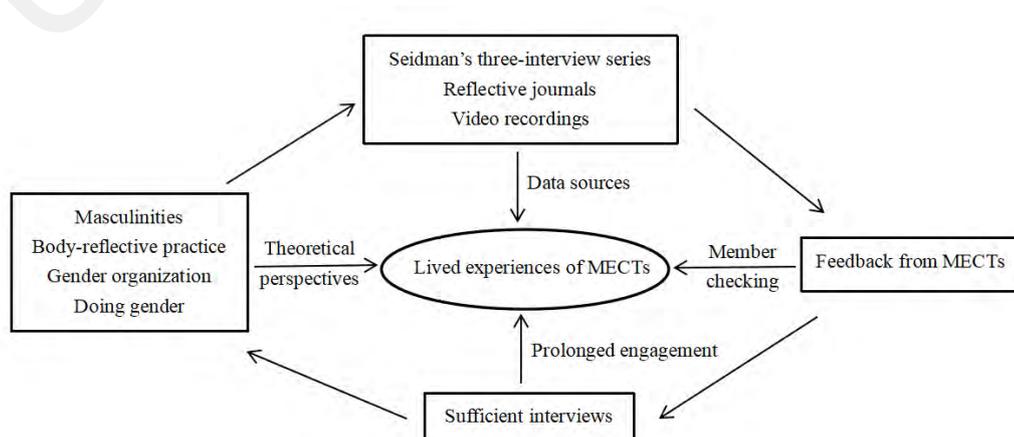
As illustrated in Figure 3.2, this study adopts a comprehensive approach to enhance the validity and reliability of its findings. By incorporating prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking, the study ensures the trustworthiness and accuracy of the data. The integration of these methods and perspectives strengthens the research's theoretical framework and contributes to a deeper understanding of the influence of gender dynamics on the male teachers' lived experiences.

3.10 Data Collection Techniques

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore MECTs' experiences. The interviews covered life history, detailed experiences, and reflections. The approach allowed flexibility while ensuring important aspects were addressed. The study adhered to Seidman's method for logical interviews. Video recordings were transcribed to capture non-verbal cues. Follow-up questions were integrated into later interviews. The study focused on barriers, rewards, and self-identity. Participant feedback was valued for deeper insights.

3.10.1 Interview

This study utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, which included overarching themes for each interview and relevant sub-questions under each theme. This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of key aspects related to the topics while allowing flexibility to discuss other relevant information based on the participants' individual experiences. The three interview sessions focused on exploring the participants' life

history before becoming ECTs, their lived experiences as ECTs, and their reflections on their work as ECTs based on the previous interviews.

Due to the diverse individual experiences of the participants, the data collected during the first two interviews may vary significantly. Therefore, the interview protocol did not list specific sub-questions to restrict participants' responses. Instead, it highlighted the focus during the interviews, providing a structured framework for the conversation to ensure important aspects of the research topic were not overlooked. For instance, during the first interview, particular attention was given to the participants' life history, including their family background, educational experiences, relationships, and work experiences unrelated to ECE after entering society if they had.

In the third interview, obtaining a deeper and detailed understanding of the research topic was crucial to gain valuable insights for analysis and conclusions. To effectively collect comprehensive and focused data within the limited time frame, the interview protocol highlighted three main areas of interest: the limitations or hindrances faced by male participants in entering ECE, rewards and opportunities, and their self-identity and career aspirations. Within these three areas, a total of 24 sub-questions were formulated. However, it is important to note that I did not require participants to answer all the sub-questions, as their experiences varied. I would adapt the sub-questions as needed based on the individual circumstances. These sub-questions were meant to ensure comprehensive coverage of various aspects of the research topic and to develop easily identifiable themes and patterns during data analysis. Nonetheless, I

also encouraged participants to freely express their viewpoints and share their unique perspectives and experiences.

This study adopts Seidman's method, and it is essential to respect the structure of the three-round interviews (Seidman, 2006). The interviews are conducted logically, with each session providing a foundation for elucidating details in the subsequent interviews. This requires interviewers to carefully control the direction of the conversation, striking a balance between providing participants with enough openness to narrate their stories while adhering to the specific purpose of each interview to ensure the effectiveness of the interview structure. After participating in the study and gaining an understanding of the interview topics through an informed consent form, one participant gave a quick and simple account of his family's background leading up to becoming an early childhood teacher. At that point, I would remind him of the interview themes and guide him back to his family life for a detailed description. During the interviews, participants are encouraged to describe their experiences rather than their thoughts, feelings, or opinions. For example, if a participant said, "We have tried many times, but it's not recognized." I would ask, "Can you tell me more about the attempts you made and why you feel they were not recognized?" Subsequently, the participant would describe his experience to answer this question. By encouraging participants to talk about their experiences, the aim is to reveal the essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 3.4

Semi-structured Interview Procedure

Interview preparation	During the interview	After the interview
Determine the interview time and tool via WeChat	On-site notes	Upload recorded video to Google Drive or Baidu Cloud
Interview tools: Google Meet or Tencent Meeting	Listening more and speaking less	Reflective journal
Recording tools: Tencent Meeting & Format Factory	Following up on participants' responses	
	Asking one question at a time	
	Avoiding leading questions	
	Tolerating silence	
	Maintaining a non-judgmental attitude	
	Letting participants guide the conversation	
	Focus and emotional control	

Additional elaboration on the specific interview process will be provided (see Table 3.4). Due to the impact of the pandemic, all interviews with the 5 participants were conducted online. Before the interviews, I contacted the participants via WeChat and confirmed the interview schedule and tools in advance. Each participant had 3 interviews, with each session lasting 90 minutes. Depending on the participants' situations, the interview duration was extended until sufficient data was collected. One participant underwent 4 interviews, while another participant, due to a busy work schedule, had 2 interviews combined into one session. One participant is currently studying abroad, so the first 2 interviews were conducted via Google Meet to ensure smooth internet connection. However, Google Meet's personal meeting does not have a recording function, so the subsequent interviews switched to Tencent Meeting. The other four participants who are in China were interviewed using Tencent Meeting. To ensure safety, two video recording software were used: Tencent Meeting itself, which has a built-in recording function, and Format Factory. This means that each interview was recorded and saved in two copies. The recorded videos were uploaded to personal

folders on Google Drive and Baidu Cloud, visible only to the respective participants for sharing and reviewing.

The interview process adhered to the following interview techniques: listening more and speaking less, following up on participants' responses, asking one question at a time, avoiding leading questions, tolerating silence, maintaining a non-judgmental attitude, letting participants guide the conversation, focus and emotional control (see Adams, 2010; Seidman, 2006). As I had limited experience in conducting interviews, regrettably, there were instances when I unintentionally violated some of these principles during the interviews. However, one participant kindly pointed out my shortcomings and offered me constructive reminders. To improve my interview skills, I diligently reviewed the video recordings to assess my demeanor, tone, and questioning style. I recorded all reflections in the reflective journal after each interview, learning from my mistakes and continuously enhancing my interview techniques for the next sessions.

While the interviews for this study were intended to stay within a 90-minute timeframe, aligning with the informed consent agreement, the actual interview durations often exceeded this limit due to participants' enthusiastic engagement. One participant even underwent a fourth interview, with the last two sessions lasting around 3 hours each. Despite the extended time, the participant remained dedicated and rigorously delved into past experiences and reflections. This interview format, although generating

seemingly unrelated data, offers a comprehensive backdrop for thorough exploration and investigation of participants' experiences.

After concluding the interviews, I would consolidate my on-site notes and write reflective journals to deepen my understanding. These reflective journals served as valuable references for the follow-up questions with the participants.

In phenomenological analysis, follow-up interviews are often necessary to clarify any preconceived notions held by the researchers (Peoples, 2020). Additionally, follow-up questions can be useful for exploring interesting or unexpected insights that arise during the conversation. Considering that the interviewees were quite busy, I did not conduct separate follow-up interviews outside of the three scheduled interviews. Instead, I integrated the follow-up questions within the second and third interviews.

3.10.2 Video Recording & Reflexive Journals

In this study, the process of transcribing verbatim from video recordings after repeated viewing was interleaved with the practice of writing reflective journals. Although video recording and observation are not used as primary research instruments, they serve a crucial role in verifying interview content and capturing additional context.

Table 3.5

Interview Record

pseudonym	Series of Interviews	Interview time	Interview duration
Aaron	Interview 1	19 Feb., 2023	90 minutes
Ben	Interview 1	20 Feb., 2023	100 minutes
Charles	Interview 1	22 Feb., 2023	90 minutes
Darren	Interview 1	5 Mar., 2023	120 minutes
Darren	Interview 2	9 Mar., 2023	115 minutes
Charles	Interview 2	11 Mar., 2023	130 minutes
Aaron	Interview 2	12 Mar., 2023	90 minutes
Ben	Interview 2	13 Mar., 2023	110 minutes
Aaron	Interview 3	10 Apr., 2023	120 minutes
Charles	Interview 3	10 Apr., 2023	90 minutes
Eli	Interview 1	12 Apr., 2023	90 minutes
Eli	Interview 2 & 3	16 Apr., 2023	150 minutes
Ben	Interview 3	17 Apr., 2023	190 minutes
Ben	Interview 4	24 Apr., 2023	190 minutes
Darren	Interview 3	25 Apr., 2023	105 minutes

According to Peoples (2020), listening to participants' voices during the transcription process is a crucial component of the analysis, as it allows capturing extensive non-verbal communication cues. Therefore, after each interview, I diligently reviewed the video recordings and personally transcribed them. I made note of non-verbal elements, such as gestures, confident smiles, and thoughtful silences, which conveyed meaning beyond the spoken language. These observations were annotated on the transcripts and recorded in the reflective journal to capture any implicit or unspoken content.

Subsequently, I shared the transcripts with each participant in their individual folders on the cloud storage, encouraging them to review and provide feedback. Only after completing these steps did I proceed with the next round of interviews. This iterative process ensured that the transcripts accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, due to participants dropping out and joining midway, as well as some participants needing interview time rescheduled due to scheduling conflicts, as a result, there was a slightly longer interval between each interview session (see Table 3.5). However, in the follow-up questions, I still prioritized filling in any gaps in information identified in the transcripts and reflective journals. And despite the relatively long intervals between participants' interviews, their responses remained favorable.

It is important to note that while video recordings and observations provide valuable context and verification, they cannot be used to triangulate data in the same way as primary research instruments. Their primary function is to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the interview content, thus supporting the overall validity and credibility of the study.

3.11 Procedure of the Study

The procedure of the study ensures the collection of comprehensive and reliable data while adhering to ethical considerations. The accompanying figure (see Figure 3.3) illustrates the procedure of this study, and detailed explanations subsequently provided.

Figure 3.3

Research Procedure Flowchart
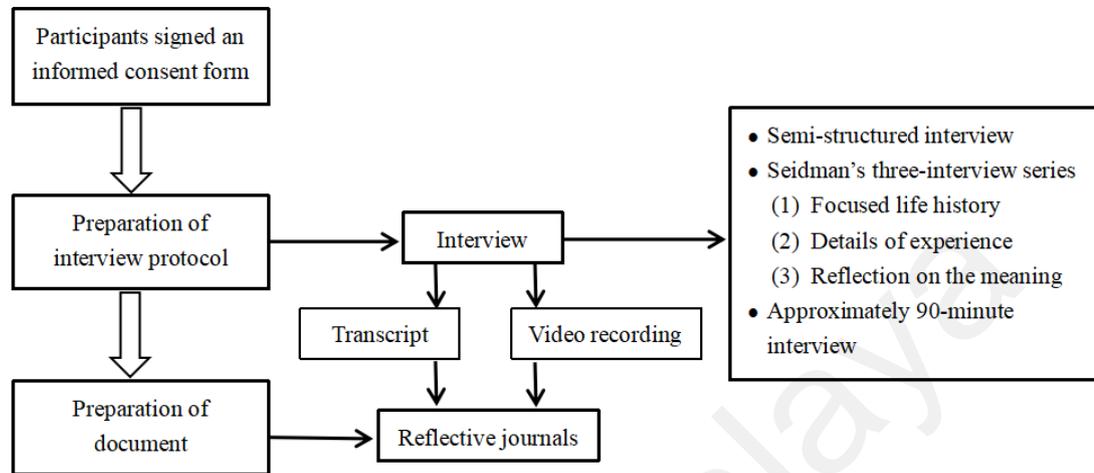
Once volunteers were recruited and eligible participants were identified, they would receive an informed consent form. The consent form comprises seven main sections: the first part outlines the researcher's identity and the study's topic, followed by a brief overview of the study's purpose, the three rounds of data collection through semi-structured interviews, and the duration of the interviews. Subsequently, potential risks of participating in the study, participants' rights, benefits of participation, confidentiality of records, dissemination methods, contact information and a copy of the form are explained in the remaining six sections. Upon participants' signing of the informed consent form, I, as the researcher, proceed with the study while ensuring participants' protection and well-being, adhering to agreed-upon procedures and ethical guidelines. The five adult participants are assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and ensure their true identities remain anonymous throughout the study. Data collection and transcription manuscripts were shared with participants proactively, enabling them to review and verify the accuracy of descriptions or flag

any potential inaccuracies or content they may not wish to be disclosed. This reflects my respect for participants and ensures I do not engage in any actions detrimental to their interests. I consistently uphold participants' voluntary involvement and allow them to withdraw from the study at any point. The research is conducted with integrity, transparency, and a steadfast commitment to ethical principles throughout the entire process.

The interview protocol serves as a crucial tool underpinning the research process, furnishing a structured framework for interviews that ensures the consistency, depth, and relevance of data collection. While offering guidance to explore key themes, it also allows the flexibility to unearth unforeseen insights (Dibley, 2014). This study adopts Seidman's interview method, engaging in three semi-structured interviews with each participant, each lasting around 90 minutes. Over time and with growing trust, participants seem to progressively ease into the interviews, revealing even more intimate information than before. Seidman (2006) emphasized the importance of narrating experiences as a primary means for humans to comprehend their own encounters. The extensive material gathered from interviews, amounting to hundreds of pages, provides abundant analytical data to delve into participants' lived experiences as ECTs.

The post-interview materials will be meticulously stored in a secure and easily accessible location. Each interview's date and duration were well-documented, and recorded videos and transcriptions have been consistently named, backed up, and

shared in participants' private cloud storage folders. By maintaining organized and managed materials, I aimed to prevent any inconvenience in using or sharing data due to delayed labeling or archiving. Revisiting data, reviewing videos, and analyzing verbatim transcripts, I engaged in self-reflection, capturing my insights in reflective journals. Moving forward, I conducted in-depth thematic analysis using the collected data, elaborating on the data coding and analysis procedures. Subsequently, I would conduct thematic analysis based on the collected data. The procedure of data analysis will be further elaborated later.

3.12 Ethical Concerns

Creswell and Poth (2016) stated that there are three main principles for dealing with ethical issues: "respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p.57).

Respect for people includes treating the people involved in the research process and their data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When participants were first approached, I started by informing them of the topic of the research, its objectives and what to expect from the interview to ensure that they are entirely voluntary in the study. Participants have the right to withdraw if they wish for any reasons during the data collection process. The data obtained through the interviews will be honestly presented and the participants will be involved in the examination of the data analysis, which will allow the voice of the participants to be represented in the study.

The concern for welfare involves the researcher ensuring adequate protection of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). After participants have formally agreed to

participate in the study, they would be informed to sign the consent form provided by the University of Malaya and assure the participants that all data obtained from this study including video recordings, personal privacy, etc. will be kept strictly confidential to avoid putting the participants in any possible danger. Therefore, in the final study report, any sensitive information about the participants such as their names will appear under pseudonyms.

Justice refers to the need to treat people fairly and equitably (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study I used consistent standards to treat participants, and I am willing to share actual research results with others through formal channels.

3.13 Pilot Study

Shakir and ur Rahman (2022) elucidated the concept of a pilot study as "small-scale study or a pretest for a particular research instrument such as an interview guide or a questionnaire"(p. 1620). Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasized that the pilot test can help researchers improve research instruments, detect observer bias, refine questions and adjust research procedures. The primary objective of the pilot study is to assess the clarity of interview questions and their relevance to the main study. Additionally, it aims to appraise the utility of the tools for obtaining viable outcomes, thereby facilitating the design and implementation of the main study and ultimately enhancing the validity and credibility of the research results. This pilot process encompasses the meticulous consideration of participants, procedure, and outcome (Malmqvist et al., 2019; Shakir & ur Rahman, 2022).

3.13.1 Participants

There were two male participants in this pilot study, both of whom were recruited but ultimately did not participate in the main research. Both participants worked in public kindergartens in Shenzhen, but they were from different schools. One of them had two years of work experience. Although he didn't meet the criteria for years of experience outlined in the recruitment, he was highly interested in this study. Consequently, he willingly agreed to participate in the pilot study. I will refer to him as Participant A. The other participant had six years of work experience but withdrew from the study due to personal reasons. However, he agreed to participate in one pilot study interview. I will refer to him as Participant B. Both participants received informed consent forms and participated voluntarily. They were also informed that the pilot study was solely aimed at testing the feasibility of the tools, and its results would not be included in the final main research outcomes.

3.13.2 Procedure

Participant A underwent a complete three rounds of semi-structured interviews. As it's a pilot study, the interview duration was shortened to 60 minutes for each session. Participant B participated in a single interview, focusing on reconstructing and reflecting upon his experience as an early childhood teacher. Given the substantial content, this interview lasted for 90 minutes. For the segments of the interview concerning life history and the details of working experience, specific questions were not provided. Instead, participants were given thematic guidance to narrate their own experiences. In terms of the reflective interviews, Participant A was the first to be

interviewed. I had prepared 26 questions in advance. As Participant A's responses were not entirely satisfactory, I adjusted the interview protocol for the reflective section before proceeding to interview Participant B. Throughout the interviews, participants were encouraged to provide answers with illustrative examples. After the interviews concluded, participants were also invited to give feedback on the interview.

The pilot study was conducted in early February 2023. Since the participants were on winter break during that time, and thus had more availability, Participant A's interviews were conducted over three consecutive days, specifically from February 3rd to 5th. Participant B's interview, on the other hand, took place on February 8th. Given the limited number of participants and the proximity of the interview dates in the pilot study, the experience left a strong impression. As a result, I refrained from creating reflective journals. Instead, I generated new documents to directly modify the interview protocol, maintaining backup copies of both the old and new versions of the protocol. All interviews were conducted using WeChat video calls and were fully recorded using Format Factory software. The recorded video backups were stored in a personal folder on Baidu Cloud and shared with the participants. Transcription of the interview recordings was carried out using Feishu software.

3.13.3 Outcome

The pilot study data proved to be useful for the modifications of the instrument. Following the conclusion of the pilot study, the following modifications were made:

Firstly, a notable achievement of the pilot study was the realization that fostering participants' sense of trust and comfort is essential for eliciting insightful responses. Participant A was engaged in the study for a longer duration, and during the interviews, his responses were notably more detailed than those of Participant B. Additionally, this preliminary research allowed me to gauge participants' receptiveness to the interview process and identify potential areas of discomfort or hesitation. This, in turn, boosted my confidence in the successful acquisition of data.

Secondly, the pilot study further validated the suitability of interview duration and participant recruitment criteria. It was determined that the 60-minute duration of the pilot study interviews was insufficient for comprehensive data collection, while 90 minutes proved to be a more reasonable timeframe. Participant A's two-year work experience, comprising one year as a physical education teacher followed by a year as a supporting teacher, highlighted the difficulty in gaining profound insights due to the changes in roles and limited experience across different positions. Therefore, the recruitment condition of a minimum of 3 years of kindergarten work experience remains appropriate.

Thirdly, the pilot study provided guidance for modifying the interview protocol. The data acquisition strategies for the interviews on life history and the details of working experience were validated as effective. However, significant changes were made to the protocol for the reflective session. Initially, the protocol consisted of a set of 26 specific questions aimed at directing participants' reflections and responses. However,

these questions proved overly restrictive, curtailing participants' ability to delve deeply into their experiences. As a result, the protocol for the third interview underwent revision, adopting three overarching themes: the limitations or hindrances faced by male participants in entering ECE, rewards and opportunities, and their self-identity and career aspirations. Each of these themes was accompanied by an array of reference sub-questions, strategically designed to enhance participants' responsiveness. This revamped approach not only facilitated participants in honing their focus based on insights gleaned from preceding sessions but also acted as a compass when participants' thoughts were less crystallized. The outcome was a well-rounded and comprehensive data collection process, catering to both instances of clarity and moments of ambiguity. In the third interview protocol, sub-questions that were less relevant to the main themes were removed, and additional sub-questions of greater value were introduced. The total number of sub-questions was reduced from 26 to 24. Moreover, these 24 sub-questions were selectively chosen based on each participant's individual circumstances, with participants encouraged to express their insights aligned with the three main thematic aspects of the interview.

