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# Why Do They Choose to Stay? Career Choice of Publicly Funded Male Kindergarten Teachers in Jiangsu Province, China

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## Abstract

This study explores the career choices of five male kindergarten teachers whose contracts are about to expire in a publicly funded male kindergarten teacher project. The publicly funded male kindergarten teacher project is implemented by the Jiangsu Provincial Government in China. The purpose of the project is to increase the number of male kindergarten teachers and alleviate the gender segregation of kindergarten teachers. The policy requires male kindergarten teachers to return to their hometown to work in kindergartens for five years, after which they can freely choose careers. Through interviews with five teachers, this study found that the first career choice of public-funded male kindergarten teachers is influenced by job security and family members' wishes; the second career choice is the joint effect of career development, emotional motivation, and gender roles. The research results show that in order to improve the retention rate of male kindergarten teachers, a more equal gender culture and diverse gender evaluation standards are needed.

## Keywords

Publicly funded male kindergarten teacher; career choice; early childhood care and education

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the gender imbalance among Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers has become a common phenomenon (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Yang & McNair, 2020 ). Attracting more male teachers to engage in ECCE has become a common concern of researchers and governments of many countries in the world (Heikkilä, 2016; Peeters et al., 2015). For example, in 1996, in order to increase the number of male kindergarten teachers, the European Union proposed a goal that 20% of the practitioners employed in central childcare should be men within ten years (European Commission Childcare Network, 1996). By 2015, no country in the European Union had achieved this goal. In most European countries, the proportion of male employees in the ECCE field is between 1% and 3%. In some countries, it is even lower.

In China, ECCE is one of the industries with the most severe occupational gender disparity. Male kindergarten teachers account for only 2.22% of the total number of employees (Ministry of Education of China, 2021). Xin (2021) pointed out that to solve the shortage of male kindergarten teachers, we need to pay attention to two stages of their professional development: the first stage is the teacher training stage of male education students, which mainly includes recruiting and training males to study preschool education. The second stage is the career development stage of male kindergarten

teachers, which aims to reduce the dropout rate of male teachers in this profession.

For the first stage, the Chinese central government has formulated some special policies to recruit more male kindergarten students. It issued the document "Several Opinions of the State Council on Further Promoting the Development of Preschool Education" (2010) as a macro-guidance suggestion, proposing to support male kindergarten teachers in terms of education funds, enrollment channels, and employment policies.

On this basis, provincial governments formulated more detailed policies. Jiangsu Province launched the publicly-funded male kindergarten teacher project in 2010 (Ministry of Education of China, 2010), that is, boys who are interested in becoming kindergarten teachers are selected from junior high school graduates, and policy measures such as free education and targeted employment are adopted to encourage boys to apply for the five-year preschool education major to improve the gender composition of kindergarten teachers. Subsequently, provinces such as Guangxi, Fujian, and Hunan successively introduced similar policies (Li et al., 2023).

Then focusing on the second stage, related research shows that publicly-funded male kindergarten teachers showed better job longevity compared with non-publicly-funded male kindergarten teachers. For example, the first generation of publicly-funded male kindergarten teachers in Jiangsu Province completed the agreement period signed with the government in 2020, and the statistics showed that the turnover rate was about 10% (Xu & Gong, 2021). At the same time, the overall attrition rate of non-government-funded male kindergarten teachers within five years of graduation is about 65% (Deng, 2017). The career choice of publicly-funded male kindergarten teachers is striking, but few people pay attention to this phenomenon.

So why do publicly funded male kindergarten teachers choose to stay? Existing studies on the career choices of male teachers in basic education mostly focus on "why they chose to leave" (Heikkilä, 2016; Peeters et al., 2015; Xu, 2006; Yang et al., 2017). These studies provide useful information to understand high turnover but are limited in fully explaining the phenomenon. Because career choice is not only affected by external factors but also a decision made by teachers under the joint action of internal and external forces in the kindergarten workplace (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017).

