

Research Article

Male Preservice Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences regarding Early Childhood Education Program in China

Yanhui Liu  and Xuecheng Zou 

Faculty of College of Education Science, Hubei Normal University, Huangshi, China

Correspondence should be addressed to Yanhui Liu; angelane27@qq.com

Received 23 May 2023; Revised 22 August 2023; Accepted 21 November 2023; Published 9 December 2023

Academic Editor: Goutam Saha

Copyright © 2023 Yanhui Liu and Xuecheng Zou. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

An increasing amount of attention has been focused on the issue of the low recruitment and retention of male teachers in early childhood education worldwide. Previous research has indicated that personal perceptions of male preservice teachers' personal regarding early childhood education could have a major influence on their decision of a future career. This qualitative study aims at promoting the significance of early childhood preservice preparation programs by exploring the perspectives and experiences of male preservice teachers working with infants in China. Using the purposeful sampling method, two male interns in an infant classroom were interviewed individually, and each of them was interviewed three times in total: at the beginning of their professional studies, during their internship, and after completing their studies. Participants' reflections were also considered as supplementary data. The results underscore the necessity of a comprehensive early childhood preservice preparation program for prospective male teachers, particularly regarding infants' development. Additionally, the study highlights the crucial role of male preservice teachers' involvement and perspectives before entering the early childhood education field. The study was limited to one location and may not apply to others. Despite the small sample, it offers valuable perspectives. Future focus should be on attracting males to early childhood education area and exploring useful strategies.

1. Introduction

To date, the recruitment of males in early childhood education remains lower than that of females worldwide [1–3], and the retention rates for males, particularly in preschool settings, are significantly lower [4–5]. Cushman [6] identified three key factors contributing to the low recruitment and retention rate of males in early childhood education: non-competitive salaries, challenges associated with working with young children, and female-dominated work environments. Extensive prior research on gender gaps in early childhood education has consistently highlighted teaching as a predominantly female-dominated career [7, 8] which serves as a significant barrier to the recruitment and retention of males in this field [9].

Research demonstrates that young children can benefit from exposure to diverse role models and perspectives, allowing them to develop a broader understanding of gender roles and expectations, ultimately fostering more inclusive

and equal societies [7, 8]. The underrepresentation of males in infants' development perpetuates gender stereotypes, isolation, and biases [10], reinforcing the notion that caregiving and nurturing roles are primarily the domain of women while men are discouraged to pursue careers in early childhood education, resulting in a gender imbalance. This gender imbalance restricts professional opportunities for men and limits the potential for all individuals to pursue their passions and interests without societal expectations. Plaisir et al. [9] highlighted that it is essential and important to involve male preservice teachers to inspire career commitment and passion for early childhood education. The absence of males in this field prevents the establishment of positive relationships with children, parents, and other teachers, dissuading them from pursuing careers in this field and limiting the diversity of teaching strategies, perspectives, and experiences [10].

Addressing the barriers faced by males in this field has broader implications for gender equality in society. Extensive research has found that males in this area are undervalued

due to traditional bias and highlights their critical role as role models, especially for infants [5, 11]. Male preservice teachers consistently encounter challenges and limited opportunities in a female-dominated career, hindering the facilitation of infants' development. Thus, this study determined to explore the perspectives and experiences of male preservice teachers throughout their professional study in early childhood education, shedding light on how their perspectives are shaped or evolve over time. Ultimately, this study can promote diversity, challenge gender stereotypes, enhance the quality of care and education for young children, and contribute to broader efforts for gender quality in early childhood education.

2. Literature Review

Currently, research has extensively emphasized the pivotal role of males in young children's development [8, 12–14], particularly boys [2, 15]. Studies by Lyons et al. [16] and Cushman [15] have shown that the absence of male teachers has been linked to lower academic achievement and behavioral issues among boys in school. Furthermore, male representation in early childhood education has been found to provide essential male role models for young boys [17, 18] because they can establish stronger relationships with boys and emphasize the importance of having both male and female teachers to allow young children to interact with adults from diverse gender backgrounds [15], and boys were more likely to seek support from male teachers [19].