Lastly, the pilot study provided valuable guidance for structuring the procedures of data collection. Despite comprising only four interview sessions, the pilot study yielded a substantial amount of data. This underscored the significance of promptly naming, organizing, archiving, and backing up data after each interview, as well as the necessity of crafting reflective journals. These journals not only aided in clarifying personal biases but also proved essential in documenting pertinent matters to address

after each interview, facilitating timely follow-up and improvements in subsequent sessions. Difficulties were also encountered during the transcription of data. The Format Factory software used for video recording exhibited an issue of audio overlap, where the voices of both participants were partially intertwined in the recorded video. In response, I transitioned to using Tencent Meeting for interviews during the main study phase since it offered a built-in recording feature. In cases where Format Factory's recorded videos had issues, the Tencent Meeting recordings could serve as backups. Through repeated review and meticulous comparison of transcribed transcripts, a strategy of conducting comprehensive thematic analysis for each manuscript was established.

3.14 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study primarily employed computer-based methods, utilizing qualitative analysis software known as Nvivo. This software was instrumental in streamlining the process of data storage, retrieval, and encoding. The data analysis process is broken down into seven distinct steps. For precise information, please consult the accompanying Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Data Analysis Process Flowchart

Stage 1: Read the Entire Transcript and Eliminate Unnecessary Language
↓
Stage 2: Re-Read the Transcripts to Gain an Overall Understanding
↓
Stage 3: Create Initial Codes
↓
Stage 4: Develop Emerging Themes for Each Interview
↓
Stage 5: Proceed to the Next Case
↓
Stage 6: Identify Patterns Across Different Cases
↓
Stage 7: Validate the Findings by Revisiting the Interview Transcripts
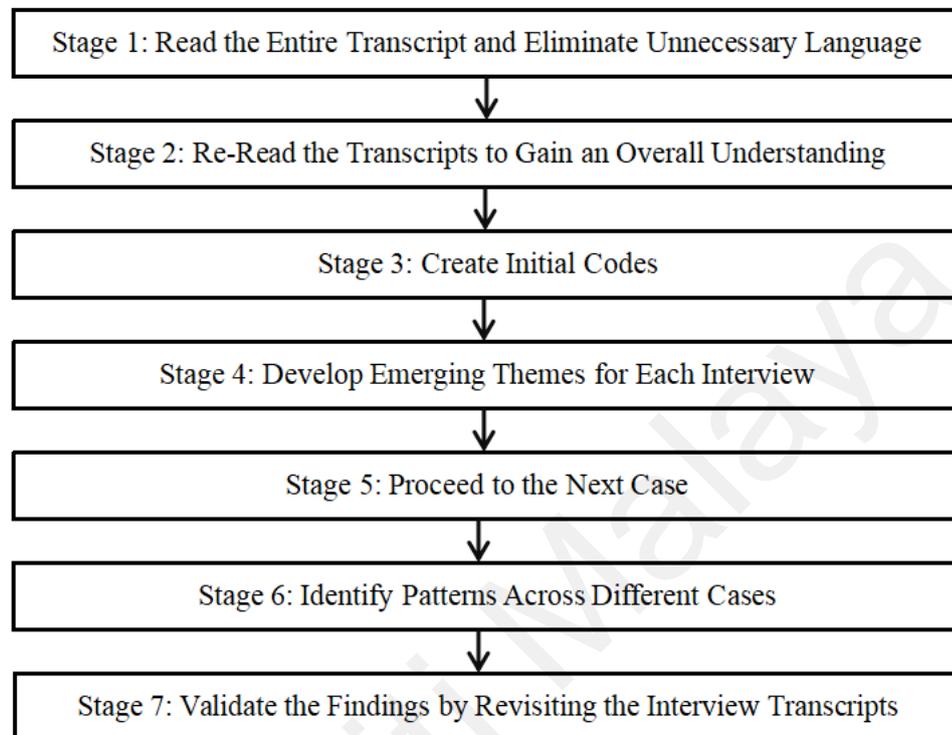
Stage 1: Read the Entire Transcript and Eliminate Unnecessary Language

In this initial stage, utilizing software like Word 365, I read through the entire transcript with the goal of becoming familiar with the data. I carefully reviewed the content and identified and removed unnecessary language, such as filler words, pauses, or repetitive phrases. This process aimed to streamline the text, making it more concise and manageable for subsequent analysis. By eliminating extraneous language, I could efficiently manage the transcripts and focus on their substantive content.

And then the transcribed textual content from the interviews was imported into Nvivo, enabling efficient management of the extensive information gathered from multiple

interview sessions. Given that the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the textual data was naturally in Chinese as well (see Figure 3.5). This linguistic congruence was advantageous for me, a native Chinese speaker, as it facilitated swift and accurate judgment and induction throughout the coding process.

Figure 3.5

Interview Transcript Sample

Stage 2: Re-Read the Transcripts to Gain an Overall Understanding

After cleaning the data, I engaged in a more comprehensive reading of the transcripts. During this stage, I sought to gain a deep understanding of the content. I annotated the transcripts by adding notes or comments to capture my initial impressions, questions, or observations (see Figure 3.6.). These annotations served as valuable references throughout the analysis process and aided in identifying key themes and patterns.

Figure 3.6

Note and Comment Capture in NVivo
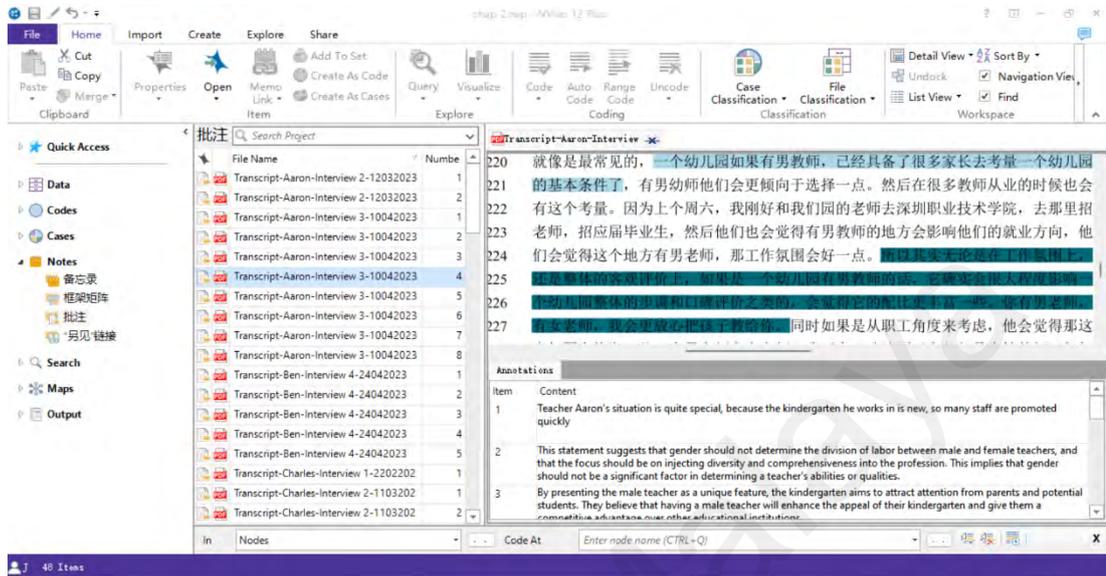
Stage 3: Create Initial Codes

Once I had a solid grasp of the data, I proceeded to generate initial codes or labels.

These codes consisted of short, descriptive tags that represented specific concepts,

ideas, or phenomena found in the data, which encompassed videos, interview

transcripts, and self-reflection journals. The following Figure 3.7 displays a sample of

the reflection journal. Then I created these codes to initiate the process of organizing

and categorizing the information. This stage involved identifying keywords or phrases

that encapsulated the core elements of the data.

Figure 3.7

Self-Reflection Journal Sample

Stage 4: Develop Emerging Themes for Each Interview

Building on the generated codes, I then worked on developing emergent themes for each interview or dataset. Themes were broader, overarching patterns or concepts that emerged from the coded data. I grouped related codes together to form these themes, which provided a higher-level perspective on the content. During this process, some less relevant codes were also discarded to refine the themes. Themes helped in synthesizing and interpreting the data and were crucial for drawing meaningful conclusions.

Stage 5: Proceed to the Next Case

After completing the analysis for a specific interview or dataset, the transition to the next case was made. Each case denoted a unique participant, interview, or data source.

This iterative process facilitated the comparison and contrast of findings across cases, enabling the identification of commonalities or differences.

Stage 6: Identify Patterns Across Different Cases

While progressing through multiple cases, patterns transcending individual instances gradually emerged. These patterns, as illustrated in Figure 3.8, included recurring themes, trends, or similarities in the data. Acknowledging these patterns became essential for drawing more robust conclusions and for generalizing findings across the entire dataset or research context.

Figure 3.8

Emerging Patterns in the Data

Stage 7: Validate the Findings by Revisiting the Interview Transcripts

In the final stage, a revisit to the original interview transcripts was undertaken to verify and validate the results obtained through coding and theme development. This critical

step ensured that the analysis accurately reflected the participants' responses and the context of the interviews. Additionally, input was sought from peers, and member checking techniques were employed, involving participants in the verification process to enhance the credibility of the findings.

3.15 Summary

This study employed a phenomenological research design along with a semi-structured interview approach to investigate occupational gender stereotypes experienced by MECTs in Shenzhen, China. The methodology, as outlined in Chapter 4, served as a visual guide to the research procedures. In the subsequent chapters, preconceptions were set aside, allowing the collected data to speak for itself and inform the subsequent analysis and findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the research findings, focusing on the experiences of five male teachers with a minimum of 3 years of work experience in Shenzhen kindergartens. The research results are primarily based on the analysis of various data sources, including video observations, in-depth interviews, and reflective journals, with the text derived from in-depth interviews holding particular importance. In this chapter, a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach is employed for thematic analysis. The specific data analysis steps, as outlined in Chapter Three, consist of seven sequential procedures, which are:

Figure 4.1

Steps in Data Analysis Process

Stage 1
- Read the Entire Transcript
- Eliminate Unnecessary Language

Stage 2
- Re-Read the Transcripts
- Gain an Overall Understanding

Stage 3
- Create Initial Codes

Stage 4
- Develop Emerging Themes for Each Interview

Stage 5
- Proceed to the Next Case

Stage 6
- Identify Patterns Across Different Cases

Stage 7
- Validate the Findings by Revisiting the Interview Transcripts
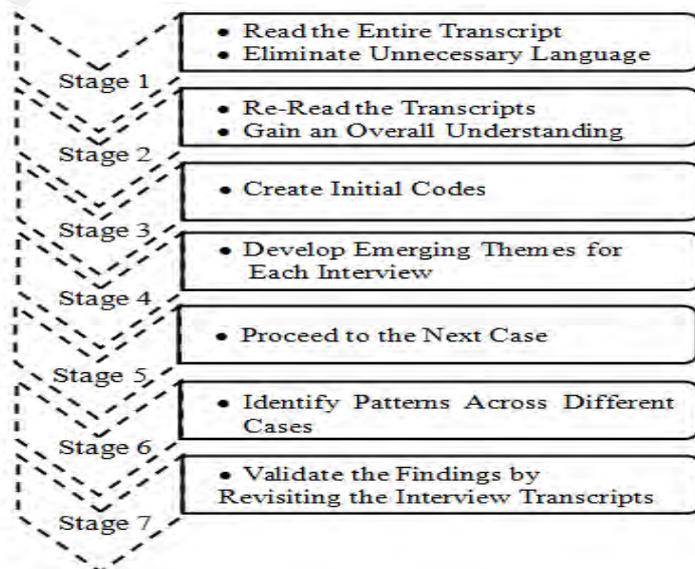
Chapter 4 begins by presenting the personal life histories and overall work experiences of the five participants. It conducts a comprehensive analysis of their work experiences in detail, addressing three key research questions. Initial codes are established for each case, leading to the emergence of thematic elements. Subsequently, a cross-case examination is conducted to encompass all themes, and finally, the summary of this chapter is made.

4.2 Participant Backgrounds

To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants in this research study, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. These pseudonyms, following alphabetical order, ensure anonymity while allowing for a coherent and personalized exploration of each participant's background. This careful approach aligns with the rigorous sample selection criteria outlined in Chapter 3, resulting in a group of five male early childhood teachers who enthusiastically participated in the study.

Within this section, a comprehensive and illuminating exploration of each participant's background unfolds. By meticulously examining their individual experiences, this research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the multifaceted dimensions that shape and influence their roles as male educators in the early childhood setting.

Table 4.1

Participant Profiles

	Age	Educational Background	Major in ECE	Work Experience in ECE	Any other male colleagues
Aaron	25	Bachelor	No	3 years	Yes
Ben	29	Bachelor	No	3 years	Yes
Charles	27	Bachelor	Yes	5 years	Yes
Darren	30	Bachelor	Yes	7 years	Yes
Eli	26	Bachelor	Yes	4.5 years	Yes

4.2.1 Participant 1 – Teacher Aaron

Life History

Teacher Aaron's current family consists of four members: their father, mother, and one younger brother. He grew up with his maternal grandparents, where he played the role of the oldest child. He didn't have much exposure to younger siblings and mostly interacted with peers of the same age. As the eldest son in his immediate and extended family, he holds a significant position in both.

In terms of the family dynamic, Teacher Aaron's parents adhere to traditional gender roles, with his mother taking care of the household while his father focuses on external matters. He believes that the notion of male chauvinism is outdated.

I feel that these simple tasks can be done by oneself. The outdated notion of male chauvinism, prevalent in my father's generation, is unnecessary. Many things can be done independently, and it's actually nice to take care of each other in small ways. It's not a big deal.

Teacher Aaron shares a close relationship with his mother, often confiding in her and discussing various aspects of his life. While his father may not show as much concern, his mother's care and attention make up for it. They discuss details about his work, encounters with different people, and even small things like dinner preferences. Teacher Aaron finds it interesting to spend his winter and summer breaks with his family since he has time to engage in training and simple activities like grocery shopping with his mother or playing chess with his father. Being able to spend time with them is something he values.

Reflecting on his childhood, Teacher Aaron recalls being disciplined harshly by his grandparents. Although he noticed a similar treatment towards his younger brother, he felt hesitant to intervene due to their age difference. However, he discusses these family education methods with his parents and shares his own perspective.

In this aspect, I tend to think more and strive to achieve greater respect for each person's choices within our small family.

Regardless of the decisions he makes, his parents are always supportive, acknowledging his growing maturity and trust in his capabilities.

Teacher Aaron has been talkative and sociable from a young age, which has resulted in having a considerable number of friends. Among his friends, he tended to have a slightly higher proportion of friends of the opposite sex. This social pattern was established during his high school years. During high school, Teacher Aaron has

consistently held leadership positions from middle school to university. This involvement allowed him to interact more with female classmates. Subsequently, he pursued studies at a teacher training college and are currently working in a kindergarten. Meanwhile, it indicates his ability to take responsibility and effectively manage interactions between teachers and fellow students. By acting as a middle person or mediator, he has developed better interpersonal skills and a good understanding of navigating different social dynamics.

Teacher Aaron's interest in psychology stems from a particular high school teacher who taught political science but had a background in psychology. This teacher incorporated psychological elements into their lessons, including activities and games relevant to high school students. Teacher Aaron developed a strong affinity for this teacher, which influenced their decision to pursue a psychology major in college.

In fact, when it comes to my choice of major, I only chose this particular field. It doesn't matter which university it is, I only selected this one major.

(Aaron, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 760)

Career Trajectory

In June 2020, Teacher Aaron interviewed for a position at a newly established kindergarten and taught a small class. In the second year, he specialized in mental health education as his college major was applied psychology . In the third year, he continued as a mental health specialist and took on additional roles as the assistant principal, safety officer, and secretary of the Communist Youth League branch in the office.

4.2.2 Participant 2 – Teacher Ben

Life History

Teacher Ben grew up with his father, as his mother left to work with his elder sister when he was four years old. His grandfather was a professor at a school, but during the Cultural Revolution, he was criticized and their family's fate took a turn. From then on, their family went from a prosperous state to a financially constrained working-class life. Teacher Ben's father had a childhood condition that affected his ability to speak, and he suffered from marginalization within his large family. This led to emotional and social struggles, impacting his self-esteem and causing late-life depression. It is evident that due to his upbringing and psychological state, his intimate relationships, including the one with Teacher Ben's mother, could not be stable or lasting, leading to their separation. Despite these challenges, Teacher Ben became his father's sole intimate companion during his formative years. Regarding his family background, Teacher Ben mentioned:

We have a cultural mindset that is not rooted in a local context. Instead, we possess a relative sense of elitism, aspirations, and thinking.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 481-482)

Teacher Ben had childhood dreams of becoming a politician, inspired by charismatic leaders. His grandmother found it absurd. He later shifted his dream to becoming a gourmet, wanting to explore delicious food globally. His grandmother considered it lacking ambition.

Teacher Ben's father voluntarily retired early from his job, choosing to receive a minimal pension. This decision further strained their economic circumstances. His father had a controlling parenting style, resorting to harsh discipline and verbal abuse, leading to fear and a reliance on academic achievement for self-worth. However, Teacher Ben does not blame his father, understanding his insecurities.

So, when I was a child, my self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-concept basically relied on my academic performance, which was the only resource that could support them.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 561-563)

Teacher Ben had a diverse range of activities during his primary school years. However, one traumatic experience stood out - playing poker with his father. His father had an obsession with testing his son's ability to mentally calculate card values. This involved rigorous repetition and the fear of making mistakes. The constant pressure and emotional abuse resulted in lasting psychological scars, causing fear, insecurity, and a tendency to avoid conflicts. The impact of Teacher Ben's upbringing on his self-esteem and boundary-setting continues to affect him, with lingering feelings of insecurity and a heightened sense of emotional vulnerability.

Until now…I can still feel the part of my heart that is safe, in fact, a place that I need to live with for a long time.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 774-776)

During his high school years, Teacher Ben developed a strong connection with his mother after his father's death. Despite not living together for a while, their relationship remained intact. Unlike peers with similar backgrounds, he didn't face

difficulties reconnecting with his mother, thanks to the secure environment she provided during his early childhood. In addition, Teacher Ben forgave his father's flawed expression of love and recognized his underlying kindness. Reflecting on his father's life challenges, he marveled at his stability and inner strength. Inspired by this, Teacher Ben pledged to embrace his father's positive qualities and become a responsible and nurturing family member.

Teacher Ben's life was shaped by a lack of material wealth, which surprisingly didn't instill a strong desire for materialism or success in him. He attributes this to the cultural environment within his family. Despite growing up in poverty, he didn't feel compelled to chase money, business, or possessions in his adulthood.

Even though I don't have money, I still want to do things I love, pursue meaning, and have dreams and fantasies.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 506-507)

Teacher Ben narrated achieved excellent academic results and held the position of class monitor in elementary school, earning respect and privileges from his peers. However, his positive experiences were disrupted by his father's insecurity, leading to further school transfers. He had a positive experience learning mathematics and playing the clarinet. In middle school, He gained admission to a prestigious school based on academic instead of artistic abilities.

Teacher Ben experienced bullying during middle school, both from external individuals near the campus and from a classmate who engaged in subtle emotional manipulation. The bullying incidents left a lasting impact, causing feelings of fear,

shame, and a loss of identity. Meanwhile, Teacher Ben's academic performance declined in a prestigious city school. He struggled with physics due to a disliked teacher. Despite efforts to improve, he narrowly missed admission to a top high school. Teacher Ben still carries negative memories of classmates and chooses to distance themselves from them.

Throughout my three years in middle school, I lacked a sense of belonging because I couldn't find my place.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 2, Lines 419-420)

In high school, Teacher Ben experienced a wave-like academic journey. Despite missing out on a prestigious provincial school by 8 points, he became the top student in the city's best high school. He didn't pay any tuition for three years and excelled academically, especially in physics. His inspiring physics teacher, a young and humorous dual master's degree holder, sparked his admiration. However, transitioning to a new class in the second year affected his performance slightly. Adapting to transitions has always been a challenge for him.

Having a sense of identity and security is something I have always been pursuing, as I constantly feel like something is lacking within me. This feeling stems from childhood experiences.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 2, Lines 604-605)

In his sophomore year, his father had a stroke. After that, their roles reversed, and Teacher Ben took care of his father. His grades declined, but his social relationships improved. He gained independence, managed his own finances, and had the freedom to make decisions.

In college, Teacher Ben matured mentally, thanks to Chai Jing's book Seeing, which helped him confront personal challenges and question his behavior. Working with the Red Cross Society gave him a sense of belonging, allowing him to enjoy the process and stay true to his initial motivations.

So, this is how I've always been, even after graduating and growing up until now. I'm not someone who is driven by money or material possessions to be interested in something. I am someone who does things because they genuinely interest me, not because there is material gain involved. That's my orientation, and it's important to me.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 2, Lines 710-713)

Teacher Ben had a three-year crush on a mature, artistic, and intellectually inclined girl in high school. Later, he developed an admiration for independent women like Chai Jing. In college, he was drawn to a talented and gender-fluid senior, along with a group of imaginative, thoughtful individuals. In this part, he emphasizes traits that are not limited to gender but personal attractiveness.

Even though she is a girl, I really wanted to become a guy like her. She's not a very girly girl, she gives off a strong independent woman vibe.

(Ben, Transcript Interview 2, Lines 720-722)

Teacher Ben chose Marine Engineering as his major due to his scores. Intrigued by the mechanical aspect and high earning potential, he opted for marine engineering. While working as a seafarer for three years, he experienced the loss of his father, which transformed his values and led him to study psychology. However, he failed the graduate exam in psychology. At 25 years old, facing the competitive and uncertain nature of the psychology field in China, Teacher Ben opted for practical experience by

working in a kindergarten for three years. This decision exposed him to a variety of children and their unique behaviors, guiding his future path in psychology.