Quantitative research provides useful information for understanding the career choices of male kindergarten teachers but has limitations in fully explaining this phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm and used semi-structured interviews to analyze the underlying reasons for the career choice behavior of male kindergarten teachers.

The research question of this study is: "What are the factors affecting the retention rate and future career choices of publicly funded male kindergarten teachers?"

The study explores the two career choices of public-funded male kindergarten teachers (the first choice is to fulfill the contract to work in kindergarten after graduation, and the second choice is whether to leave after working for five years), as well as their understanding, experience, challenges, and support, provide a reference for improving the retention rate of male kindergarten teachers.

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Participants in this study were recruited by snowballing. There were two criteria for the inclusion of participants:

1) Publicly funded male kindergarten teachers who enrolled in 2014, their five-year agreement period is about to end and they are free to choose a career;
2) After graduation, they accept arrangements from the Education Bureau and return to their hometown to work in kindergartens.

First, we posted information on social media to recruit participants, and within a week two male kindergarten teachers contacted me and agreed to participate in this study. From their referrals, we then contacted a number of other potential participants. Eventually, five male kindergarten teachers participated in this study.

The five male kindergarten teachers who participated in the study all graduated in 2018. They all work at public provincial model kindergartens. The five teachers came from two small cities in the northern part of Jiangsu province, and they all came from working-class families. Two of the five teachers were married, and teacher P5 became a father in early 2023 (see Table 1).

### 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

We reviewed existing literature and designed an interview framework based on the purpose of this study. After completing the preparation of the initial interview outline, the researcher invited two experts to discuss and revise the structure,

content, and suitability of the questioning methods.

**Table 1. Participants**

| Name | Age | Current position(s) | Marital status | Monthly income (Dollar) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher P1 | 25 | Deputy Director of Logistics Department & Physical Education Teacher | Single | 850 |
| Teacher P2 | 24 | Director of Teaching and Research Section & Programming Teacher | Single | 940 |
| Teacher P3 | 25 | Head teacher | Single | 785 |
| Teacher P4 | 25 | Head teacher | Married | 850 |
| Teacher P5 | 25 | Deputy Director of Logistics Department & Physical Education Teacher | Married | 920 |

Subsequently, we conducted preventive interviews with two male kindergarten teachers and adjusted the interview framework based on the interview results. The final interview outline included the following five questions:

1) Why did you initially choose to become a public-funded male normal college student?
2) Will you choose to continue to be a kindergarten teacher?
3) What factors do you think influenced your career choice?
4) Are you satisfied with your current job?
5) What plans do you have for your work?

After obtaining the consent of the participants, all interviews were conducted online using the WeChat App, and the entire process was recorded. We conducted two 60-minute formal interviews and some short informal interviews with five participants. The entire interview process lasted for two months, and the interview ended in November 2023.

Immediately after each interview, we combined field notes and interview audio recordings for text transcription. Teachers participating in the study were anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of their information. The transcribed texts were read and compared repeatedly over a six-week period and analyzed using the thematic analysis procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006). We conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, read and re-read the transcribed text, and systematically reviewed the data to ensure that names, definitions, and detailed data sets were identified for each category. Two key themes ultimately emerged around the career choices of male kindergarten teachers.

## 3. Findings

During the interviews, only one teacher indicated that he would leave the kindergarten to take up another job (P3), while the other four indicated that they had hesitations and uncertainties in their jobs, but decided to stay after much deliberation.

### 3.1 Choosing to Enter the Industry: Job Security and Family Influence

The five male teachers expressed similar views on why they chose to enter ECCE: the choice to become male kindergarten teachers was not based on personal interest, but was mainly influenced by external factors, with the expectation of a stable job and the opinions of their family members combining to influence their career choice.