Career Trajectory

In 2016, Teacher Ben graduated from university with a degree in Marine Engineering. After completing his degree, he had the option to work as an engineer on ships. Teacher Ben pursued a career in the maritime field for three years.

In 2019, upon returning to his home country, he made a career change and entered the field of ECE. In October 2019, he secured a position in a private kindergarten by submitting his resume through various job platforms. He worked with a small class in a private kindergarten located in Xiamen province for a year, but he left the position due to dissatisfaction with the leadership style.

At the end of 2020, Teacher Ben took a job at a private Montessori kindergarten, where he taught a mixed-age class. However, due to personal reasons, he left the position after a year, this time to join a public Montessori kindergarten in Shenzhen, where he continued to teach a mixed-age class. Yet again, he left his job after one year in 2022 due to personal reasons.

4.2.3 Participant 3 – Teacher Charles

Life History

Teacher Charles, a 27-year-old tea enthusiast who enjoys a laid-back lifestyle. He grew up in a happy family with loving parents and an older sister. Despite their occasional

fights, their bond remained strong. He describes his sister as an active and spirited individual, while he is more submissive and obedient to his father's instructions.

In his traditional family, Teacher Charles's father adhered to the role of the provider, while his mother took care of household chores. His father also managed the family's finances and assets.

My father has a strong sense of traditional masculinity. Since we live in a rural area, whenever he goes out to work or do any tasks, he insists on having my mother accompany him. Even though my father could easily handle things on his own, he always demands my mother's presence. He never takes care of chores like washing dishes or cooking.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 75-78)

Teacher Charles's parents influenced him greatly by instilling a positive and optimistic outlook on life. They taught him to see the good in every situation and not to complain. Their harmonious and sunny household created a generally positive and cheerful atmosphere, shaping Teacher Charles's character.

Teacher Charles grew up with his parents' guidance from elementary school to his entry into society. He learned the importance of respecting elders and took on household chores assigned by his father. His parents provided moderate guidance, adjusting their approach based on his age and giving him a sense of freedom as he grew older. They instilled discipline without suppressing him, which prevented him from developing bad habits like excessive gaming. Charles respected his parents' authority, particularly fearing his father's intimidating presence and stern demeanor.

He possessed a gentle personality, deviating from the typical mischievous behavior of boys his age. He enjoyed quieter activities and had more female friends, reflecting his softer nature. However, as he grew older, he formed close bonds with male peers. In his childhood, Teacher Charles engaged in playful activities with girls, like molding clay and jumping rope, as well as role-playing inspired by TV characters. His father occasionally discouraged his friendships with girls, by fourth and fifth grade, then he began developing strong relationships with other boys.

My father would prevent me from playing with girls whom I got along well with.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 180)

He would give me reminders or someone would come to me in our village, and he would say I wasn't home or something.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 186-187)

Actually, it might have had an impact and made me realize that I should play with boys instead.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 194-195)

In his childhood and adolescence, Teacher Charles had an average academic performance and a gentle and kind personality, which allowed him to get along well with friends without conflicts. He never got into fights and described himself as moderately active. Although he had a dream of becoming a chef, he later developed a fascination with being a teacher and standing on the podium.

During middle school, Teacher Charles became independent as a boarder and took care of his own chores diligently. In addition, he faced bullying as older students demanded protection money from younger ones, including himself. He sought help from his family, and after a challenging semester, the bullying was resolved. It was a difficult time for Charles as he dealt with constant demands for money while feeling unable to confide in his family.

In middle school, Teacher Charles made more male friends who introduced him to new experiences, including dating. While engaging in energetic activities like running and sports with his male friends, he also enjoyed chatting with his female friends. He had a strict but fair final homeroom teacher in junior high who used physical punishment for serious mistakes but provided incentives like purchasing magazines for well-behaved students. Teacher Charles found her to be an excellent teacher who balanced discipline and rewards. Additionally, he had a young and friendly male homeroom teacher who focused on students' personalities and abilities rather than grades, making math less intimidating for him. After junior high school, his dream gradually transformed into wanting to become a teacher, partly influenced by the teachers he encountered.

In high school, Teacher Charles became the vice secretary of the student union, boosting his confidence. His outgoing nature and decent interpersonal skills led others to recommend him for leadership positions. Towards the end of high school, his homeroom teacher suggested considering a career in early childhood education due to

his gentle and patient nature. Teacher Charles took this advice seriously and explored opportunities in that field.

His father initially opposed the decision, but his uncle and cousins convinced his father due to the promising job prospects with the upcoming two-child policy. Despite his father's concerns about age and limited career growth, his mother supported his choice. The enrollment process and family support solidified his decision, outweighing his father's objection. He enrolled in a preschool teacher program, driven by his own desire and the influence of others.

My father believed that being a preschool teacher was a job only suitable for young people. According to his impression, as you reach 30, 35, or 40 years old, you won't have the energy to keep up with the demands of the job.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 717-718)

He thought of preschool teachers as people who just bounce around and play with children, lacking potential for success. He believed it might lead to a lack of prospects or achievement in the long run.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 724)

In college, he understood the value of higher education and the need for strong skills. He approached his studies with determination and excelled in his major courses, including child psychology and language arts. He actively engaged with professors and classmates, earning recognition and respect. He gained practical experience by visiting preschools, where he developed a deep affection for young learners. He is committed to teaching and hopes to make a positive impact on every child he

encounters, even though his classmates in the same major rarely stick to working in the field of ECE.

I want to use what I have learned to teach every child well because I find them adorable and innocent. I hope the children I teach can learn something from me. Even though it may be tiring and challenging, I believe I will persist and never give up.

(Charles, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 1241-1244)

Career Trajectory

Between 2018 and 2020, Teacher Charles worked as a co-teacher at a private kindergarten. He decided to leave due to a combination of salary concerns and the significant work-related stress, which frequently led to overtime. In 2020, he transitioned to a position at a public kindergarten, where he initially took on the roles of a homeroom teacher for a small class and a grade level coordinator during his first year. He has remained at this public kindergarten ever since.

4.2.4 Participant 4 – Teacher Darren

Life History

Teacher Darren has a wide range of hobbies and interests, including reading emotionally charged literature, interacting with children, and traveling, etc. He finds fulfillment in playing with their nieces and nephews, considering it a rewarding and happy experience.

His family has four members: father, mother, older sister, and him. Despite being the only male child in his family, Teacher Charles experienced equal expectations and treatment from his parents. Household chores were shared among all the children, and

his parents believed boys were better suited for physically demanding tasks. Education was highly valued in his family, and his parents emphasized the importance of studying and pursuing career independently. They provided guidance based on their experiences but didn't impose specific demands. His mother, in particular, had a significant influence on his open-minded thinking and progressive mindset, while his father had a more traditional parenting style. He feels that his emotional development was greatly influenced by his mother, whereas his relationship with his father was characterized by mutual care and concern.

My mother has had a greater influence on me emotionally. Perhaps my emotions tend to be more sensitive, and I feel that I have been influenced by my mother a lot since childhood. I sometimes belong to the type of person who is not overly melancholic but rather sensitive. For example, when watching a movie, if there is a line that resonates with me and reminds me of a scene from my life, I can't help but shed tears. It's that kind of state.

(Darren, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 1058-1061)

In terms of daily life and emotional aspects, the emotional connection with my father is relatively limited.

(Darren, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 1063-1064)

Teacher Darren didn't attend kindergarten and started boarding school in the second grade. He later moved to the town for better education. He learned cooking from a young age and continued cooking throughout high school.

Throughout his educational journey, Teacher Darren maintained positive relationships with teachers but faced mild bullying during junior high school. Certain classmates would engage in bullying behavior, particularly targeting his personality traits. For

example, his inclination to play with girls or prioritize studying over socializing earned him the label of a bookworm from male classmates. However, upon entering high school, these incidents became less prevalent as he developed a diverse social circle and better emotional management skills.

Because in high school, you were exposed to diversity, and you formed friendships with male friends and others, you had more varied experiences and interactions. This allowed you to develop different ways of managing and expressing your emotions, providing you with more outlets, then you feel nothing.

(Darren, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 1169-1170)

It caused him to feel inferior a bit due to classmates' behavior, he tended to be introverted and have limited socializing. Despite being perceived as having good interpersonal skills, he believes his social circle is not strong. He prefers connecting with like-minded people and avoid engaging with those who don't share common interests or values.

After the college entrance exam, he switched from marketing to ECE as it is the ace major of the university and got support from parents. During his three-year diploma program, practical training at local kindergartens gave him valuable insights. The first internship revealed his aptitude for the profession as he bonded with the children, finding their hugs and conversations immensely rewarding. This experience solidified his desire to become an early childhood teacher.

Before the internship, I didn't have this kind of feeling. I would go to class every day like a robot. But when suddenly there's a group of cute and adorable children praising you, hugging you, giving you an unprecedented warmth, you feel deeply touched by this profession. I felt that I must become a teacher like this in the future, that's the thought I had.

In the third year of college, the only class with 16 male students were given priority for internships. Teacher Darren chose to intern at an elite kindergarten, where he was assigned to a smaller class and responsible for teaching physical education to all the children in the kindergarten. He noticed that parents were particularly attentive to him, and the issue was resolved through communication between his class teacher and the parents. This internship enriched his practical experience and enhanced his understanding of the theoretical coursework at school.

Gradually, you will notice that parents of the smaller class you teach have a special interest in a male teacher. Of course, this interest is in quotation marks. They might be curious about how a male teacher interacts with children and whether he is capable of handling early childhood work. Although they may not discuss these topics directly with you while dropping off or picking up their children, they will communicate with the lead teacher to address these concerns.

(Darren, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 135-138)

During his college years, Teacher Darren actively engaged in studying professional courses. Simultaneously, he actively sought information related to male teachers involved in physical education. His efforts were recognized by the leadership during the open sports class in his internship, which strengthened his belief in pursuing a career in early childhood education and influenced his perspective on college courses.

If you have taken some health-related courses in college, it would greatly benefit the process of transforming these students into teachers and contribute significantly to their professional career.

(Darren, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 525-526)

Career Trajectory

In August 2016, Teacher Darren began his journey in education at his first public kindergarten. During the three-year period, from August 2016 to July 2020, he spent two years as a co-teacher and one year as a physical education teacher. Feeling confident in his abilities to lead a class, he decided to switch jobs and joined a second kindergarten.

Since 2020, Teacher Darren has been working at a public kindergarten. In his first year there, he served as a homeroom teacher. In his second year, he took on dual responsibilities as both a homeroom teacher and a grade level coordinator. In his third year at this kindergarten, he continued his role as a homeroom teacher, consistently working with large classes.

4.2.5 Participant 5 – Teacher Eli

Life History

In Teacher Eli's family of five, he became a left-behind child when his parents went to work outside the hometown. His grandmother became his caregiver, but she favored his older brother and physically abused him. She was uneducated and had a strained relationship with Teacher Eli's late grandfather due to his infidelity. When Teacher Eli's parents returned to care for him, it was because his grandmother had cancer.

Teacher Eli's father struggled to fit into the family, leading to frequent arguments and physical fights with his mother. Before Teacher Eli was born, his mother fled due to his father's abuse, but they eventually reunited. Both parents were abusive, with his

father being more violent. His father's volatile behavior, fueled by alcoholism, created

fear and instability. Witnessing his parents' strained relationship and experiencing

their violence left Teacher Eli and his siblings lacking security.

> *I felt like it was the end of the world whenever he raised his voice when I was a child.*

<p align="right">(Eli, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 321-322)</p>

Teacher Eli mentioned that the influence of his parents is apparent in his personality.

He believed that he inherited his mother's controlling nature and fear of losing control,

as well as his father's "adult infant" mentally. He felt anxious in situations where he

lack control, such as managing a class, fearing chaos and reprimands. He also struggled

with a constant sense of insecurity, fearing not being good enough in romantic

relationships.

As the second child, he often felt neglected and sought his parents' attention. He would

act out or feel jealous of his siblings, but aggression towards his brother led to

retaliation, so he targeted his sister instead. However, he would be punished when he

attacked his young sister, reinforcing his sense of being unloved. While his relationship

with his siblings improved over time, his relationship with his parents remained

strained. He perceived his mother as overly controlling, and he resisted her advice.

While his mother initially favored his brother and sister, she later focused more on him

and his brother, paying less attention to his sister.

> *It gives a sense that she will place her hopes on those individuals whom she deems worthy of attention.*

<p align="right">(Eli, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 264-265)</p>

In his early years of primary school, he attended a rural kindergarten and primary school until fourth grade, where his academic performance was poor. After his parents returned, he switched to a school in the county. However, the transition brought a sudden change in environment, making him feel like an outsider and causing a sense of inferiority compared to city kids. Making friends became challenging, and he often faced rejection. Moreover, being scolded and physically punished by teachers for incomplete homework or misbehavior affected his perception of authority figures and influenced his approach to work in later years.

Even in my current job, when I see teachers around me exhibiting such behavior, I tend to empathize and imagine myself in their shoes.

(Eli, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 24-25)

During his middle school years, he experienced a challenging and difficult time. In his first year, during his very first English class, he made a mistake that caused the entire class to laugh at him. This incident left him feeling embarrassed and self-conscious, leading to a lack of confidence in English class and difficulty concentrating. Although he excelled in subjects like math, biology, and geography, the low importance given to these subjects overshadowed his achievements. Additionally, he faced bullying and intimidation from groups of students who targeted those who were smaller or mischievous. This made him fearful and paranoid, constantly anticipating potential confrontations. He felt marginalized, bullied, and disliked by his homeroom teacher. He struggled to form lasting friendships and noticed that his social interactions tended to be short-lived.

The choice of ECE major wasn't Teacher Eli's; it was selected by his mother due to the scarcity of male teachers in kindergartens and better job opportunities. Initially, he had little understanding of the field and mistakenly thought it was about general teaching, not specifically for kindergarten. Upon realizing he was training to become a kindergarten teacher and being the minority in a class full of females, he argued with his mother but nothing changed.

I just find it very annoying. All girls. And yet this professional teacher is responsible for cleaning up after and taking care of the kids' bodily functions like changing diapers and helping them use the toilet. I feel like this job is very demeaning. I think it's really embarrassing.

(Eli, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 892-893)

During the initial years of school, Teacher Eli neglected certain classes and subjects unrelated to male students. However, his perspective changed during an internship, where he found solace in interacting with children, easing his resistance towards ECE.

I would have a desire to work in this field. And it truly gives me a sense of having a direction for my career, as if I've finally found a starting point. Contrarily, in the previous two years, it felt like I hadn't even started. It was after that internship experience that it felt like the beginning of exploring this profession.

(Eli, Transcript Interview 1, Lines 952-954)

However, he avoided kindergarten work due to a negative internship. A classmate's incident of physically assaulting a child, resulting in public berating and assault by that child's father, deeply impacted him. It made him question the professionalism and respect for kindergarten teachers. After that, being the only male teacher, he felt isolated and disconnected since conversations among female teachers focused on family and gossip, which made his integration difficult. Consequently, he chose to

work as a full-time physical education teacher in Shanghai's early childhood sports institutions.

After graduating from a vocational school, Teacher Eli has been continuously working on improving his educational qualifications. Currently, he has obtained a bachelor's degree through correspondence education.

Career Trajectory

In 2016, Teacher Eli began his career as a preschool physical education instructor at an institution in Shanghai, where he conducted physical education classes for children at various kindergartens. However, with limited room for professional growth in this role, he decided to resign by the end of 2018.

From 2019 to 2020, he worked as a co-teacher for a senior class in a public kindergarten. However, due to differences in teaching philosophies, he decided to resign and took up a position as a teacher for a junior class in a different kindergarten. After half a year, he resigned once more, taking a six-month break for travel.

In early 2022, Teacher Eli spent four months as a homeroom teacher and educational researcher in a public kindergarten, overseeing middle-class responsibilities. Yet, due to differences in teaching philosophies and a heavy workload, he chose to resign again. Since June 2022, he has been serving as a homeroom teacher for a senior class in a public kindergarten.

4.3 RQ1: What are the experiences of Experiences of Male Early Childhood Teachers

This section focuses on the challenges MECTs face and the advantages they encounter. Further intricate information will be revealed, exploring deeper aspects and providing a comprehensive understanding.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Challenges Faced by Male Early Childhood Teachers

The theme Challenges Faced by Male Early Childhood Teachers consists of four codes: undervalued profession, gender bias in ECE setting, lack of administrative support, and loneliness.

Undervalued Profession

In the field of ECE, male teachers face unique challenges that stem from the profession being undervalued. Despite their crucial role in shaping young minds and providing a nurturing environment for children, MECTs encounter various obstacles due to societal bias and judgment, low salary, and low status.

Table 4.2

Obstacles in Undervalued ECE Profession for Men

Societal bias and judgment	The participants involved in this study have almost all encountered bias and judgment from others due to prevailing gender stereotypes, which primarily focus on three aspects: low income, perceived lower competence in the profession, and accusations of sexual misconduct. Prejudices vary among different groups, with the younger generation primarily focusing on the perception of low income associated with this profession. On the other hand, the older generation or more individuals in the society experience tend to view it as a predominantly female occupation that does not require high levels of ability. Additionally, parents tend to be more concerned about the issue of sexual harassment within this profession.
Low salary	All five participants expressed dissatisfaction with the salaries in ECE. The low wages have an impact on their career choices. Teacher Eli explicitly stated that he would not choose to work in a kindergarten because of the low salary. Teacher Charles decided to resign from a kindergarten job due to the low pay. Teacher Aaron has plans to switch to another field in the future due to the financial pressure caused by the low wages. Despite Teacher Charles and Teacher Darren's strong passion for the ECE profession, they both acknowledged that age is an important factor. They expressed their intention to persevere in this field for the time being, but they also mentioned that after getting married, the financial burden may lead them to quit their current jobs. This consideration has created significant pressure and anxiety for them. The low wages also imply an imbalance between the level of dedication or commitment in this field. It affects teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers Charles and Darren explicitly expressed their dissatisfaction with this situation.
Low status	Teacher Charles pointed out that due to the low social status of ECE, people have a weak sense of recognition for this profession, which leads to hesitation in introducing their occupation to others. Teacher Darren also expressed dissatisfaction with the differential treatment between preschool teachers and elementary school teachers by parents. Teacher Eli, in particular, is reluctant to enter ECE field due to a negative experience shared by a colleague. This experience has led to a profound sense of disrespect and a lack of identification with the profession, making Teacher Eli hesitant to pursue a career in ECE. The latter two also mentioned the stereotype of preschool teachers being seen as nannies by some parents, but Teacher Darren also noted that this perception is gradually improving with societal progress.

Gender Bias in ECE Setting

Within the context of gender bias in ECE settings, several interrelated items shed light on different aspects of this pervasive issue. Understanding the association among these items is crucial in comprehending the multifaceted nature of gender bias and developing comprehensive strategies to address and eliminate it.

Table 4.3

Gender Bias in ECE Setting

Curriculum areas and activities are associated with gender	Four of the participants said that the kindergarten they worked in would arrange sports or outdoor sports classes for them, as long as their wishes were respected. Teacher Aaron and Teacher Charles also pointed out that kindergartens tend to prefer sending male teachers to participate in off-campus training and learning related to sports and outdoor themes.
Physical demand	Three participants highlighted the physical demands they face in their respective preschools. As one of the few male teachers, Teacher Aaron frequently takes on the role of planning and preparing activities, which can be physically demanding and occasionally overwhelming. Teacher Ben, due to personal physical limitations, is unable to accept assistance from colleagues, surprising them and leaving them with unfulfilled expectations. Teacher Eli emphasized that physical labor adds an extra workload to their responsibilities.
Perception of inadequate skills in nurturing	Three participants mentioned that their caregiving abilities were underestimated or easily overlooked. However, both Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli pointed out that when they initially entered ECE, there were concerns stemming from their lack of experience or unfamiliarity of parents with male teachers. However, as time passed, the abilities of male teachers became apparent, and both colleagues and parents recognized and acknowledged their professional competence.

Susceptibility to Allegations

This section explores the unique challenges male early childhood teachers face regarding the risk of allegations of misconduct. This theme consists of several subthemes: fear of false accusations, impact on professional relationships, and coping strategies.

Table 4.4

Susceptibility to Allegations

Fear of false accusations	The prevailing stereotypes about professions have raised doubts about the motives of male early childhood teachers entering the field of ECE. Except for Teacher Ben, who is involved in Montessori education and stands out, the other four participants expressed their concerns about this matter. Teacher Eli pointed out that the biggest challenge he faces is the lack of trust from parents. A male teacher around Teacher Darren experienced misunderstandings and emotional distress due to the parents' lack of trust when he tried to check and express concern for an injured student. Teacher Charles believes that parents of boys are more welcoming of male early childhood teachers, while parents of girls need more time to adapt to male teachers.
Impact on professional relationships	To avoid accusations, all four participants deliberately maintain distance from young children, especially girls, particularly when parents are present. They consciously try to work with children in monitored areas. Moreover, some kindergartens where they have worked do not assign male teachers to supervise naptime, prohibit male teachers from changing diapers or engaging in actions that involve private body parts, and do not allow male teachers to accompany children to the restroom alone. Teacher Eli and Teacher Darren also believed that time was an important factor. As trust was established through long-term interactions, parents would gain a better understanding of male teachers and become more at ease, which would reduce the restrictions on male teachers' daily work with children.

Coping strategies	To alleviate parents' concerns, Teacher Charles and Teacher Aaron emphasized their professionalism as teachers and the involvement of female colleagues in girls' affairs during the first meeting with parents. The parental distrust not only limits the interaction between male early childhood teachers and children but also affects their educational activities, classroom arrangements, and career advancement. Teacher Charles and Teacher Eli hesitated to teach sexual education. Teacher Darren has been in charge of the senior class in his current kindergarten and successfully ran for the position of head of the junior class, but his promotion was revoked due to his male identity. He further mentioned that some preschools prefer to assign male teachers as PE teachers to alleviate parental concerns about male teachers being in charge of the class.
Challenges in interactions with female colleagues and parents	In addition, male teachers not only face accusations from children but also encounter challenges in their interactions with female colleagues and female parents. The boyfriend of Teacher Eli's female colleague accompanies them during overtime, reducing his opportunities to interact with his female colleague. Teacher Darren was publicly humiliated by the husband of a female parent in a WeChat parent group because he accidentally used the "pat" function on the woman's profile picture, which was considered sexual harassment towards his wife.

Lack of Administrative Support

MECTs often encounter distinct challenges when it comes to administrative support, which can hinder their effectiveness and professional growth.

Table 4.5

Lack of Administrative Support

Administration that in not involved and not supportive	All participants expressed dissatisfaction with the management team. Teacher Aaron was forced to take on multiple positions. Teacher Charles clashed with the dean of studies, and he was even threatened with the removal of his position as a grade group leader, which became an unstable factor in his professional growth. Teacher Ben and Teacher Eli resigned from the kindergarten due to dissatisfaction with the leadership's management style. Two other teachers, Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli, questioned the management style of the female managers. The former believed that male opinions were mostly ignored, while the latter felt that his teaching philosophy, which encourages children to take risks and explore boldly, is being restricted.
Waste time on trivialities	The heavy workload and trivial tasks in the kindergarten are also challenges faced by all participants. Teacher Aaron considered spending a significant amount of time reporting every detail to parents as his biggest challenge. Teacher Ben and Teacher Darren expressed that numerous meetings and training sessions consumed a lot of their time, leaving them exhausted. The latter also stated that there was no time for personal growth planning. Teacher Charles mentioned that despite everything going smoothly, the tediousness of the kindergarten work made him contemplate leaving the front-line teaching role. Teacher Eli expressed dissatisfaction with the management style of the female managers, stating that the work in the kindergarten is overly focused on trivial matters and superficial formalities.

Loneliness

Four participants expressed feelings of loneliness. Teacher Eli mentioned the difficulty of fitting into a predominantly female work environment and even considered rejecting a career in ECE because of it. Teacher Darren and Teacher Ben, despite feeling lonely, remained passionate about the industry and it did not affect their work, although they lacked daily life interactions with their female colleagues. Teacher Aaron pointed out that having only one male teacher in the kindergarten results in either hiring more male teachers or the existing male teacher resigning. Using his own example, he explained that his work was already impacted when he was the only male teacher, which led the management to pay more attention to him and expedite the recruitment of more male colleagues. Additionally, one of his male colleagues switched from another kindergarten for the same reason.

Table 4.6

Evidence Presentation for Theme: Challenges Faced by Male Early Childhood Teachers

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
Undervalued profession	Societal bias and judgment	**Ben:** I noticed that the majority of stereotypes about me primarily revolve around its income.	Interview 4/Line 43
		Ben: Young people tend to inquire about this more frequently.	Interview 4/Line 69
		Darren: Before choosing this profession, some people, such as my college classmates, would ask me why I chose this career. It wasn't surprising, but they would ask me. After starting my job, the people around me didn't have any objections, mostly just curiosity. They would all wonder why, as a man, I chose this profession. The most common question I would hear is, "Why did you choose this career?"	Interview 3/Line 39-42
		Eli: For example, when I'm in a taxi and people strike up a conversation, they ask me what I do for a living. I say I'm a teacher, and then they inquire further about the specifics, to which I reply that I'm an early childhood educator. At that point, they may have certain opinions or questions like, "Are there male teachers in kindergarten?" or something along those lines.	Interview 2&3/Line 1441-1443
		Eli: Sometimes I hear people saying, "Are teachers in kindergarten considered real teachers? Only elementary school teachers count as teachers, right?"	Interview 2&3/Line 2026
		Charles: Most people still hold the perception that kindergarten teachers simply accompany children in carefree play every day, and that being a kindergarten teacher is an easy and relaxed profession.	Interview 3/ Line 321-323
		Ben: Caring for children is usually seen as something that only females do or a job suited for women. As a male, how do you think you should approach taking on this role?	Interview 4/Line 44-45

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Ben: This perception is primarily concentrated among the older generation, particularly middle-aged and elderly individuals.	Interview 4/Line 51
		Charles: Nowadays, there is an abundance of news regarding incidents of sexual harassment.	Interview 3/Line 178
		Ben: Both male Chinese teachers and male foreign teachers have been exposed in incidents involving child molestation or physical punishment, while there have been few or rare cases of female teachers being exposed. This implies that men in this profession are subject to greater scrutiny and consideration, which is a perspective often held by parents.	Interview 4/ Line 153-156
	Low salary	**Eli:** I felt at that time that the salary was particularly low, so I was unwilling to go.	Interview 2&3/Line 25-26
		Charles: Later on, I didn't have a particularly pleasant experience working at that kindergarten. It wasn't due to issues with the management; the main problem was the salary and compensation package.	Interview 2/Line 71-72
		Aaron: It is rare for preschool teachers to be satisfied with their salaries.	Interview 2/Line 875
		Aaron: (I) would start thinking about changing jobs and things like that.	Interview 2/Line 886
		Charles: Currently, there is no pressure for me. I am not married, so there is no pressure.	Interview 2/Line 1515
		Charles: I definitely won't continue working in this profession once I get married, I think.	Interview 2/Line 1521

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: I'm not saying I'm firmly committed, but at least for the next three years, I still really enjoy this profession and I intend to persevere. However, in the future, for example, when you reach a certain age or want to settle down and start a family, you may have to consider other factors.	Interview 1/Line 895-897
		Charles: Now, if someone were to ask me to pursue a different profession, oh my, I wouldn't even know what to do.	Interview 3/Line 962-963
		Charles: Your effort and the rewards you receive are not directly proportional. The ratio between your salary and your dedication is not 1:1; it's more like 1:10.	Interview 2/Line 1484-1485
		Darren: I'm not satisfied, extremely unsatisfied. The salaries in Chinese kindergartens are extremely low, and I'm still not satisfied with them.	Interview 2/Line 1176
	Low status	**Charles:** When you tell others that you are an early childhood educator, deep down inside, you still have to hesitate before saying it.	Interview 2/Line 320-321
		Charles: The main reason is that the social status of this profession is not very high, and there is not a strong sense of recognition from others towards this occupation.	Interview 2/Line 324-325
		Darren: When a primary school teacher says something, it is taken as the truth, but when a preschool teacher says something, parents feel they can choose not to listen, not cooperate, and lack respect for the teacher.	Interview 2/Line 1546-1547

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: They perceive preschool teachers as belonging to the lowest stratum of society, similar to the role of a nanny. It's as if they consider preschool teachers to be equivalent to nannies. Many Chinese parents hold such beliefs. However, there have been significant improvements in recent times.	Interview 2/Line 1582-1583
		Eli: It also gave me the impression that early childhood educators, in general, struggle to earn respect in the eyes of parents. This has been one of the reasons why I don't want to work in a kindergarten.	Interview 1/Line 25-26
		Eli: In the beginning, I had a feeling that being a preschool teacher meant just playing with children and not really teaching them anything. It felt more like the job of a nanny, where the focus is solely on playing.	Interview 2&3/Line 2034-2035
Gender bias in ECE setting	Curriculum areas and activities are associated with gender	**Darren:** According to the arrangement made by the kindergarten, I am responsible for teaching a small class and also in charge of conducting a PE class for the entire kindergarten.	Interview 1/Line 133-134
		Eli: If I don't ask for it, they'll ask me to be a PE teacher. My second worked kindergarten asked me to be a PE teacher, but I didn't want to.	Interview 2&3/Line 785-786
		Aaron: They believed that I would be more suitable to teach an outdoor class in order to highlight my individual strengths. At that time, I indeed conducted an outdoor class on long jump.	Interview 3/Line 296-297
		Aaron: If the theme is related to outdoor activities, the leader would prefer male teachers to attend those classes and then bring back the knowledge and experience to share with others.	Interview 3/Line 307-308

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Charles: For example, when it comes to work arrangements such as PE classes or training opportunities, the leadership tends to lean towards male teachers, providing them with better opportunities.	Interview 3/Line 73-75
	Physical demand	**Aaron:** The physical labor aspect can indeed sometimes feel unfair. It's frustrating that it always seems to be us doing the work, just the same few individuals.	Interview 3/Line 365-367)
		Ben: When it comes to lifting heavy objects, they assume that I can handle it without realizing that I am a twenty-six or twenty-seven-year-old young man with severe lumbar muscle strain and herniated discs in my spine.	Interview 4/Line 449-450
		Eli: In the preschool, there are instances where there are things or heavy objects that need to be moved, and sometimes I am called upon to do so as a male teacher. As a result, male teachers may have to balance other tasks alongside these responsibilities.	Interview 2&3/Line 260-261
	Perception of inadequate skills in nurturing	**Aaron:** The teacher also commented that as a male teacher, showcasing athleticism can also inspire children's enthusiasm for sports, which the leader found to be feasible. However, roles centered around care and nurturing do tend to be overlooked for male teachers indeed.	Interview 3/Line 298-299
		Darren: They (parents) may be concerned about how the male teacher interacts with the child. Whether a male teacher can be qualified for real child care work.	Interview 1/Line 136-137
		Eli: I proactively take on tasks related to caring for children. This might surprise some female administrators or teachers, as they may not expect a male teacher to engage in such caregiving responsibilities and provide care for children.	Interview 2&3/Line 1992-1994

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
	Susceptibility to allegation	**Eli:** I think it's about the trust of parents towards male teachers.	Interview 2&3/Line 1314
		Darren: In an outdoor activity organization, when a child fell and got injured, the male teacher briefly pulled down her sock and adjusted the pant leg to examine the wound. However, the parent viewed this action as an invasion of privacy towards their daughter, reflecting a significant lack of trust towards the male teacher.	Interview 2/Line 783-785
		Charles: For parents of boys and girls, their attitudes are actually different. Boys' parents would likely appreciate having male teachers around, while girls' parents may require some time, not necessarily the majority but a small portion, to adapt to having a male teacher.	Interview 3/Line 201-203
		Eli: I have this feeling when parents are present, but when they are not, I don't have that feeling.	Interview 2&3/Line 1546-1547
		Aaron: Also, it's important not to be alone with female children in a location where there is no video surveillance.	Interview 3/Line 161-162
		Charles: I made it clear during the first meeting with parents. I explicitly stated that I will not be involved in girls' matters and that they will be solely handled by the assigned class teacher and caregiver.	Interview 2/Line 889-890
		Aaron: Exactly, it's like addressing and dispelling their concerns upfront.	Interview 3/Line 748
		Eli: Generally, in the initial stages, these concerns tend to be more significant, but as time goes on, they usually diminish.	Interview 2&3/Line 1331-1332

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: When you feel that the parents trust you, you can let go of these concerns completely.	Interview 2/Line 799-800
		Charles: Especially in the realm of sex education, if you were to ask me to teach it, I might need to take some time to reflect and consider it carefully.	Interview 3/Line 73-75
		Darren: Because I feel that some parents are actually more concerned about this aspect of education, particularly when it comes to sex education. There is a portion of parents who are quite sensitive about it.	Interview 2/Line 1590-1591
		Darren: It (the preschool setting) may prefer male teachers to be involved in physical education activities, as it addresses parental concerns.	Interview 1/Line 907-908
		Darren: I ran for a leadership position, but the administration made a wrong decision. During the communication, the leader would say, "You can continue to handle the senior class."	Interview 3/Line 349-350
		Eli: Her husband frequently finishes work and then comes to our class to join us during overtime.	Interview 2&3/Line 1097
		Darren: When the family committee communicated with me, I just knew that I accidentally tapped on his wife's WeChat account, and then he left. He misunderstood and thought that I was harassing his wife.	Interview 2/Line 720-721
Lack of Administrative Support	Administration that in not involved and not supportive	**Aaron:** We can say that we are being subjected to leadership PUA tactics.	Interview 2/Line 601

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Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Charles: The management personnel do not consider the issue from the perspective of the teachers. They hold a superior position and criticize the teachers, making them feel that working here is an honor for them.	Interview 3/ Line 73-75
		Ben: I have actually had grievances against her in my own mind all along, but I haven't spoken up because she is a leader who exercises absolute authority and makes decisions independently.	Interview 3/Line 763-765
		Eli: Their management style towards teachers is quite strict, and it tends to be more of a suppressive management style.	Interview 2&3/Line 707
		Darren: Whether it's the leadership or the classroom teachers, when making decisions, they always approach problems from a female perspective and rarely consider the male perspective.	Interview 2/Line 468-470
		Eli: Many people disliked the arrangement of female managers. They felt that in the kindergarten, having female managers led to an excessive focus on being motherly, being too strict in following formalities.	Interview 2&3/Line 846-848
	Waste time on trivialities	**Aaron:** For me, the biggest challenge actually lies in interacting with parents.	Interview 2/Line 92
		Aaron: Having to report every little thing, whether there is something significant or not, feels quite burdensome.	Interview 2/Line 100
		Ben: One of the major reasons for the high pressure at S Kindergarten is the various trainings and meetings that take place during lunchtime. Unfortunately, 90% of these meetings and trainings are deemed pointless, lacking substance and value, yet attendance is still mandatory.	Interview 3/Line 1948-1950

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: It truly is... I don't have any personal time at all, really. For example, in March, I referred to it as the "devil's month" at our kindergarten because it was either meetings during lunchtime or training sessions in the afternoon. Almost the entire month was consumed by meetings and trainings. Teachers hardly have the energy to read books or plan their own things, let alone find a balance.	Interview 3/Line 1304-1306
		Charles: The parents don't have any problems, including the class management, but (I) am just a little tired.	Interview 2/Line 863-864
		Eli: Many people disliked the arrangement of female managers. They felt that in the kindergarten, having female managers led to an excessive focus on being motherly, being too strict in following formalities.	Interview 2&3/Line 846-848
Loneliness		**Eli:** Having only one male teacher makes me feel particularly lonely, extremely lonely. During lunchtime, the female teachers discuss topics related to their own children, how their husbands are doing, and how much money they earn each month. I have zero interest in those topics, and I find it difficult to fit in with those conversations.	Interview 1/Line 48-51
		Darren: If the majority of the colleagues are female, the feeling of loneliness can still persist because, after all, there are fewer male teachers in the kindergarten compared to the female teachers.	Interview 3/Line 1116-1117
		Ben: During mealtime, the female teacher will always talk about some gossip: what are your children doing, what is your husband doing? Buy something in Jingdong, this is easy to use, where to buy? How much is that dish? A few cents a catty? Where to buy? All this stuff. I got nothing to talk about. So every time in the kindergarten and daily life, with colleagues, I will not talk to them, no talk, I am very lonely.	Interview 4/Line 794-798

Table 4.6, continue

Sub-themes	Group codes	Participants	Evidence
		Aaron: The other male teacher from a different class had a similar experience of being the only male teacher in his previous kindergarten. His reason for choosing our kindergarten was because he found out that there were already male teachers, including myself, working here.	Interview 3/Line 1886-1888

4.3.2 Theme 2: Advantages

The theme Advantages consists of six codes: job recruitment, promotion, preferential treatment based solely on gender, leadership appreciation, be more respected by parents, and loved by kids.

Job Recruitment and Promotion

Three participants acknowledged experiencing advantages during recruitment. Teacher Darren mentioned that in his first job at a kindergarten, they explicitly stated a preference for male teachers during the hiring process. The principal even expressed the ideal scenario of having a male teacher assigned to each class, indicating a high demand for male teachers in the field. Teacher Charles had a smooth interview process when transitioning from a private to a public kindergarten. Many principals showed great anticipation upon seeing that he was a male teacher, hoping that he would choose their kindergarten. Furthermore, he mentioned that other kindergartens, aware of his intention to switch jobs, would extend olive branches, offering career planning and trying to attract him by providing favorable positions. Teacher Eli shared that compared to female teachers, his interviews were generally successful, with only one rejection in the past.

Three participants expressed that their male identity has helped them in terms of promotion. Teacher Aaron's college mentor once mentioned that if he chose to work in ECE, he could reach a mid-level position in about three years. Indeed, he has been promoted from a classroom teacher in his first year to the position of Assistant Director

in the office, which is his third year of work. Teacher Charles, after working in a private kindergarten for two years, switched to a public kindergarten and was directly promoted from an assistant teacher to a homeroom teacher and grade coordinator. Although the situations of these two teachers might be attributed to the fact that the kindergartens were relatively new and in need of talent, it cannot be denied that gender also played an important role, as confirmed by Teacher Charles. Teacher Eli represents another scenario. He joined a well-established public kindergarten that he is highly satisfied with. He honestly admitted that his abilities at that time were not sufficient to take on the role of a homeroom teacher. However, after the election process, he still obtained the position, while the previous female homeroom teacher became his assistant.

Preferential Treatment Based Solely on Gender

Four participants clearly perceived the advantages that come with their male identity, which were evident in three aspects: increased opportunities for external learning and training, guidance and tolerance in leadership roles, and greater support from colleagues in daily life. It is important to note that these advantages varied depending on the number of male teachers in the preschool. Both Teacher Charles and Teacher Eli believed that leaders were more inclined to prioritize male teachers for external learning and training opportunities. Teacher Eli and Teacher Aaron also acknowledged that leaders showed greater tolerance towards male teachers. The former gave an example where if a male teacher wore the wrong uniform, the leadership would overlook it, whereas a female teacher would be directly criticized. The latter provided

an example stating that leaders would exhibit more patience in guiding male teachers with less experience and would not treat their mistakes with the same level of criticism as female teachers. Teacher Aaron and Teacher Eli also pointed out that the school staff showed greater enthusiasm towards them. The former cited instances where the kitchen staff would give him extra food, the cleaning staff would proactively offer to help him with classroom cleaning, and anyway the support staff would provide certain privileges or favors to him. The latter, in addition, the kitchen staff would also give him extra food. Furthermore, as the only male teacher at the time, the leadership frequently had him by her side, not only for assistance with various school affairs but also to show concern for his personal life.

Be More Respected by Parents

Three participants expressed the belief that male teachers are more likely to be respected by parents. Teacher Charles found it easier to communicate with female parents and was well-liked by them. Teacher Aaron and Teacher Eli believed that their male identity led parents to be more polite and adopt a calmer tone, which facilitated their interactions in matters related to children.

Beloved by children

There are two participants who claimed that children in kindergarten showed more enthusiasm towards male teachers than female teachers. Teacher Aaron pointed out that many male teachers in his kindergarten felt that they were more popular with the children compared to the female teachers. This viewpoint had also received agreement

from some female teachers. Furthermore, he believed that this was unfair for the classroom teachers because they did not have as much direct contact with the children as the classroom teachers did, yet they received more affection from the children. This affection is evident when the children greeted them from afar, willingly embraced them, listened to their instructions more attentively, and showed greater interest in activities such as sandbox play and outdoor games. Teacher Charles quickly confirmed this point as well, observing that children exhibit a greater level of enthusiasm towards him.