#### 3.1.1 Job Security

During the interviews, all of the participants said very frankly that they originally chose to become publicly funded male kindergarten teachers because they were interested in becoming teachers who have BianZhi (Teachers on permanent government contracts) after graduation. BianZhi is a professional status with Chinese characteristics, meaning “official employee”. Teachers with BianZhi receive government-funded salaries and benefits and enjoy priority in promotion and performance.

Teacher P4 said, “We are assigned a job with Bianzhi. This kind of security is very attractive to me.” Teacher P2 also said that he was “very lucky”.

#### 3.1.2 Family Influence

The initial career choices of male kindergarten teachers are deeply influenced by their families. Parents’ education level, family relationships and family economic status have a great impact on their children’s career choices. Teacher P4 said

that he chose to become a male kindergarten teacher because he could go to school for free: “Family relations have been tense since I was a child, and my family doesn't have much money either. I want to reduce the financial burden on my family.” So after initially understanding the public-funded male teacher training policy, he chose to apply without hesitation.

Teacher P5 believes that the reason for applying mainly comes from the suggestions of parents and relatives, and he integrates parents’ will into his own career choice (Jacobs & Eccles, 2000).

### 3.2 Choosing to Stay: Career Development, Emotional Motivation, and Gender Barriers

The five male teachers (including the P3 teacher who plans to resign) all believe that male teachers cannot always be engaged in childcare and education. As they grow older, as males, they must become managers. Recognition from significant others at work is an emotional motivator to continue working as a kindergarten teacher. In career choice, gender barriers are the main hindrance factor.

#### 3.2.1 Career Development

The four male kindergarten teachers who will choose to stay said that the primary reason affecting their career choice is that they are satisfied with their current job status and development prospects. They agreed that kindergartens have created many professional learning opportunities for male teachers, such as high-quality classroom evaluations, internships in other kindergartens, and inviting experts to provide guidance. This has largely supported and promoted the learning and development needs of male teachers. Obviously, male kindergarten teachers’ career advancement is faster than that of female kindergarten teachers in the same period. They naturally stepped onto the “glass escalator” of their careers (Williams, 1992).

However, not all teachers have gone to management positions. P3 and P4 teachers are still working as head teachers. Teacher P3 in particular has experienced multiple positions and describes himself as “(I) like a brick, moving wherever it needs to be.”

#### 3.2.2 Emotional Motivation

Male kindergarten teachers expressed that emotional satisfaction made them find their jobs very meaningful. Although kindergarten work is tedious, has heavy responsibilities, and the emotional labor intensity at work is high, being needed and respected at work makes them feel that their work as male kindergarten teachers is worthwhile. Teacher P2 said that he learned a lot of educational theories during his school days, and since then he has very much hoped that his masculine characteristics can infect the children around him so that they can get different love and encouragement from him.

#### 3.2.3 Gender Barriers

Gender concepts are the main hindrance factor in the career choice of male kindergarten teachers. This is mainly reflected in the anxiety about masculinity in the professional field of male kindergarten teachers, the gender identity of the breadwinner, and social isolation in kindergartens.

Kindergarten is considered a feminine organization. Kindergartens have feminine characteristics in terms of environment creation, work content, work requirements, and even the gender of leaders. Living in such a gendered culture for a long time, the gender temperament of male kindergarten teachers has been questioned.

Therefore, questioning gender self-identity at work is also a major challenge faced by male kindergarten teachers. In the study, male teachers also repeatedly mentioned that they “can’t hold their throats to speak like female teachers do, it’s too effeminate (P2)”, “must be masculine (P3)”, “Male teachers are more authoritative in front of children (P5).” This emphasis on masculinity actually reflects the anxiety of male kindergarten teachers. Males hold stricter occupational gender attitudes than females (Xin, 2021) and face greater pressure when violating occupational gender stereotypes.

Social isolation in the workplace. The kindergartens where the five male kindergarten teachers work are all high-quality public kindergartens, and each kindergarten only has 1-2 male kindergarten teachers in service. Male teachers from the minority group all mentioned “loneliness” when describing their situation when they first entered kindergarten.