Table 4.7

Evidence Presentation for Theme: Advantages

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
Advantages	Job recruitment and promotion	**Darren:** The recruitment advertisements they posted explicitly stated that they were only seeking male teachers.	Interview 2/Line 947
		Charles: I feel that gender plays a major role rather than just skills and abilities. This was evident even during the interview process. Although I didn't feel that my presentation was outstanding, the principal seemed to think highly of me. I could tell from their subtle gestures that they were very interested and had high expectations when I sat in the front row during the interview.	Interview 2/Line 490-494
		Eli: In fact, almost every time I go for an interview, I am able to gain recognition and approval. I have noticed that many female teachers, on the other hand, have faced multiple rejections during their interviews.	Interview 1/Line 2113-2114
		Aaron: Before I chose this profession, during my graduation, my thesis advisor mentioned to me that if I were to work in ECE, I could reach a mid-level position in approximately three years. He specifically said that to me. Now, looking back, it seems to be true. I am currently in my third year, and I have indeed experienced some promotion opportunities.	Interview 3/Line 988-991
		Charles: After joining this kindergarten, I was promoted from an assistant teacher to a grade-level coordinator. Typically, it would take at least two years to progress from an assistant teacher to a homeroom teacher, and then another five years to become a grade-level coordinator. In this case, I have effectively saved around seven years of time and directly advanced to the position of a grade-level coordinator.	Interview 1/Line 1395-1397

Table 4.7, continue

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Charles: If two individuals, one male and one female, have similar abilities, and you ask the principal to choose between them, the principal will likely choose the male teacher in over 99.9% of cases.	Interview 2/Line 482-483
		Eli: I currently feel that my abilities are limited, and I may not be the most suitable person to be a homeroom teacher in this kindergarten. There may be others who are more qualified for the role. However, despite that, I chose to compete for the position and was selected as the homeroom teacher.	Interview 2&3/Line 2135-2136
	Preferential treatment based solely on gender	**Charles:** Personally, what I deeply experienced was the opportunities for external learning and training. The leadership tends to provide more opportunities in this aspect for male teachers compared to their female counterparts.	Interview 3/Line 81-82
		Eli: In terms of off-site activities, we may have visits and learning opportunities outside the kindergarten once or twice a month. Generally, there is a slight inclination towards male teachers, who tend to participate more frequently. Female teachers, on the other hand, may see a higher involvement of exemplary educators being called upon for such events.	Interview 2&3/Line1054-1056
		Eli: There might be a greater tolerance towards some mistakes we make in our work. Specifically, in terms of work-related errors, there seems to be a more forgiving attitude. It could also mean that they are more willing to grant us additional chances for improvement, which might be more frequent compared to female teachers.	Interview 2&3/Line1938-1939

Table 4.7, continue

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Aaron: When it comes to making mistakes in these tasks, it is true that her attitude towards male and female teachers differs. She tends to be more tolerant towards male teachers and doesn't resort to harsh scolding or reprimands as she might do with female teachers.	Interview 3/Line 462-464
		Aaron: We have a lot of external staff members, such as security guards, janitors, and cafeteria personnel, who also seem to be more inclined to interact with male teachers. They often engage in casual conversations and jokes with male teachers and are more willing to offer small favors or privileges during work. For example, when it's raining, the security guards are more likely to lend an umbrella to male teachers.	Interview 3/Line 512-514
		Ben: In daily life, for example during meal times, the kitchen staff, particularly the cook, may perceive that as a male teacher, you require more food, so they would serve you larger portions.	Interview 4/Line 801-803
		Ben: The first one (kindergarten) extensively applied stereotypical perceptions, incorporating all the elements associated with those perceptions. They not only fulfilled the expected criteria but also provided the anticipated preferential treatment without any surprises or unexpected deviations.	Interview 4/Line 843-845
	Be more respected by parents	**Charles:** I don't know if it's the case for all classes, but I find it relatively easy to communicate with female parents, and they also seem to like me.	Interview 3/Line 1446-1447
		Aaron: It seems that when it comes to handling situations like children getting hurt or minor conflicts, if parents approach a female teacher, they may have a somewhat questioning tone, asking "Why? Why?" However, if they approach a male teacher to discuss these matters, the tone is more polite, with them saying something like, "Hello, I wanted to ask about the situation."	Interview 3/Line 94-97

Table 4.7, continue

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Eli: It seems that parents tend to have a calmer attitude when interacting with male teachers. Sometimes, when parents are emotionally charged, they may show less respect towards female teachers and the situation can easily escalate into an argument.	Interview2&3/Line1517-1518
	Loved by kids	**Aaron:** For children in kindergarten, they may be slightly more inclined to interact with male teachers and find them naturally appealing. It is easier for male teachers to establish a positive teacher-student relationship with children.	Interview 2/Line 982-983
		Aaron: I can say this from multiple perspectives because we have a considerable number of male teachers in our kindergarten, and I have also interacted with many visiting teachers. I believe that in terms of interacting with children, male teachers leave a deeper impression on them and children are more willing to engage with them.	Interview 2/Line 989-991
		Charles: After seeing me, they would call out to me from a far distance. This is the case for many classes of children, essentially.	Interview 3/Line 1386

4.4 RQ2: How do male early childhood teachers make sense of their experience？

This section addresses the second research question by examining four themes: Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE, Intrinsic Motivation for Pursuing ECE, Embracing Diversity in Education, and Career Paths and Ambitions. It also incorporates grouped codes associated with these subthemes.

4.4.1 Theme 1: Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE

Theme 1 Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE, encapsulates the various factors and considerations that influenced participants' choices regarding their career in ECE. This theme encompasses elements such as their academic background in ECE, their conscious decision to pursue ECE as a major, the motivation driving their choice, the efforts they invested in furthering their education, and their personal feelings about ECE as a preferred or a viable career choice. Additionally, it explores the significance of the support received from family, relatives, and friends as well as the challenges posed by family members who may have opposed their career decisions.

Table 4.8

Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE

Items	Aaron	Ben	Charles	Darren	Eli
Academic background	Not major in ECE	Not major in ECE	Major in ECE	Major in ECE	Major in ECE
Pursuing ECE as major was a personal choice	-	-	Yes	Yes	No
Motivation to pursue ECE	The turning point was partly related to career choices. (Interview 1/Line 166) When I first arrived in Shenzhen to choose a career, I did consider leveraging my previous learning experiences and internship experiences to pursue opportunities in primary schools or junior high schools. However, considering the intense	Why did I choose ECE instead of K-12 education for children aged six and above? It's because I am aware of the significant impact that early life experiences have on a person's adulthood. There is a belief that intervention is most effective when done during early childhood. Early intervention refers to intervening before the age of six, or even before the age of	During my first practical experience, the children would be very curious and would come up to me, rubbing against me or touching me. Some more active children would approach and ask me questions, showing their fondness for me. I found the children so adorable and innocent. They seemed like little angels to me. (Interview 2, Lines 1088-	Before your internship, you didn't have such feelings. You went to class every day like a robot. However, when suddenly a group of children, cute and adorable, came to praise you and hug you, it gave you an unprecedented warm feeling. You felt deeply touched by this profession, and you believed that in the future, you must become a teacher like this. That's the	In the third year, we started our internship. After completing a semester of internship and returning, I experienced the transformation I mentioned. I felt more comfortable in my interactions with children. Previously, during my middle school and elementary school years, when I came to the county town, I had a very poor state of relating to others. The

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Table 4.8, continue

Items	Aaron	Ben	Charles	Darren	Eli
	competition with candidates holding a postgraduate degree, I realized it would be challenging with only an undergraduate degree. As a result, I eventually settled on working in a kindergarten. (Interview 1, Lines 172-174)	three. That's why I am passionate about working in this field. Furthermore, why do I want to intervene? Why do I want to engage in such work? It may be driven by a sense of compensation. I didn't have a good childhood, so I don't want others to go through the same experience. It's as simple as that. (Interview 2, Lines 988-992)	1091).	kind of thought I have. (Interview 1, Lines 756-760)-	relationships I had with people made me feel suppressed. However, in my interactions with children, I felt liberated and less anxious. So, from that point onwards, it seemed like I was more inclined to embrace ECE. (Interview 1, Lines 915-920)
Efforts in education	-	-	I never sat in the back row during class; I always sat in the front row. I took diligent notes on what the teacher was lecturing about, especially for my major courses. (Interview 1, Lines 1004-1005) I was very confident in my major. Moreover, I was	During my free time, I would actively search for websites or attend regional events organized by renowned teachers. I also joined early childhood education groups to seek advice from experienced teachers who had been working for a long time. I engaged in discussions with	-

Table 4.8, continue

Items	Aaron	Ben	Charles	Darren	Eli
			quite well-known among our cohort, so to speak. Most people knew me. (Interview 1, Lines 1033-1034)	them to explore their expertise and learn knowledge that couldn't be acquired in school. (Interview 1, Lines 206-209)	
Perception of ECE as a Viable Career Choice	Initially, I didn't actually consider choosing this profession because during my university life, the internships I had were in other settings like psychological outpatient clinics or counseling centers, similar to hospitals. In fact, I hadn't even set foot in a kindergarten before I graduated. (Interview 1, Lines 23-25)	At that time, I was interested in pursuing a career in child psychology counseling and family counseling. Instead of focusing solely on a child's academic abilities or what they learn, I cared more about understanding what a child truly needs during their growth and the challenges they face. I wanted to support them in overcoming those challenges. This was what I truly wanted to do. (Interview 1, Lines 45-48)	-	-	For my first job, I didn't choose to work in a kindergarten because I had a negative experience during my internship there. (Interview 1, Lines 40-42) By a stroke of luck, three of us male students wanted to work together, so we ended up finding a job at a sports institution instead of working in a kindergarten. We didn't enter the actual school setting. (Interview 1, Lines 40-42)

Table 4.8, continue

Items	Aaron	Ben	Charles	Darren	Eli
Support network	My family has never had a significant objection to my choices, and they have always been supportive of me. (Interview 1, Lines 209)	My relatives and friends all advised me to prioritize gaining practical experience at that time. (Interview 2, Lines 971)	The final reason that solidified my decision was that everyone in my family felt it was acceptable, which made me feel resolute. And my father was the only one who opposed it. (Interview 1, Lines 932-933) Because of my personality. (Interview 1, Lines 939) Being a teacher is great. It's a stable profession where you have a steady income regardless of any challenges you may face. (Interview 1, Lines 945-946)	From my childhood until these past two years of working, my parents have always been very open-minded. They have always believed that boys should have their own thoughts and that the path you choose is your own decision. (Interview 1, Lines 967-969)	My mother helped me choose this major. Her idea behind selecting this profession was that there is a shortage of male teachers in kindergartens, making it a good job prospect. (Interview 1, Lines 29-30) Those opinions are not important to me. Perhaps the people around me are more supportive. (Interview 2&3, Lines 1440)

Table 4.8, continue

Items	Aaron	Ben	Charles	Darren	Eli
Support challenge	-	-	I talked to my dad about it, but he disagreed, and no matter what I said, he remained unwilling to agree. (Interview 1, Lines 705-706) He believes that it is something only young people can do, and as you reach your 30s, 35s, or 40s, you won't be physically able to handle it anymore. That's how he sees it. In his impression, early childhood educators are just bouncing around and playing with children. (Interview 1, Lines 717-718)	-	-

4.4.2 Theme 2: Intrinsic Motivation to Pursue ECE

The theme Intrinsic Motivation to Pursue ECE revolves around the inherent drivers that propel individuals into the field of ECE. This theme encompasses several key aspects, including a deep acknowledgment of the professional value that ECE offers. It also delves into the importance of building positive relationships within the field. Furthermore, it explores the profound sense of empathy, belonging, responsibility, and accomplishment that acts as an intrinsic motivator for those engaged in ECE, highlighting the emotional and personal factors that drive their commitment to this profession.

Acknowledgment of the Professional Value

Five participants demonstrated a strong sense of purpose, a commitment to the well-being and development of children, and a belief in the transformative power of education. They viewed their role as teachers as one that goes beyond simply caring for children, but rather as a meaningful and fulfilling profession that contributes to the growth and well-being of both the children and themselves. It is noteworthy that these five participants also offered advice on encouraging more men to pursue careers in ECE based on their experiences. They all believed that having a clear career goal, recognizing the significance of this industry, and actively engaging with passion are the most crucial factors.

Building Good Relationships

All the participants highlighted the importance of building good relationships with colleagues, students, and parents. They expressed satisfaction in their interactions and collaborations with other teachers, emphasizing the sense of cohesion and growth they experience together. Additionally, they valued the feedback and trust they received from parents, indicating a strong connection and rapport with both children and their families. A nurturing and supportive environment can enhance their motivation to pursue a career in ECE.

Professional Fulfillment

Participants highlighted the sense of professional fulfillment they derived from their roles. The intrinsic motivation of the five participants is fueled by their empathy, sense of belonging, responsibility, and the sense of accomplishment derived from their interactions with children, colleagues, and parents.

Teacher Aaron has a strong sense of responsibility, which made him feel guilty about not being able to spend more time with the children due to position changed and considered himself an inadequate teacher. His sense of accomplishment comes from his familiarity, understanding, and connection with colleagues, children, and parents throughout the entire kindergarten.

Teacher Ben expressed strong recognition and a sense of belonging to the second kindergarten he worked at and regretted having to resign due to personal reasons.

Moreover, he felt amazed and satisfied about bringing a positive influence to the third kindergarten where he worked.

Teacher Charles is a compassionate teacher who repeatedly revealed his compassion and love for children during his interview. He had refused good job opportunities that made him regretful because he wanted to complete the full academic term with the children. His sense of accomplishment comes from his rapid and successful promotion in his position and the strong connections he had established with parents and children.

Teacher Darren has a strong passion for ECE, and many of his feelings of accomplishment comes from excellent teaching, recognition from leadership, and the connections he had established with children. He pointed out that his biggest challenge is not being able to utilize his professional abilities to bring the students he currently teaches to his desired state.

Teacher Eli has a strong sense of belonging to the current kindergarten where he was employed, as it provides a favorable environment for professional growth. He has a strong sense of empathy towards children, relating it to his own growth experiences, and he reciprocated by providing more care and attention to the children. He had ever chosen to postpone his resignation to complete the full academic term with the children. He also has a strong sense of professional responsibility. A kindergarten principal he once worked for arranged children of acquaintances in his class for him to take special care of, , which made him feel that his profession was tainted. He believes that every child should be treated equally. One experience that gives him a sense of

accomplishment is helping a transfer student grow, taking her from a shy state to a bold and expressive state within a month.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Celebrating Diversity in Education

The theme Celebrating Diversity in Education encapsulates the ways in which individuals in the field of ECE honor and promote diversity within the educational setting. This theme focuses on several key aspects, including the embrace of role models who champion diversity, the genuine appreciation expressed towards leaders and colleagues who contribute to a diverse and inclusive environment, and the active efforts to amplify and promote unique perspectives within the realm of education. This theme underscores the value placed on diversity and inclusivity within the ECE community.

Embracing Role Models

Three participants believed that role models in the field could inspire them, provide motivation, and offer valuable insights to guide their careers. Teacher Aaron and Teacher Ben expressed admiration and longing for seasoned educators who were able to persevere in frontline education. The latter even believed that he was shown how to achieve personal growth within education. Teacher Darren, on the other hand, actively used his free time to learn from head teachers and continuously improve his teaching skills. It is worth mentioning that the renowned and experienced teachers mentioned by the participants, who have made significant contributions to ECE, are all women.

Appreciation for Leaders and Colleagues

The five participants emphasized the importance of leadership and colleague support, guidance, and the ability to create an environment conducive to growth and development, rather than prioritizing gender. Teacher Eli highlighted the background and expertise of the principal, admiring her determination to establish a kindergarten after retirement, which influenced the choice of the current position. Teacher Aaron acknowledged the abilities of the young female principal, despite her being under 30 years old, and believed she was well-suited for the current role. Teacher Aaron also expressed appreciation for highly competent colleagues in the kindergarten and expressed a desire to learn from them. Teacher Ben expressed gratitude towards the principal for granting autonomy to teachers and treating them as owners of their classrooms. Teacher Charles appreciated the support and guidance received from colleagues regarding his teaching, and Teacher Darren emphasized the importance of learning from exemplary individuals as a means of professional growth. All participants unanimously agreed that competence in the field is of greater significance than gender.

Nurturing Professional Confidence

All five participants showcased a strong sense of confidence in their profession, particularly when it comes to their ability to communicate with parents. Both Teacher Aaron and Teacher Ben expressed a belief that their communication skills surpass those of their female colleagues. Teacher Aaron saw himself as a representative of the school, while Teacher Ben felt confident and capable when working with children and

parents, despite lacking confidence in other areas. Teacher Charles highlighted his initial advantage in terms of qualifications and position, while Teacher Darren emphasized the trust and confidence parents have in his professionalism. Teacher Eli recognized his own improvement and success in parent communication.

Amplifying Unique Perspectives

Four participants expressed their willingness to provide boys with a unique sense of enthusiasm, positivity, and an open approach to activities. They acknowledged the importance of fostering resilience, adventure, and positive energy in boys while maintaining equal treatment for both boys and girls in terms of teaching and learning.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Career Paths and Pursuits

The theme Career Paths and Pursuits delves into the career development and ambitions of individuals in ECE. This theme encompasses several critical elements, including the commitment to fostering professional growth and continuous learning, the proactive steps taken to advance one's career within the ECE field, the deliberate actions and choices made in shaping career trajectories, and the advocacy for improved remuneration and recognition in the profession. It underscores the dynamic nature of career progression and personal dedication within the context of ECE.

Fostering Professional Growth and Learning

All five participants expressed a desire for growth, improvement, and a stronger sense of purpose in their teaching roles. They seek opportunities for learning, effective guidance, and meaningful engagement with students to enhance their professional

fulfillment. Teacher Aaron aspired for professional growth rather than simply seeking promotions. Teacher Ben expressed disappointment in the lack of progress in teaching and communication with parents during the first year of work experience, but felt satisfied and confident with the educational knowledge and progress gained in the subsequent two years. Teacher Charles valued the role of a kindergarten teaching director and expressed dissatisfaction due to teaching director's own shortcomings, which resulted in having to learn from colleagues and figure things out on his own. Both Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli had previously worked as PE teachers for a year and believed that the growth in teaching was extremely limited in that role, leading them to subsequently choose class teaching positions.

Taking Initiative to Advance the Career

The experiences of four participants shed light on the participants' desires for professional growth and their reflections on their career paths. Teacher Aaron served as a class teacher in the first year, then became a dedicated mental health teacher in the second year, and in the third year, assumed the role of Deputy Director in the office. Teacher Charles worked as an assistant teacher in a private kindergarten for two years before transitioning to a public kindergarten, where he was promoted to the position of head teacher and grade coordinator. Teacher Darren started as an assistant teacher and later advanced to become a head teacher. He further competed for and successfully won the position of grade coordinator. Teacher Eli also experienced progressive advancement in his positions through changes in kindergartens. He went through step-by-step promotions and, at one point, left a job due to unsuccessful competition for the

position of head teacher. His highest position held was as a head teacher and curriculum coordinator.

Shaping Career Trajectories

Five participants have various aspirations and emphasize the importance of continuous improvement and growth in their professional journeys. Teacher Aaron believes that the higher the position, the more responsibilities one must bear. He prefers to focus on meaningful, developmental, and valuable aspects rather than blindly pursuing promotions. Currently, his short-term career plan is to effectively guide the first group of children within three years. Teacher Ben identifies himself as a professional who accompanies children's growth. His future work is not limited to kindergarten but may extend to roles such as a psychological counselor or community service center worker, involving work related to children. However, he plans to work in a kindergarten within the next five years.

Teacher Darren, driven by a passion for his profession, wishes to deeply engage in the ECE field. He aspires to simultaneously gain professional expertise and advancement in his career. His promotion direction primarily focuses on teaching, such as becoming a curriculum coordinator or instructional supervisor. He prefers to maintain close contact with children and shares research findings in ECE with his peers. Both Teacher Charles and Teacher Eli aim to become principals in the long run. These three individuals consider age as a driving force for their career development. Currently, they do not possess a strong inclination for swift career progression; however, they

consider the age of 35 as a significant milestone in their career planning. The establishment of a family plays a crucial role in this regard, as their professional image and reputation are closely related as well.

In addition, Teacher Charles and Teacher Eli acknowledged that if they don't achieve that goal, they are unsure of their future prospects outside of the field. They feel limited and passive in their current profession, believing they wouldn't be capable of doing anything else. Because of the lack of better alternatives, Teacher Eli further pointed out that he might keep working in ECE in the future.

Advocating for Improved Remuneration

The three participants, Teacher Charles, Teacher Darren, and Teacher Eli, all believe that low remuneration is a key factor hindering the entry and retention of talent in ECE. They expressed concerns about the economic difficulties faced by male teachers and unanimously agreed that improving the wages in ECE would help address these issues and attract and retain qualified professionals in the field.

Table 4.9

Evidence Presentation for Three QR2 Themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
Intrinsic motivation to pursue ECE	Acknowledgment of the professional value	**Aaron:** As a teacher, you may also have this starting point where you think being a teacher is just about taking care of children, which essentially denies the true value and purpose of being a teacher.	Interview 3/Lines 899-900
		Aaron: I chose this profession primarily to seek my own professional development and personal growth.	Interview 3/Lines 917-918
		Ben: In the process of working with children now, they also shape me. It is a healing process, or rather a journey of becoming a loving person, a mature and emotionally mature adult.	Interview 1/Line 883-884
		Eli: Because I believe that the ideal education, I pursue can actually heal myself, and I also hope that through this kind of education, my past self can be liberated.	Interview 1/Lines 1211-121
		Charles: I didn't learn much, but I am very happy being with the children, and they really like you.	Interview 1/Lines 1080-1081
		Charles: If a child has psychological issues, and you communicate with him slowly during the kindergarten period, guiding and comforting him, he may never have such a problem in his lifetime.	Interview 2/Lines 1652-1654
		Darren: Because I love this profession. When you enter something you love, the factors that trouble you seem insignificant.	Interview 2/Lines 1100-1101

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
	Building good relationships	**Aaron:** As I look back on my first year of work, I remember feeling quite happy. I had a good rapport with the teachers in our class, and we had a strong sense of cohesion. Despite the mischievousness of the children, we found fulfillment in the process of growing together as teachers alongside the children.	Interview 2/ Lines 176-178
		Ben: At the time, I received feedback from both parents and our supervisor/principal, indicating that I was a teacher who created a strong connection with the children and their parents, fostering a sense of trust and bond.	Interview 1/Line 54-56
		Charles: I believe I could score a 95 because parents are generally satisfied with my performance.	Interview 2/Lines 241
		Darren: I feel that parents have a sense of trust in me and have confidence in my expertise in this area.	Interview 2/Lines 893-894
		Eli: Actually, after spending some time with each class, I can feel that I've been doing a relatively good job with parent communication.	Interview 2&3/Line1330-1331
	Professional fulfillment	**Aaron:** First of all, from the perspective of the children, I would feel like I owe many of them.	Interview 3/Lines 1350
		Aaron: Because I feel like I want to spend more time following up on their lives and some details. But I feel that as the position changes, I will spend less and less time with the children, which is very unprofessional as a teacher. It's like deviating from the original intention of being a teacher.	Interview 3/Lines 1356-1358

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Ben: The kindergarten is indeed a very good one, and even now, I approve of it. If given the chance, I would still go back. It's a place where employees have a strong sense of belonging.	Interview 3/ Lines 854-855
		Ben: But what I found amazing is that during my year of working at S kindergarten, I brought a lot of inspiration and positive energy to my colleagues, refreshing things. These conclusions are not based on my overconfidence, but something I observe with my own eyes. I also hear things through the grapevine, and I hear other people speaking well of me.	Interview 3/Lines 1813-1816
		Charles: Sometimes, when I see them, these little ones carrying their schoolbags to kindergarten, and I have to criticize them, it actually hurts my heart.	Interview 2/Lines 1433-1434
		Charles: Regarding my previous principal, he called me in late December last year and asked me to work in the office in Nanshan District, away from the front line. I refused him. Now, I regret it.	Interview 3/Lines 646-647
		Charles: In fact, I have already achieved a middle-level position three years earlier than others, so things have been relatively smooth. I'm also very grateful to our parents. Although I sometimes make mistakes in my work, they are very understanding.	Interview 2/Lines 235-238
		Darren: This makes me proud as a teacher in the field of early childhood education because never before have I received such great encouragement and affirmation from adults, teachers, or principals. Because I feel that when a male teacher, who can't teach at the moment, receives affirmation from a principal or some teachers, it will be of great help to him in his future teaching process.	Interview 1/Lines 187-190

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: My biggest challenge is that I really want to use my expertise to make a difference in these children's lives, but I feel like I haven't achieved my ideal state.	Interview 3/Lines 1121-1122
		Eli: The environment of the kindergarten is probably the best among all public kindergartens in Shenzhen.	Interview 2&3/ Line 576
		Eli: I saw that many children couldn't sleep because it was too stuffy. I suggested that they not cover themselves with a blanket, but the homeroom teacher still felt that they must be covered.	Interview 2&3/Lines 58-60
		Eli: At that time, I actually wanted to resign, but I felt that I should finish teaching the big class for the next semester, so I chose to stay.	Interview 2&3/Lines 86-87
		Eli: It took about a month to bring her from a shy state to a state where she dares to express herself boldly. At that time, I felt a great sense of accomplishment, especially when her parents called me crying. I felt like I had done something great.	Interview 2/Lines 1235-1237
Celebrating diversity in education	Embracing role models	**Aaron:** She is a famous teacher in Shenzhen, known for her dedication as a classroom teacher. What makes her particularly renowned is that she chooses to solely focus on teaching and remains with the same class of students. She takes charge of her own teaching and research activities and deliberately declines any promotion opportunities. Her commitment lies in being a teacher who is actively involved with the children.	Interview 2/Line 763-765

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Ben: She showed me that working in education and being involved with children is a journey of personal growth and maturity for adults as well. She has achieved this, and it made me believe that I can do it too. I don't need to elaborate much on praising her, but she is truly extraordinary, almost like a deity to me. The most crucial reason is that she has been working in the Montessori field for 30 years.	Interview 3/Line 1080-1084
		Darren: Sometimes I watch online classes taught by renowned teachers like Ying Caiyun, and I find her professional competence very appealing.	Interview 2/Line 793-794
	Appreciation for leaders and colleagues	**Eli:** She allowed us to grow at our own pace, without the pressure to learn things quickly. The principal has a background in psychology from Beijing Normal University and is a well-known veteran principal in Shenzhen. When she was nearing retirement, she chose to start a new kindergarten here. I was also convinced by her decision and partly chose this kindergarten because of her.	Interview 2&3/Line110-114
		Aaron: I really admire our current teacher who was promoted to a higher position. I believe her abilities are more than sufficient to support her current role. She understands the responsibilities of being a principal, which don't necessarily require one to outperform others in teaching. It's about having organizational skills and the ability to manage and assign tasks to different individuals according to their strengths. Moreover, I think her teaching abilities are also impressive.	Interview 2/Line 765-768
		Ben: What I'm most grateful for is our principal. He never interferes or imposes his own ideas and requirements on the lead teachers. Each lead teacher is the master of their own classroom, not the principal.	Interview 3/Line 1428-1430

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Charles: In these two years in the private sector, including my first lead teacher whom I had formal contact with, she has been very helpful to me. Despite being busy herself, she would discuss things with me and listen to my opinions. She would often delegate tasks to me, and if I didn't perform well, she would provide timely feedback. Being with her, I consider her as my mentor because she has helped me transition from the internship stage to a formal stage. So working alongside her was a pleasant experience.	Interview 2/Line 65-69
		Darren: The first is learning from exceptional individuals.	Interview 3/Line 1283-1284
	Nurturing professional confidence	**Aaron:** From a parental perspective, I see myself as a human signboard for our school.	Interview 3/Line 1399
		Ben: I am very confident. I lack confidence in other areas, such as socializing aimlessly or meeting new people. I wouldn't be good at sales either. But when it comes to working with children or talking to parents, they think, "Wow, Teacher Ben is really good."	Interview 4/Line 492-494
		Charles: Including when I transferred to a public school, I entered the kindergarten as one of the top candidates recruited by the Bao'an District Education Bureau. So, I had a sense of superiority when I joined. After entering, my position went from being an assistant teacher to becoming a grade-level leader.	Interview 1/Line 1393-1395
		Darren: I feel that in this aspect, parents trust me more and have confidence in my expertise.	Interview 2/Line 893-894
		Eli: Actually, after spending some time with each class, I can feel that I've been doing a relatively good job with parent communication.	Interview 2&3/Line1330-1331

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
	Amplifying unique perspectives	**Aaron:** As a male teacher, I feel that I tend to be stricter with boys and more lenient with girls. Therefore, I may pay more attention to the girls in my class, while the other female teachers may focus more on the boys.	Interview 2/ Lines 266-268
		Charles: In terms of ECE as a whole, there is a shortage of boys, and their personalities are often perceived as more sensitive. They may need more opportunities to develop their perseverance. So, during outdoor and physical activities, I usually emphasize the boys'involvement. When boys face difficulties, I encourage them to try and overcome those challenges.	Interview 3/Lines 236-239
		Darren: Overall, it's mostly the same. However, as male teachers, we may not be as "reserved" as female teachers when organizing activities. We tend to engage children in open and adventurous activities that some female teachers may not have experience with, such as climbing trees. Sometimes, female teachers may not take children for such activities, but we, as male teachers, do.	Interview 2/ Lines 579-582
		Eli: For example, I am bold in inviting children to participate in adventurous activities like tree climbing and ladder climbing. However, in the presence of female managers, they consider such activities as dangerous and discourage them. They worry that it may foster a habit of risky behavior in children, so they believe it shouldn't be done.	Interview 2&3/Line1803-1805
Career paths and pursuits	Fostering professional growth and learning	**Aaron:** Even though I hold many positions, I don't have any particular role that I can proudly claim to be highly qualified in.	Interview 2/Lines 1207-1209
		Ben: These are the things I have gained, and what disappoints me is that I have no one to guide me in teaching. I feel like a headless fly, making no progress in my teaching or communication with parents.	Interview 3/Line 714-716

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Charles: Actually, what I hope for more is to receive theoretical and practical guidance. When I encounter difficulties, I don't want someone to tell me to look it up in a book; I want them to provide me with substantial advice.	Interview 2/Lines 1158-1159
		Darren: I only applied for the position of a PE teacher for a year. However, later on, I found that after teaching the children physical education, I would mostly sit in the office, write documents, or assist the leaders with tasks. I felt that this created a distance between me and the children. For example, if I wanted to write some case observations or other things, I couldn't put them into practice. That's why I applied to be a class teacher again.	Interview 3/Lines 313-316
		Eli: I have classmates who have become male teachers in kindergartens, and after communicating with them, I realized that their lives are fulfilling, and it seems like there are more things to learn in that job. So I gradually developed a thought that since I only teach one or two classes a day and the rest of the time is spent resting or playing games, I feel like it's too idle.	Interview 2&3/Lines 37-4
	Taking initiative to advance the career	**Aaron:** My work experience started with one year in a preschool class, where I co-taught with two other teachers. In the second year, I transitioned to a full-time position as a specialized teacher, focusing on mental health. Currently, I work as a teacher in the office.	Interview 2/Lines 148-149
		Charles: Right from the beginning, I became the grade coordinator and class teacher.	Interview 2/Lines 278
		Darren: During my time as a class teacher, I had a plan for myself. Through an internal recruitment process, I competed for and became the grade coordinator.	Interview 2/Lines 100-101

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Eli: When I applied for the job, I made this requirement because I felt that after resigning from my previous position as a class teacher, I had to have a promotion in my new position.	Interview 2&3/Lines 480-482
	Shaping career trajectories	**Aaron:** In the recent three years, my primary career plan has been to effectively guide the first group of children.	Interview 3/ Lines 1723
		Ben: Within the next five years, I will continue working in the kindergarten, but I may consider exploring different avenues.	Interview 3/Line 1576
		Darren: My career plan for the next two to three years is to excel in my current role and strive for further advancement. If I have the capability, I would like to climb the ladder, such as taking on positions like grade-level coordinator, curriculum coordinator, or instructional supervisor.	Interview 3/Lines 1200-1202
		Charles: Actually, if given the opportunity, my next step would be to move away from the front line and assume a leadership role. After gaining experience, I would seize any chance to climb higher. Ultimately, my goal is to become a principal.	Interview 3/Lines 945-946
		Charles: It seems like besides this one profession, you don't know how to do anything else. Hey, people who work in programming are really skilled, and those who are into design are also very talented, but you don't know how to do anything else if you go out there.	Interview 3/Lines 948-950
		Eli: I will persevere because my expectation is to challenge for this position around the age of 35 or 40. Therefore, currently, I don't have any specific or strong expectations.	Interview 2&3/Lines 1010-1011

Table 4.9, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Eli: That's probably true because I don't feel like there are any particularly good prospects for me outside of this field.	Interview 2&3/Lines 1023
	Advocating for improved remuneration	**Charles:** I believe that if this aspect is resolved, everything else won't be a problem because this is truly a serious issue. Because if you work overtime every day like us, you don't actually get overtime pay. I have to work 12 hours a day just to earn such a meager salary. If you calculate your hourly wage, it's actually very low, even lower than doing labor work at a construction site. Seriously.	Interview 3/ Lines 1246-1249
		Darren: Because many male teachers don't choose the ECE profession, even though they love children. Sometimes, when they discuss with others, they actually think, "I quite like this teaching profession, but as a man, I earn so little, especially in our county where they only pay three to four thousand yuan. As a man, if I smoke a pack of cigarettes and drink a bottle of alcohol, my living expenses for the month are gone. How can I not worry?"	Interview 3/Lines 1050-1054
		Eli: If the remuneration doesn't increase, it won't attract good teachers. If your pay is low, you might not be able to attract those people.	Interview 2&3/Lines 2162-2163

4.5 RQ3: What are male teachers' perceptions of their role in early childhood education based on their lived experiences?

Research Question 3 delves into two pivotal sub-themes within the realm of ECE. The first theme, Fostering Diversity, centers on the efforts made to cultivate a more diverse and inclusive educational environment. This includes embracing the unique backgrounds and perspectives of teaching staff and offering role models that reflect this richness. The second theme, Unique Contributions, examines the multifaceted roles that educators assume in ECE. These roles encompass companionship, influence, fatherly guidance, mentorship, support, and protection, shaping the relationships and experiences of both educators and the children in their care. These themes shed light on the dynamic and crucial aspects of the ECE profession.

4.5.1 Theme 1: Fostering Diversity

This theme focuses on efforts within ECE to promote diversity and inclusivity. It involves embracing the richness and diversity of teaching staff while providing unique role models to create a more inclusive educational environment.

Embracing Teaching Staff Richness

The perspectives of two participants, Teacher Aaron and Teacher Charles, suggested that having male teachers in ECE brings several benefits. It enhances the overall atmosphere and reputation of the institution, satisfies the preferences of parents who seek a diverse teaching staff, and challenges any preconceived notions or stereotypes

about the capabilities of male teachers. Embracing and promoting the richness of teaching staff, including male educators, can contribute positively to the field of ECE.

Teacher Charles further suggested that having both male and female teachers in a classroom can promote a better understanding of gender differences and gender-related activities among children. With a diverse teaching staff, children may have clearer insights into what boys and girls are capable of and the roles they can play.

Providing Unique Role Modeling

Five participants highlighted the potential benefits of gender diversity in ECE. They suggested that male teachers can bring unique perspectives, challenge children, provide different role models, and satisfy parental expectations for a balanced learning environment. Teacher Aaron and Teacher Darren believed that the qualities of male teachers could encourage children to challenge themselves. Teacher Ben and Teacher Eli believed that the different interactions between male and female adults and children could influence various aspects of children's growth and learning. Teacher Charles believed that male teachers could impact children and cultivate their resilient personalities.

4.5.2 Theme 2: Unique Contributions

This section explores the various unique contributions made by MECTs, highlighting their distinctive and valuable inputs to the educational environment. Within this theme, we delve into the various roles of educators within ECE, viewed from both an equal and an adult perspective. Educators take on roles such as companions, influencers,

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father figures, role models, guides, supporters, and protectors, shaping the experiences and relationships within the ECE setting.

Table 4.10

Roles of Male Early Childhood Teachers

	From an equal perspective	From an adult's perspective
Aaron	Influencer	
Ben	Companion	Protector
Darren		Supporter, guide, role model
Eli		Father figure

Companion, Influencer

Two participants both approach their relationship with children and the roles they want to assume from a perspective of equality. Both of Teacher Aaron and Teacher Ben shared the intention of positively influencing a child's experiences and mindset. They aim to provide a supportive and empowering environment where the child feels valued, motivated, and encouraged to explore and engage with the world around them. Their approach focuses on nurturing the child's inner strength and fostering a sense of belonging and usefulness within their environment.

Father Figure

Two participants, both Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli, demonstrated a connection to the role of a father figure or a paternal presence in their interactions with children. They exhibit a sense of responsibility, care, and a desire to provide a protective environment for the children under their care.

Protector, Supporter, Guide, Role Model

Three participants, Teacher Ben, Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli, demonstrated their perspectives and roles as adults in relation to children. Teacher Ben acknowledged the need for protection and recognize the potential risks children may face in their lives.

Teacher Darren characterizes himself as a supporter of games and activities, while Teacher Eli portrays himself as a supporter who encourages children to engage in positive exploration. Both of them employed different vocabulary, such as "guide" and "role model," but they all underscored the significant impact they have in fostering the development of good behavioral habits in children.

Table 4.11

Evidence Presentation for RQ3

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
Fostering diversity	Embracing teaching staff richness	**Aaron:** Whether it's the work atmosphere or overall objective evaluations, if a kindergarten has male teachers, it can significantly impact the overall dynamics and reputation of the kindergarten. It gives a sense of a more diverse balance. When there are male and female teachers, I would feel more confident entrusting my child to them.	Interview 3/Lines 1224-1227
		Charles: If I have to pinpoint one thing, it would be changing parents' impressions of male teachers, creating a positive impression. Previously, parents might have questioned if there would be boys in the kindergarten and if they would excel in this role. It's about changing that perception.	Interview 3/Lines 838-841
		Charles: Actually, it's important to note that a classroom consists of not only boys but also girls. If we have both male and female teachers in a classroom, I believe it would be easier and more effective in promoting children's understanding of gender distinctions and gender-related knowledge. They can learn about what activities boys and girls can engage in. I think this approach is beneficial.	Interview 3/Lines 1311-1314
	Providing unique role modeling	**Aaron:** If we consider it from a child's perspective, I believe that spending more time with male teachers can have a significant impact on their personal traits.	Interview 3/Lines 1243-1244
		Ben: The different aspects of interaction between male and female adults bring about different effects on children's growth and learning. Therefore, it is important to maintain gender diversity.	Interview 4/Lines 1356-135
		Charles: The role of male teachers satisfies the current parental demand for embracing the gentler side of boys' personalities, as it becomes more prominent. It fulfills parents' expectations for more male involvement in this profession. However, the current situation does show that many boys are indeed engaged in this field.	Interview 3/Lines 788-790

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
		Darren: But when it comes to the ways males and females handle situations, they produce different outcomes because boys and girls have different styles of dealing with things.	Interview 3/Lines 1503-1504
		Eli: Gender complementarity ensures that children in kindergarten do not solely follow one gender or one aspect of a teacher, engaging in three years of learning and imitation. Instead, when there are male teachers around, they provide different lifestyles and work approaches that children can observe, imitate, and experience.	Interview 2&3/Lines 2203-2206
Unique contributions	Companion, influencer	**Aaron:** I want to do more in a way that I don't need to be present in every aspect of the child's life, but I hope that the many details of our interactions can provide them with a sense of psychological empowerment.	Interview 3/Lines 1433-1434
		Ben: (I am) a component of the child's experiential world, allowing them to constantly feel and recognize that they are welcomed by this world. They are different from this world, and they have a purpose in this world. They are willing to continuously explore it.	Interview 4/Lines 1493-1495
		Ben: Certainly not a guide. Rather, a companion, someone who walks alongside the child.	Interview 4/Lines 1501
	Father figure	**Darren:** Of course, there are certain aspects where I tend to interact with children using a father's mindset or approach.	Interview 3/ Lines 1085-1086
		Eli: When I am with the children, there are often moments when they inexplicably call me "Dad." And I might find myself embracing that role, feeling a desire to protect them.	Interview 2&3/Lines 2286-2287

Table 4.11, continue

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Evidence
	Protector, supporter, guide, role model	**Ben:** There is also a protective aspect, really. No matter how much we emphasize equality, I still feel the need to provide protection.	Interview 4/Lines 1523
		Darren: Then, as a supporter and guide in games, I will use my expertise in a specific field or something I am good at to guide children. For example, if I enjoy construction-related activities, I will engage children in games that involve spatial reasoning and mathematical thinking. Another role is that of a guide in their childhood. I will organize activities and engage in conversations with children, maintaining a positive and sunny disposition. If the influence of my personality is transmitted to the children, it can contribute to their joyful and emotionally healthy childhood development. By pointing them in the right direction, we can reduce the presence of psychological issues and help them change any negative habits. These positive behavior habits and character traits they develop in kindergarten can greatly benefit them as they enter primary school or move forward in the future.	Interview 3/Lines 1086-1094
		Eli: Personally, I feel that my role is more about being a role model for them. I also aim to inspire them to explore and support them. Being a role model and a supporter are essential roles for children. Being a positive example and stimulating their curiosity, I aspire to foster positive habits.	Interview 2&3/Lines 2261-2262

4.6 Summary

In conclusion, Chapter 4 provides an extensive analysis of the lived experiences of MECTs in Shenzhen, China, focusing on their personal and professional journeys. Through a detailed thematic analysis, this chapter highlights the multifaceted challenges and advantages faced by these teachers, sense-making of their experiences, as well as their perceptions of their roles in ECE.

The findings reveal that MECTs encounter significant societal biases and stereotypes, which manifest in various forms, including low salary, low status, and gender-specific expectations in the workplace. Despite these challenges, the participants also reported unique advantages, such as preferential treatment in job recruitment and stronger bonds with children, which contribute to their sense of fulfillment and professional satisfaction.

The chapter also delves into how MECTs make sense of their experiences, emphasizing their intrinsic motivations, the decision-making processes that led them to ECE, and their commitment to celebrating diversity in education. These teachers view their roles as crucial in fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments, challenging traditional gender norms, and advocating for greater gender diversity in ECE settings.

Overall, the chapter underscores the complexity of the professional landscape for MECTs, illustrating the need for increased societal awareness and support to promote gender diversity and equality in early childhood education. By addressing and

dismantling occupational gender stereotypes, the educational environment can become

more inclusive and equitable, benefiting both teachers and children alike.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussion of the findings, the implications of the study, and recommendations for future research. The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of male early childhood teachers (MECTs) in Shenzhen, China, and to offer insights into how these experiences shape their roles and perceptions in the field of early childhood education (ECE).

5.2 Summary of Findings

The exploration into the lived experiences of MECTs in Shenzhen, revealed multifaceted insights, encapsulated within overarching themes that characterized their journey in the field. The participants navigated the intricacies of their roles by externalizing their experiences through the following super-ordinate themes: (1) challenges and advantages, (2) sense-making in experiences, (3) perceptions of role in ECE.