The kindergarten where Teacher P4 worked after graduation only had one male kindergarten teacher. Due to gender differences, there are certain differences in the way of work methods, communication topics, and hobbies, and he felt “very lonely”. Teacher P3 even said that some of his teaching behaviors “were misunderstood by female teachers, and female teachers would look at themselves in a different light.”

## 4. Discussion

Summarizing the interview data, we can find that gender runs through the career choices and career development of male

kindergarten teachers. This conclusion is partially consistent with the research results of Yang and McNair (2020).

Gender is an important issue in the social division of labor, especially in China's current highly gendered social structure and traditional cultural background, where the value of fulfilling traditional gender role obligations is still deeply rooted (Hedlin et al., 2018). As a male kindergarten teacher with a non-traditional job, he is both a hidden beneficiary of male privilege and a victim of gender stereotypes.

On the one hand, there is male privilege, and the government's "pro-male policy" is the main reason why male students choose to enter the ECCE industry. Being male brings with it structured jobs that do not require competition, better on-the-job learning opportunities, and a smoother path to promotion (Yang & McNair, 2020).

However, this conclusion is contrary to the research conclusion of Cai (2017). In her research, she found that not only were male kindergarten teachers not promoted, but gender suppression occurred, that is, "the originally suppressed gender concepts and collective operating modes in daily life will naturally emerge and affect the entire promotion process (p. 88)."

The difference in conclusions may come from the difference in the participants' identities in the organization, that is, whether they have BianZhi or not. In Cai's (2017) study, the male teachers came from private kindergartens. The principal believes that the turnover rate of male kindergarten teachers is too high. However, the publicly funded male kindergarten teachers in this study are established and have been working continuously for more than four years. Compared with female teachers in the same period, they have received gender dividends in terms of career development.

But on the other hand, gender stereotypes have an inhibitory effect on the career choices of male kindergarten teachers. Society's expectations of males, especially the expectations of dominant masculinity from the mainstream of society, put male kindergarten teachers in an embarrassing and self-questioning position. Hegemonic masculinity is the most socially authoritative masculinity widely accepted by patriarchal society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In China, it is described as male masculinity, measured by economic prosperity and career success. This emphasis on single masculinity causes males to face strange looks from society when they enter ECCE.

Consistent with the research results of Gao (2017), this study also believes that male kindergarten teachers experience conflicts between their own masculinity and the female image of the kindergarten teacher profession at work, resulting in masculinity anxiety.

The career choice of in-service male kindergarten teachers is closely related to the reconstruction of masculinity. Williams (1992) refers to four common strategies: 1) specialization; 2) emphasizing the masculine characteristics of the job; 3) striving to reach higher management positions; and 4) staying away from one's job. Three teachers (P1, P2, and P5) were all used specialization strategies in the early stages of their work. They took on administrative positions and full-time teachers (physical education teachers and programming teachers), concentrated them in specialized departments, opened up a male territory, and constructed "Islands of masculinity" in female occupations (Evans, 1997). Subsequently, the male kindergarten teachers showed more enterprising spirit and worked hard to pursue career success and ascend to higher management positions. For example, Teacher P1 called himself "Principal P1" when talking about how to introduce himself to others. Male kindergarten teachers use various strategies to reconstruct masculinity and rationalize their professional identities, choosing to stay if they succeed and leave if they fail.

Existing research attributes the fact that males do not choose to enter ECCE and the resignation of male teachers to reasons such as insufficient publicity of the benefits of male teachers and insufficient government support (Cushman, 2005; Cruickshank et al., 2021). However, this study believes that the root cause still lies in gender essentialist bias at the cultural level. Only by creating an equal gender cultural concept, advocating diversified male evaluation standards, improving social gender stereotypes, and improving the professional status and work benefits of kindergarten teachers. Only then can we truly break the glass door for males to choose a career in ECCE and improve the current gender segregation of kindergarten teachers.

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