5.2.1 RQ1: What are the experiences of male early childhood teachers？

In addressing the first research question, this study explores the experiences of MECTs, focusing on two key themes: the challenges they face and the advantages they encounter in their professional journeys. By examining these facets, the research aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive understanding of the nuanced experiences of

male educators in ECE, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on their

unique roles and contributions in educational settings. Based on the collected data and

further analysis within the group code synthesized by the initial items, the following

specific themes have emerged:

Table 5.1

Overview of Experiences for Male Early Childhood Teachers

Themes	Sub-theme	Codes grouped
Challenges	Undervalued profession	Societal bias and judgment
		Low salary
		Low status
	Gender bias in ECE setting	Curriculum areas and activities are associated with gender
		Perception of inadequate skills in nurturing
		Physical demand
	Susceptibility to allegation	Fear of False Accusations
		Impact on Professional Relationships
		Coping Strategies
		Challenges in Interactions with Female Colleagues and Parents
	Lack of Administrative Support	Administration that in not involved and not supportive
		Waste time on trivialities
	Loneliness	
Advantages	Job recruitment and promotion	

Table 5.1, continue

Themes	Sub-theme	Codes grouped
	Preferential treatment based solely on gender	
	Be more respected by parents	
	Beloved by children	

5.2.2 RQ2: How do male early childhood teachers make sense of their experiences？

In addressing the second research question, this study embarks on a nuanced exploration of the intricate ways in which MECTs derive meaning from their professional encounters. Focused on key themes that intricately shape their experiences, namely the decision-making process that led them to enter the realm of ECE, the intrinsic motivations fueling their commitment to this field, their reflections on the significance of celebrating diversity within educational contexts, and the diverse trajectories of their career paths and pursuits, this research delves into the intricate tapestry of their narratives. By probing into these specific themes, the study seeks to unravel the internal and external factors that contribute to the sense-making process for MECTs, offering a comprehensive understanding of the layers that define their professional journey and perceptions within the dynamic landscape of ECE.

Table 5.2

Code Summary on Sense-Making in Male Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences

Themes	Sub-themes
Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE	Academic background
	Pursuing ECE as major was a personal choice
	Motivation to pursue ECE
	Efforts in education
	Perception of ECE as a Viable Career Choice
	Support network
	Support challenge
Intrinsic motivation to pursue ECE	Acknowledgment of the professional value
	Building good relationships
	Professional fulfillment
Celebrating Diversity in Education	Embracing role models
	Appreciation for leaders and colleagues
	Nurturing Professional Confidence
	Amplifying unique perspectives
Career paths and pursuits	Fostering professional growth and learning
	Taking initiative to advance the career
	Shaping Career Trajectories
	Advocating for improved remuneration

5.2.3 RQ3: What are male teachers' perceptions of their role in early childhood education based on their lived experiences?

In addressing the third research question, this study delves into the perceptions of male teachers in ECE shaped by their lived experiences. Two key themes guide the exploration: first, an examination of how male teachers foster diversity by embracing teaching staff richness and providing unique role modeling; second, an exploration of unique contributions such as companion, influencer, father figure, role model, guide, supporter, and protector. Through this analysis, the research aims to uncover the nuanced perspectives that shape male teachers' roles in ECE, contributing valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on gender dynamics within this educational domain.

Table 5.3

Code Summary on Perceptions of Male Teachers' Roles in Early Childhood Education

Themes	Sub-themes
Fostering diversity	Embracing teaching staff richness
	Providing unique role modeling
Unique contributions	Companion, influencer
	Father figure
	Role model, guide, supporter, protector

5.3 Discussion

This section will be dedicated to the exploration and analysis of the three research questions posed in this study. The objective is to comprehensively discuss and dissect each research query, unraveling diverse dimensions and implications.

5.3.1 Experiences of Male Early Childhood Teachers

The exploration of the experiences of MECTs will primarily unfold through two key dimensions: (1) challenges encountered by MECTs and (2) advantages. In delving into the challenges, the study will dissect the hurdles and complexities faced by male educators in early childhood settings, shedding light on the nuanced aspects of their professional journey.

5.3.1.1 Challenges Faced by Male Early Childhood Teachers

MECTs confront a range of challenges in their profession, including being undervalued, encountering gender bias, seeking improved administrative support, and grappling with a sense of loneliness. The undervaluation of their roles, coupled with gender bias, adds layers of complexity to their experiences.

Undervalued Profession

Five participants entered the highly gendered field of ECE, and their initial challenge was the prejudice and discrimination they faced due to the misalignment between their male identity and societal expectations. As highlighted by Clow et al. (2015), these biases and discrimination primarily originated from individuals outside the field, such as family elders, peers, or even taxi drivers who represent societal norms.

These biases can be attributed to traditional discourse that associates child care solely with women and undervalues female-dominated occupations compared to male-dominated ones (Peeters et al., 2015). However, the younger generation, having benefited from more inclusive education and witnessing the competitive labor market in China, tends to have a broader perspective on career choices. They prioritize the rewards associated with a profession. Consequently, their viewpoints differ from those of the older generation. They raise valid concerns about the low wages and societal status associated with ECE, as these factors fail to align with the expectation that men should possess ambition and economic independence to provide for their families (Connell, 2005). These doubts and questioning can create a social stigma and a sense of shame among men who are interested in or already working in the traditionally female-dominated field of ECE (Torre, 2018).

Gender Bias in Ece Setting

According to Acker (2006), the division of labor within work organizations is not a neutral process but is influenced by gender dynamics. This means that tasks, roles, and responsibilities are systematically assigned based on gender. In this institutional culture, participants, whether consciously or unconsciously, are generally encouraged to actively engage in teaching tasks related to indoor construction, science, mathematics, outdoor games, or sports, emphasizing masculine qualities associated with intelligence or physical strength within the feminized education system.

Likewise, physical labor is closely linked to masculinity and is often automatically assigned to participants, leading to physical strain, frustration, and increased stress among them. It is clear that the participants do not actively seek to engage in physical labor solely to prove their male identity.

The gendered assumption perceives ECE as an extension of women's "care work" in the public sphere (Peeters et al., 2015) and assumes that men lack innate abilities to nurture and care for young children (Connell, 1995). However, contrary to previous research, the participants in this study primarily expressed that their caregiving abilities were underestimated when they initially entered the field and lacked experience, rather than solely due to their gender. On the one hand, most of the kindergartens the participants worked in had male teachers, so there was no doubt about men's competence in caring for young children. On the other hand, the participants themselves recognized that nurturing and caring for children are professional skills that become more proficient with increasing work experience.

OECD (2019) highlighted that working in the low-status and low-wage field ECE can undermine masculine qualities, as society places stronger emphasis on status and economic capabilities for men. Negative media portrayals of male early childhood teachers perpetuate these detrimental stereotypes, leading to doubts about the motivations of men entering the field. In this study, it was found that these motivations are often erroneously associated with pedophilic tendencies rather than homosexual orientations. The participants in this study intentionally maintained a distance from

children to avoid potential accusations. They believed that avoiding close contact, particularly with female children, would not compromise their professional competence. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the emotional needs of children and expressed their willingness to provide support when children faced difficulties. While they refrained from initiating physical embraces with young children, they did not reject physical comfort sought by children in moments of emotional vulnerability. The participants emphasized that mitigating these risks depended on two factors: establishing trust between parents and the kindergarten, which extended to male teachers, and gradually building trust with parents through the demonstration of professional competence and character.

To establish trust with parents initially, the participants often employed a strategy of emphasizing their professionalism as teachers during the first meeting of the semester, while delegating the daily affairs of female children to their female colleagues. This approach aimed to mitigate the trust crisis arising from their male identity. Teacher Eli further demonstrated a gender-sensitive awareness by expressing discomfort upon accidentally witnessing a child changing pants during naptime. This sensitivity contributes to their ability to manage risks effectively and provide better guidance to the children, thereby extending their professional careers.

The gendered assumptions about male early childhood teachers are not personal but rather embedded within the organizational structure and institutionalized (Acker, 2006; Bhana et al., 2022). Although male teachers can foster trust through their efforts and

professional performance, kindergartens, as organizations, may adopt necessary measures to minimize risks. This includes consistently assigning participants to teach in larger classes. For instance, Teacher Darren had his position as the grade group leader revoked after successfully campaigning for the role in the small class. Additionally, the participants' concerns about potential allegations encompassed not only interactions with children but also interactions with female parents and female colleagues. This aligns with the findings of Bhana et al. (2022) that the mechanism used to "defend" and "justify" men's presence in ECE is also used as a mechanism to condemn their presence.

Susceptibility to Allegations

The susceptibility to allegations emerged as a significant concern for male early childhood teachers. The fear of false accusations, as highlighted by Teacher Eli, is compounded by societal stereotypes and the mistrust of parents. This aligns with findings from previous research (Sargent, 2005) which indicate that male teachers often face heightened scrutiny and suspicion in their professional roles. The impact on professional relationships is profound, as maintaining a cautious distance from children can hinder the development of strong, positive connections, which are essential for effective teaching and classroom management (Cushman, 2005).

The coping strategies adopted by male teachers, such as involving female colleagues in girls' affairs and emphasizing their professionalism, reflect a proactive approach to managing these risks. These strategies not only help build trust with parents but also

underscore the need for systemic support to address these challenges. For instance, institutional policies that provide clear guidelines and support for male teachers can help mitigate the risks associated with false allegations and create a more inclusive environment.

Furthermore, the challenges in interactions with female colleagues and parents, exemplified by Teacher Darren's experience, highlight the broader issue of workplace gender dynamics. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including training for all staff on gender sensitivity and creating a culture of mutual respect and understanding.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to support male early childhood teachers and ensure that they can perform their roles without undue fear or restriction. By addressing these issues, educational institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that benefits both teachers and students.

Lack of Administrative Support

Vohra et al. (2015) pointed out that the attitudes of management can have a profound impact on the inclusion or exclusion of sexual minorities in gender-segregated professions through the influence on division of labor. All participants expressed that besides their primary tasks of nurturing and caring for children, they also needed to balance other responsibilities. Unlike their female colleagues who were more involved in emotional and communicative tasks related to children and parents, male teachers were more likely to be assigned tasks disconnected from children, such as planning

large-scale organizational activities, safety management, physical labor, and the use of modern equipment and technology. In his first year of working at the kindergarten, Teacher Ben was disappointed by the lack of progress in his teaching practice and communication with parents. As the first male teacher in that kindergarten, his gender identity held symbolic significance. The kindergarten wanted to convey the message to parents that having a male teacher was noteworthy and special, indicating the quality and competence of their educational team. However, as a result, he was assigned numerous non-teaching tasks. In other words, the attention from the leadership actually deprived him of opportunities for teaching practice with the children, hindering his professional growth and sustainable career development. Despite Teacher Aaron's job promotion, he found himself having less and less interaction with the children, which made him feel inadequate as a teacher. His narrative expressed the discrepancy and conflict between his pursuit of professional development and the division of labor imposed by the leadership, reflecting his sense of disillusionment in the pursuit of his professional growth.

The management's effective guidance on teachers' instructional practices also influences the enthusiasm of male teachers in pursuing career development. Due to the lack of male role models in the field of ECE, male teachers with limited teaching experience often seek assistance from female leaders and colleagues. It is crucial for leaders to have a keen awareness of the gender differences among male teachers and the additional support they may require, providing timely assistance in teaching and daily interaction to help them overcome the initial challenges when entering the ECE

organization. This support plays a significant role in extending the career development of male teachers. Teacher Eli, dissatisfied with the leadership's oppressive management style, criticized them for creating negative experiences for both teachers and children. He attributed these issues to the leadership's lack of professionalism, inadequate curriculum planning, and insufficient understanding of the developmental characteristics of children. This indicates that the management lacks firsthand teaching experience, resulting in ineffective guidance. Teacher Charles currently lacks practical guidance in leadership operations in his career. He emphasized that the training provided both inside and outside the kindergarten, the work of experienced teachers, and the exchange within the male teacher community are not directly applicable and specific enough to address his actual teaching needs. He must rely on observing his colleagues' behavior and exploring other channels to learn the profession, accumulating experience over time and finding solutions to the challenges he encountered. However, the leadership's laissez-faire attitude and subsequent criticism of inadequate practices and activity planning exacerbate the conflicts between leaders and teachers. This indirectly hindered his ability to receive effective guidance due to his limited experience. As a result, he faced difficulties in collaborating with female teachers in his class, undermining team cohesion and significantly diminishing his job satisfaction.

Due to the predominant presence of female managers in the field of ECE, it can lead to the potential overlooking of the unique experiences of male teachers. Teacher Darren, at times, felt disappointed when his perspectives are not taken into

consideration by the managers. He perceived that female managers tended to favor the opinions of female teachers more, assuming that they have greater experience and possess a female-oriented mindset. Additionally, Teacher Eli had worked in kindergartens where female managers predominantly held positions of authority. In his account, he and other male teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the overly restrictive and overly meticulous management style exhibited by female managers, which has resulted in the departure of several male teachers. He used a word meaning "overcautious, fussy, or nitpicky" to describe certain female managers, highlighting their gender identity and suggesting that leadership in the process of professionalization has become gendered. The former emphasized the differences between male and female, while the latter indicated a disagreement with female leadership, implying a devaluation or discomfort associated with feminine qualities and behaviors in managerial roles.

Loneliness

Four participants highlighted their sense of loneliness, with only one participant stating that his passion for the profession could offset the loneliness and make it tolerable. The other three participants expressed that their loneliness primarily stemmed from a lack of common topics in everyday conversations rather than a lack of collaboration in their work. They found it challenging to connect with their female colleagues as conversations predominantly revolved around family and shopping, topics that they struggled to engage with. One participant even mentioned their disinterest in participating in conversations with women. The impact of loneliness on their work

state was evident for the other two participants, prompting the management to expedite the recruitment of new male teachers. Teacher Aaron also noted that having only one male teacher in the kindergarten resulted in one of two outcomes: either recruiting new male teachers or the sole male teacher resigning. The mismatch in conversation topics between male and female teachers underscores the broader disparities in social activities between genders. These differences permeate into the realm of ECE, leading to a sense of exclusion and reinforcing gender essentialist misconceptions that further widen the gender divide among teachers. Moreover, existing research suggested that participants expressed a desire for male colleagues in order to seek support and understanding, particularly in navigating risk issues (Warin, 2017).

5.3.1.2 Advantages

MECTs find themselves presented with distinct advantages within their professional landscape. These include a unique advantage in job recruitment and promotion. Additionally, they may encounter preferential treatment based solely on their gender, a facet that, while addressing gender imbalances, also introduces opportunities for career advancement. Moreover, male educators often report experiencing increased respect from parents who value diversity in the teaching staff. Further, they enjoy a special rapport with children, being regarded as beloved figures in the ECE setting. These advantages contribute positively to the overall professional experiences of MECTs, offering avenues for career growth and fostering meaningful connections within the educational community.

Job Recruitment and Promotion

Teacher Darren's experience reflects the existence of hegemonic masculinity within the field of teaching. The explicit preference for male teachers during the hiring process and the principal's ideal scenario of having a male teacher assigned to each class indicate a privileging of traditional masculine traits and stereotypes. Teacher Charles's smooth interview process and the anticipation shown by principals upon discovering that he was a male teacher demonstrate the existence of a gendered hierarchy within the teaching profession. The interest and favorable treatment he received suggest that his gender aligned with the preferred and more prestigious form of masculinity within the educational setting. Teacher Eli's experience of generally successful interviews compared to female teachers reflects the privilege associated with being a man in the recruitment process. Connell's theory highlights how men often benefit from the assumed competence and authority attached to masculinity.

Furthermore, looking at the promotion experiences of Teacher Aaron, Teacher Charles, and Teacher Eli, their male identity may have played a role in advancing their careers. The scenarios of them demonstrate the potential advantages that men can experience in terms of career advancement, particularly in positions of authority and leadership. These experiences can be seen as reflective of the influence of hegemonic masculinity, which contributes to gender inequalities and reinforces certain gendered power dynamics within the educational context.

Preferential Treatment Based Solely on Gender

The participants were prioritized for external learning and training opportunities suggests the presence of gender bias in the allocation of resources and professional development. Acker (2006) recognized how organizations often perpetuate gendered norms and stereotypes, resulting in differential advantages for men. And leaders showed greater tolerance and patience towards the participants implies a gendered double standard in leadership expectations. As long as the participants' experiences of receiving greater enthusiasm and support from school staff, including the provision of privileges and favors, indicate the presence of gender-based favoritism within the organization. Acker (2006) believed this as a manifestation of the gendered power dynamics and social relationships that permeate organizations, with certain individuals receiving preferential treatment based on their gender.

Be More Respected by Parents

In a gendered organization, certain roles and attributes are associated with masculinity or femininity. The participants believed that their male identity grants them respect from parents, resulting in more polite and calm interactions. This perception aligns with gendered notions of masculinity, which can be associated with attributes like authority, assertiveness and confidence. The assumption that being male automatically affords them more respect and favorable treatment reflects the privileging of masculine norms in the organizational context.

Beloved by Children

In the findings of this study, three primary factors were identified as reasons for children's affinity towards male teachers: the rarity of male teachers in kindergartens sparking curiosity and attention, the qualities exhibited by male teachers, and the organization of activities that children perceive as more interesting. Children's curiosity and attention may stem from the cultural construction of masculinity in Chinese society, which differentiates it from the femininity typically represented by the predominantly female teaching staff in kindergartens. Furthermore, the findings suggest that male teachers tend to organize activities that children find more engaging. This can be understood within the context of cultural expectations of masculinity that emphasize qualities such as being active, adventurous, or stimulating.

Connell (2005) argued that individuals have the capacity to both reproduce and resist dominant gender norms. While participants in the study confirmed children's heightened enthusiasm towards male teachers, it is important to examine the underlying motivations behind this agreement. It is possible that male teachers benefit from the affirmation of masculine qualities within the gender power structure. Male teachers may consciously or unconsciously "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) by incorporating aspects of masculinity into their teaching practices to align with children's perceptions of engaging activities. Alternatively, male teachers can raise awareness of gender differences within the kindergarten environment, highlighting the importance of equal recognition and support for both male and female teachers.

5.3.2 Male Early Childhood Teachers Make Sense of Their Experiences

Male early childhood teachers interpret their experiences through four key dimensions. Firstly, the decision-making process leading them to choose ECE is explored. Secondly, intrinsic motivation is examined, unveiling the driving forces behind their commitment to shaping young minds. Thirdly, their role in celebrating diversity in education is investigated, emphasizing their contribution to fostering an inclusive learning environment. Lastly, insights into the varied career paths and pursuits of MECTs shed light on the dynamic trajectories that define their professional journeys.

5.3.2.1 Factors Influencing the Decision to Enter ECE

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that all five participants received support from various sources, including school teachers, parents, relatives, and friends. These results align with Plaisir et al.'s (2021) survey, which indicated that Chinese society supports men entering the ECE field, both at the governmental and familial levels. Given the intense competition in the job market, pursuing a relatively stable position in public kindergartens appears to be a practical choice.

Moreover, the age of the participants played a significant role in their proactive pursuit of careers in ECE. According to Hardie (2015), young men who valued non-hegemonic masculinity traits tended to embrace gender equality education and were more inclined to choose careers in ECE. The study revealed that the five young participants were particularly focused on realizing their personal value within their

careers, indicating that they considered personal fulfillment as more important than the profession itself.

Notably, Teacher Charles and Teacher Darren displayed remarkable commitment to the field, having decided to pursue careers in ECE during their university studies and maintaining their dedication ever since. Their unwavering beliefs have contributed to longer-lasting careers, with Teacher Charles having worked in the ECE field for 5 years and Teacher Darren for 7 years.

In summary, the motivation to pursue ECE for all participants appeared to be deeply rooted in personal experiences, a belief in the importance of early intervention, an emotional connection with children, and a strong desire to make a positive impact on the lives of young children.

5.3.2.2 Intrinsic Motivation to Pursue ECE

In the findings of this study, participants' motivations challenge traditional gender norms and demonstrate the significance of supportive organizational cultures and values in fostering their sense of empathy, belonging, responsibility, accomplishment to the field. The interactions with colleagues, children, and parents, along with the recognition and rewards received, contribute to their intrinsic motivation to pursue and remain in ECE.

Acknowledgment of the Professional Value

Among the findings of this study, the participants challenge the idea of subordinate masculinity, which refers to forms of masculinity that are seen as less dominant or less valued in society compared to the hegemonic form (Connell, 2005). In many societies, caregiving and nurturing roles have been traditionally associated with women, leading to the marginalization of men who pursue careers in fields like ECE. By choosing to work in ECE and emphasizing the importance of their role in the well-being and development of children, the participants challenge the notion that caregiving is exclusively feminine. And this is consistent with the positive feedback received from the participants that the joy of working with children is their reason for entering and

Building Good Relationships

The participants' positive experiences and satisfaction in their relationships with colleagues, children, and parents contribute to validating their decision to pursue ECE. When they felt supported and respected for their caregiving roles, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to pursue and remain in a career in ECE. The strong connection and rapport the participants have with both children and their families reflect their sense of purpose and the impact they make in their role as educators. They may feel a sense of fulfillment and purpose in contributing to the well-being and development of the children and families they work with, driving their intrinsic motivation to continue in this profession.

Professional Fulfillment

The participants' strong sense of empathy, belonging, responsibility, accomplishment to caregiving roles defies traditional gender norms in the context of ECE has long been constructed as a female-dominated profession (Ball, 2018; Herrera et al, 2019; Valet, 2018). They proactively engaged in nurturing children's physical and emotional development, championed children's interests, and may even altered their career trajectories for the well-being of children. These departures from the traditional stereotype of men solely pursuing career success and being disconnected from childcare showcase a kind of alternative and progressive masculinity.

5.3.2.3 Celebrating Diversity in Education

The study explores how MECTs play a crucial role in celebrating diversity within educational contexts, seen through embracing diverse role models, cultivating appreciation for leaders and colleagues, nurturing professional confidence, and amplifying unique perspectives.

Embracing Role Models

In the findings, the importance of role models in ECE field was mentioned. The fact that the renowned and experienced teachers mentioned by the participants, who have made significant contributions to ECE, are all women, challenges occupational gender stereotypes within the field. By seeking guidance and inspiration from experienced educators, they challenge traditional gender norms that may suggest men should only look up to male role models. Regardless of their gender, the participants demonstrated

an appreciation for knowledge and experiential diversity, which can enrich their teaching practices.

In the findings of a past study (Eidevald et al., 2021), a common complaint among the participants was the lack of male role models, which hindered their professional development. However, this study revealed a remarkable response from one participant who, despite recognizing this challenge while studying ECE at college, gracefully embraced the situation and actively sought inspiration from female role models. Another participant made it explicitly clear that, despite not majoring in ECE during university, and having access to a variety of gender role models to learn from, he still specifically mentioned learning from exceptional female role models.

Appreciation for Leaders and Colleagues

The findings revealed that participants emphasized a focus on competence and professional expertise, stressing the importance of valuing leadership, support, and guidance over prioritizing gender. This challenges traditional gender norms within the educational environment and celebrates the diverse contributions and abilities of all individuals within the organization, promoting a culture of equality and mutual respect.

Nurturing Professional Confidence

The experiences of the five male teachers challenge traditional gender expectations surrounding communication and confidence. Connell (2005) suggested that societal norms often prescribe a hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes attributes such as assertiveness and authority. In this context, the confidence displayed by Teacher Aaron

and Teacher Ben in their communication skills challenges the conventional notion that communication is predominantly a feminine attribute. This deviation challenges the existing gendered norms, showcasing a potential redefinition of masculinity in the professional sphere.

The concept of doing gender (2002) is evident as these male teachers actively engage in a different mode of gender expression. By recognizing and showcasing confidence in their communication abilities, they challenge the traditional stereotype that attributes strong communication skills exclusively to females. This act of doing gender differently in the professional realm contributes to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender roles.

However, while the confidence of these male teachers in communication is empowering, it is essential to remain vigilant about potential reinforcement of gendered stereotypes. It is crucial to question how organizational structures and societal expectations may contribute to or challenge these expressions of confidence, ensuring a nuanced understanding that fosters gender equity in the professional landscape.

Amplifying Unique Perspectives

The four participants underscored their commitment to nurturing a spirit of adventure in their daily teaching practices. Despite not differentiating between male and female students in their approach, they emphasized that the qualities of adventure they instill in their students are often lacking in the more conservative teaching styles typically

associated with female educators. In this narrative section, male teachers unintentionally juxtapose feminine qualities as an opposition, subtly negating feminine attributes to affirm masculine qualities to varying degrees. This highlights an interesting dynamic where the participants, while striving for an inclusive teaching environment, recognize and act upon a perceived deficit in certain traits traditionally linked with masculinity within the educational context.

5.3.2.4 Career Paths and Pursuits

Within this section, MECTs are highlighted in four aspects: fostering professional growth, taking initiative for career advancement, shaping intentional career trajectories, and advocating for improved remuneration. This concise exploration provides insights into how these educators navigate and shape their professional paths.

Fostering Professional Growth and Learning

The participants downplayed the relevance of formal work conditions and salary, suggesting that professional commitment and even enthusiasm for working with young children are factors that encourage men to stay. On the other hand, the work environment and leadership practices become more crucial when they decide to leave. Their prioritization of professional growth over seeking promotions challenges traditional norms associating masculinity with career advancement and success. This shift may indicate an alternative form of masculinity that emphasizes personal and professional development.

Simultaneously, men engaged in female-dominated professions may feel a threat to their masculine identity. Consequently, they may redefine their tasks to align with traditional masculine qualities, emphasizing and defending their own masculinity (Brannon, 2017). Young men like the participants, linking ECE with professionalism, resist societal perceptions that label ECE as unimportant or low-level. Their achievement-oriented approach aims to uphold their male identity, aligning with past research evidence (see Brownhill & Oates, 2017; Hussein et al., 2016; Yang & McNair, 2021). The potential contribution of male teachers to the continuous evolution of gender roles within the teaching profession is contingent upon the extent to which professionalization serves as a strategic mechanism for men to attain career success while preserving normative masculine identities. Should professionalization not emerge as a significant strategy for male educators in achieving and sustaining normative masculine identities alongside career success, the inclusive participation of male teachers is more likely to exert a positive influence on the ongoing transformation of gender roles within the pedagogical domain.

Taking Initiative to Advance the Career

The varied career paths, transitions between roles, and active participation in competitive processes signify a commitment to professional growth and advancement within the teaching profession. It suggests that these educators view their careers as dynamic journeys marked by intentional decision-making and strategic moves to achieve higher positions and responsibilities. A fundamental observation emanating from the accounts of these participants is the discernible efficiency and brevity of their

career advancement paths in comparison to their female counterparts. This empirical insight instigates a critical examination of gender-related advantages embedded within the organizational structures of the teaching profession (see Hussein et al., 2016; Williams, 2015).

Shaping Career Trajectories

The expression of gender is communicated through power dynamics, and even within female-dominated professions, men tend to concentrate in positions of authority. This characteristic poses a challenge to traditional male occupational stereotypes, questioning whether it is built upon the assumption of gender binary or if it challenges conventional perceptions of male professional roles. Two participants, Teacher Aaron and Teacher Ben, did not explicitly outline their career development plans; instead, they opted for short-term career planning within a 3–5-year horizon. In their short-term career plans, neither demonstrated a strong desire for rapid promotions. However, when considering the current career trajectories of the participants, Teacher Ben stands out as the only one whose position did not rapidly advance in past early childhood education experiences. His future 5-year career plan also indicates a commitment to engaging in child-centered work, persisting in frontline positions serving children. Engaging in professions focused on working with children and women is frequently associated with occupations deemed to possess lower skill levels and diminished status in mainstream societal discourse. Men who opt for roles involving the care of children and emotional labor are, to some extent, susceptible to perceptions of lacking competence and deviating from normative masculine qualities. However, this

departure from societal expectations concerning masculine attributes can be interpreted as a form of resistance against established male norms.

The choice of roles traditionally seen as less aligned with hegemonic masculinity reflects a deliberate deviation from conventional gender expectations. In this context, men choosing positions involving childcare and emotional labor actively challenge and dismantle the barriers associated with hegemonic masculinity. This departure goes beyond individual career choices; it represents a collective and symbolic rebellion against ingrained gender stereotypes, aligning with Connell's theory of "body-reflexive practice" (Connell, 2009, p. 67). This act of deviating from traditional masculine ideals within the realm of education is considered a significant stride toward fostering gender equality. By challenging preconceived notions about suitable male professions, individuals in these roles contribute to reshaping societal perceptions, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable landscape within the educational domain.

Teacher Aaron has conveyed a preference for dedicating himself to his professional interest in psychological education. However, when examining his career trajectory within the broader context of gender dynamics, it aligns with the concept of the glass escalator' effect (Williams, 2013). Progressing from a class teacher in the first year to a dedicated mental health teacher in the second, and subsequently assuming the role of deputy director in the third year, his career path exemplifies a pattern observed in earlier research. This pattern suggests that societal norms often exert pressure on men

to assume managerial positions, even if content with their existing roles, resulting in upward career mobility (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Williams, 2013). Furthermore, men's societal standing is intricately linked to their professional pursuits, with job security and career opportunities gaining significance as they age.

Despite underscoring the significance of ECE and expressing fondness for children, Teacher Charles, Teacher Darren, and Teacher Eli experience societal pressure to conform to established norms for men. Through seeking promotions, they aim to align themselves with the typical attributes associated with high-status, high-wage roles, emblematic of stereotypical male professionals. This strategic approach is intended to affirm their masculine identity within the domain of ECE. The palpable societal pressure manifests when, if unable to secure prominent positions in ECE and corresponding economic stability to support their families, they may grapple with profound feelings of frustration and inadequacy. This emotional response can pose a significant impediment to their sustained engagement in ECE.

However, should these participants successfully attain authoritative administrative roles, thereby acquiring the power to manage others, this power dynamic could operate as a mechanism reinforcing traditional masculine qualities. At a macro-level, this could contribute to supporting and perpetuating the hierarchical gender system in its entirety.

Advocating for Improved Remuneration

Despite the challenging reality of low income being a widespread issue faced by professionals in the ECE industry, considering that the participants are situated in Shenzhen, a first-tier city with comparatively higher wages than other regions, along with the societal and cultural context discussed earlier, some facts need to be considered. In this context, the participants' proposal to increase wages as a means to retain male teachers, to some extent, reflects the expectations ingrained within the gender system. Specifically, it suggests that, within the gender system, there is an anticipation for men to conform to standardized male ideals associated with higher income capabilities (Yang & McNair, 2019).

5.3.3 Male teachers' perceptions of their role

This section explores male teachers' perceptions of their roles, specifically focusing on Fostering Diversity and Unique Contributions. It delves into the nuanced perspectives of male educators, revealing insights into their contributions to diversity and the distinct roles they attribute to their presence within the educational sphere.

5.3.3.1 Fostering Diversity

The findings revealed that gendered expectations are not individualized but institutionalized, as they permeate and embed within organizations, as well as in the societal constructs brought to ECE by parents, teachers, and men themselves (Bhana et al., 2022). Parents, leaders, female teachers, and male teachers alike construct corresponding feminine and masculine qualities based on physiological gender,

forming 'complementary' roles with the expectation of enriching the diversity of the teaching workforce and educational practices. This emphasis on gender 'opposition' and encouragement for men and women to act in socially prescribed ways perpetuates occupational gender stereotypes and gender inequality. Male role models grounded in normative male ideals can, within this context, at times resist efforts to eliminate gender biases within the profession by participating in ECE work. Therefore, achieving diversity in the ECE profession cannot be simply addressed by increasing the number of male participants, as the increase in male numbers based on gender binary assumptions may also serve as a means of continuously establishing male power.

However, Bhana et al. (2022) emphasized that the augmentation of male presence within ECE is pivotal and indispensable for deconstructing the deeply ingrained perception of ECE as 'women's work'. This perspective underscores the transformative potential inherent in increasing the participation of men in a field traditionally associated with femininity. By challenging and diversifying the gender composition within ECE, this step contributes to breaking down longstanding stereotypes and dismantling the societal construct that confines certain professions to gendered norms.

The significance of this shift lies in its potential to disrupt the entrenched narratives and biases that have relegated ECE to a predominantly female domain. As more men actively engage in ECE roles, it challenges preconceived notions, redefines societal expectations, and encourages a broader understanding of the profession. This

transformative process not only contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and egalitarian work environment but also addresses systemic gender-based assumptions that have historically hindered the recognition and value attributed to ECE as a profession.

In essence, the encouragement of male participation in ECE becomes a strategic and crucial endeavor in reshaping societal perceptions, fostering diversity, and dismantling the gendered confines that have limited the professional landscape of ECE.

5.3.3.2 Unique Contributions

Examining the findings through a gendered lens allows us to delve into the impact of traditional gender roles and expectations on the participants' perspectives and roles in their interactions with children.

Companion, Influencer

The participants, Teacher Aaron and Teacher Ben, approach their relationships with children from a perspective of equality, challenging traditional gender norms that might dictate specific roles for men and women. This challenges the traditional gendered expectation that men might assume authoritative or disciplinary roles while women are expected to be nurturing or supportive. Their emphasis on influencing a child's experiences and mindset reflects a departure from stereotypical gender roles.

Father Figure

Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli demonstrate a connection to the role of a father figure, reflecting traditional masculine expectations of being protectors and providers. This

aligns with traditional gender roles that associate men with the role of a paternal figure or protector. It reinforces the societal expectation that men, in their interactions with children, embody qualities traditionally ascribed to fatherhood.

Role Model, Guide, Supporter, Protector

These participants recognize and embody roles such as protector, supporter, guide, and role model, emphasizing their responsibility and impact in children's lives. The acknowledgment of the need for protection by Teacher Ben and the support and guidance provided by Teacher Darren and Teacher Eli align with traditional masculine attributes of being strong, protective figures. The term 'role model' also reflects a societal expectation for men to serve as positive examples.

The findings suggest a nuanced approach by male teachers, challenging traditional gender norms by actively engaging in nurturing, supportive, and influential roles with children. It reflects a shift away from strict gendered expectations, demonstrating that men in early childhood education can embody a diverse range of roles beyond traditional stereotypes. However, the persistence of certain traditional roles, such as the father figure, indicates that some gendered expectations persist in these participants' perceptions of their roles with children.

5.4 Integration of Themes

The integration of themes from the findings provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics MECTs navigate in their professional lives. This section synthesizes the key themes identified in the study: challenges faced by MECTs, the

advantages they experience, sense-making of their experiences, and their perceived roles in ECE.

5.4.1 Navigating Societal Biases and Stereotypes

One of the primary challenges identified is the societal bias and stereotypes that MECTs face. These stereotypes not only affect how they are perceived by others but also influence their self-perception and professional identity. The integration of this theme with their sense-making process shows how MECTs develop strategies to cope with and counteract these biases, such as emphasizing their professional competence and focusing on the unique contributions they bring to ECE.

5.4.2 Advantages

Despite the significant challenges, MECTs also report unique advantages in their roles. These include preferential treatment in job recruitment, opportunities for career advancement, and the ability to form strong bonds with children. These advantages provide MECTs with a sense of fulfillment and recognition that can help offset some of the negative aspects of societal biases and low status. Integrating this theme highlights the dual nature of their experiences, where advantages coexist with challenges, shaping a nuanced professional identity.

5.4.3 Balancing Intrinsic Motivation and Professional Challenges

The sense-making process of MECTs reveals a strong intrinsic motivation to pursue a career in ECE, despite the challenges. This theme integrates with their experiences of societal bias and low professional status, highlighting resilience and commitment to

making a positive impact on children's lives. MECTs navigate these challenges by focusing on their passion for teaching and their desire to provide diverse role models for young children.

5.4.4 Fostering Inclusive and Supportive Educational Environments

MECTs perceive their roles as critical in fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments. This theme integrates their experiences and sense-making, showing how MECTs use their unique positions to challenge traditional gender norms and advocate for gender diversity. Their presence in ECE not only benefits children by providing diverse role models but also contributes to a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and equality in education.

5.5 Implications of the Study

The study's implications are manifold, with a primary focus on advancing gender equality within ECE. Initially, the study aims to provide valuable insights to upper managers, particularly kindergarten heads in China's ECE industry. By acknowledging the limited presence of men in ECE as a campaign for equality, the study challenges prevailing perceptions that have pigeonholed ECE as a predominantly feminine domain. This recognition encourages proactive efforts to engage more men in the field, fostering a shift in perspective that can contribute to broader initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in ECE.

In addition to challenging traditional gender discourse, the study underscores the need to reevaluate recruitment strategies and training approaches for MECTs. Moving away

from reinforcing traditional masculinity, policymakers can leverage the findings to formulate training strategies that support the healthy career development of MECTs. This calls for a paradigm shift towards more inclusive and diverse approaches to recruitment, training, and overall professional development within the ECE field.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the presence of unconscious gender biases in teaching practices within Chinese kindergartens, particularly with male teachers associating adventurous, sports-loving, and resilient stereotypes with themselves. The identified phenomenon prompts a critical reflection on gender equality education for ECTs, signaling a potential transformation in how educators guide and interact with children. The overarching goal is to foster a more inclusive learning environment that challenges ingrained gender norms.

Examining occupational gender stereotypes and the roles of male teachers, the study also highlights implications for children's play. By encouraging reflection on gender equality education for ECTs, the research aims to challenge traditional notions of gender-specific play activities. This approach seeks to promote a more diverse and inclusive environment for children, mitigating the influence of subconscious guidance that may contribute to stereotypical preferences in their activities.

Ultimately, the study suggests a broader societal impact by challenging occupational gender stereotypes and encouraging increased male participation in ECE. This entails redefining ECE as a gender-neutral field where both men and women feel empowered to pursue careers, breaking away from the constraints of traditional gender norms. The

study aligns with a larger trend of breaking down gender barriers in various professions, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive societal landscape.

5.6 Recommendations from the Study

The recommendations emerging from the study encompass various aspects of ECE and aim to foster a more inclusive and gender-neutral environment. Firstly, to address unconscious gender biases, the study proposes the implementation of gender sensitivity training for ECTs. This training would serve to raise awareness about ingrained stereotypes and equip educators with tools to create a more inclusive learning environment, free from gender-based assumptions.

In terms of recruitment, the study recommends the development and implementation of inclusive policies by policymakers and educational institutions. These policies should actively promote diversity in the hiring process, specifically targeting a more balanced representation of MECTs. By breaking down traditional gender norms in recruitment, institutions can contribute to a more diverse and equitable ECE workforce.

Collaboration is also highlighted as a key recommendation, urging policymakers, educators, and industry leaders to work together. By fostering a collective effort aimed at redefining ECE as a gender-neutral field, breaking away from traditional gender norms becomes a shared goal.

Lastly, engaging with parents and caregivers is identified as a valuable recommendation to address societal expectations. Workshops or informational sessions can be organized by educational institutions to raise awareness about the

importance of breaking down occupational gender stereotypes and creating a supportive home environment for children's holistic development.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in the realm of ECE holds promising avenues for gaining deeper insights and addressing critical gaps. One prospective area involves conducting longitudinal studies on MECTs. Such studies could offer a comprehensive understanding of the long-term impacts of their experiences in ECE, exploring factors influencing career trajectories, job satisfaction, and retention over an extended period.

Cross-cultural comparative studies represent another valuable avenue for future research. By examining the experiences of MECTs across diverse cultural contexts, researchers can identify commonalities and differences in the challenges and opportunities faced by male educators. This approach has the potential to contribute to the development of tailored strategies that consider the nuances of specific cultural environments.

An essential focus for future research is the in-depth exploration of parental perspectives on the role of MECTs. Investigating how parents perceive and engage with male teachers in ECE settings can provide valuable insights into broader societal attitudes towards gender roles in education, potentially shaping future initiatives and strategies.

Understanding the impact of MECTs on children's development is a key research avenue. Future studies should delve into cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes

associated with the presence of male teachers, shedding light on how diverse teacher representations influence children's perceptions of gender roles and their overall educational experiences.

Another recommended area for future research involves examining the effectiveness of institutional support systems for MECTs. Investigating the role of mentorship programs, professional development opportunities, and workplace policies in supporting the career growth and job satisfaction of male educators can inform strategies to create more supportive environments.

The assessment of policy impacts is critical for future research endeavors. Evaluating the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing the representation of male teachers in ECE can provide valuable insights into the success and challenges of specific initiatives, guiding evidence-based policy recommendations to foster gender diversity in the field.

Conducting qualitative studies on perceptions of masculinity within the ECE context is another recommended avenue. Exploring the subjective experiences and self-perceptions of male teachers can contribute to a richer understanding of gender dynamics, shedding light on the construction of gender identities within the field.

Future research should also prioritize the assessment of training programs aimed at addressing gender biases and promoting inclusivity within ECE. Evaluating the impact of professional development initiatives on educators' attitudes, practices, and

classroom environments can guide the refinement of training approaches to create more inclusive learning spaces.

Continuously monitoring and analyzing trends in the ECE workforce, particularly regarding the representation of male educators, is crucial for future research. Understanding shifts in demographics and exploring factors influencing the recruitment and retention of male teachers can inform proactive strategies for enhancing gender diversity in ECE.

5.8 Conclusion

The experiences of the five male early childhood teachers (MECTs) in China provide a unique perspective, shedding light on the world of men in a traditionally female-dominated profession. Their narratives reveal both personal life journeys and the specific challenges and rewards inherent in their roles as early childhood educators. Understanding these experiences offers valuable insights into the gender complexities within early childhood education (ECE).

To address the challenges faced by MECTs effectively and support their career development, it is crucial to understand the gender complexities shaping their performance in ECE. Deconstructing the gendered expectations and challenges imposed on men in this field requires a careful examination of these complexities. Enhancing the representation of men in the ECE workforce goes beyond merely increasing their numbers. It necessitates breaking free from the current constraints within gender expectations and challenges by adopting gender-sensitive strategies.

This study underscores the need for increased societal awareness and support for MECTs to promote gender diversity in ECE. By understanding and addressing the occupational gender stereotypes faced by MECTs, we can create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for all children. The findings emphasize that fostering a gender-diverse workforce in ECE is essential not only for the benefit of male teachers but also for the overall development and well-being of children, as diverse role models contribute to richer learning experiences.

Ultimately, this study calls for a comprehensive approach to gender equality in ECE, advocating for policies and practices that support the recruitment, retention, and professional development of male educators. By challenging traditional gender norms and creating supportive environments, we can ensure that both male and female teachers thrive, contributing positively to the field of early childhood education.

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