However, there are concerns raised by Spilt et al. [20] and Matsvange et al. [18] regarding the potential oversight of policymakers who might focus solely on recruiting male teachers to address boys' issues, potentially overlooking other benefits. Prior to entering the field of early childhood education, males are still having concerns that can influence their decision-making process.

Males show limited interest in working with young children, particularly during infancy, which is considered as a critical period where children require more care from adults than a formal education. Research by Jung [10] emphasized the distinct nature of preschool settings, especially infant classrooms where teachers are required to support infants directly by being involved in their social/emotional actions and by building close relationships with children ages 0 to 5. During the infancy period, although fathers serve as important male role models at home and especially for boys, their involvement is often hindered by work responsibilities, limiting opportunities for infants to interact with males [3, 21].

Recognizing this, educators and researchers argue in favor of male teachers in early childhood education, emphasizing the positive connections they can establish with young children [22]. The growing recognition of the value of male teachers has led to an increasing efforts to encourage their participation in early childhood education, with educators highlighting the need for more males in early daycare programs [5, 7]. This sentiment is echoed in a study conducted by Lyons et al. [16], which involved university students, preschool employees, and parents who all expressed the desire for

increased opportunities for males in early childhood settings [18].

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of recruiting and retaining males in early childhood education, male preservice teachers are still facing various challenges when determining their future career paths [23]. Deng et al. [24] found that males were hesitant to pursue jobs in female-dominated fields due to concerns about assumptions being made regarding their sexual identity. In an earlier study in 2010, Friedman [25] shared his experience as a male preschool teacher working with infants and toddlers. He encountered inquiries about his choice to work with infants and toddlers, reflecting societal biases that perceive such roles as abnormal for males. These biases have a negative impact on the perception of male teachers, particularly when it comes to careers involving infants.

Furthermore, the lack of same-sex mentors or peers in early childhood education programs further complicates the experiences of male students [9]. Attracting more males to teaching positions in early childhood education necessitates strategies that address and reshape their perceptions. Educators have developed useful strategies to address the barriers identified by Cushman [15].

According to previous research, low initial salaries are believed to hinder the attraction of male teachers [12, 26]. Research has revealed that countries with competitive salaries for teachers face fewer barriers, while lower wages are associated with poorer teaching quality. Thornton and Bricheno [27] demonstrated that increasing teachers' salaries made the profession more attractive. Therefore, improving the salary level for early childhood education can be considered as one of the effective strategies to recruiting and retaining males in the field.

A study by Jones and Aubrey [12] revealed that males often perceive working with young children as a female-dominated occupation, which deters them from considering it as a career choice [6]. Highlighting the significance of mentorship in early childhood education, Jung [10] emphasized that male preservice teachers can gain a better and deeper understanding of the field when guided by male mentors who offer practical advice and share strategies from a unique gender perspective during their internship. Chen [28] and Jing [29] both identified a gender imbalance within existing training programs due to the predominantly female student and faculty population. They suggested the implementation of specialized training programs tailored for male preservice teachers in early childhood education to address this issue.

Considering society's perspectives on male's involvement in early childhood education, it is crucial to address the rarity of male representation [12]. The widespread belief that working with young children, particularly infants, is a female occupation persists globally [3, 24, 30]. The study by Plaisir et al. [9] highlighted the negative image still associated with males in this field. Moreover, a recent study by Li et al. [31] explored burnout among preschool teachers in China, revealing that the lack of social support and administrative

TABLE 1: Participants' details.

Teachers (pseudonyms)	Age (years)	Gender	Education	Nationality	English level	Setting	Working hours
C	21	M	Senior	China	CET-4	Infant rooms	Part time
H	22	M	Senior	China	N	Infant rooms	Part time

C, Chen; H, Han; M, male; CET-4, college english level-4; N, none.

bureaucracy affected their perspectives on working in early childhood education.

Previous research emphasizes the crucial role of male teachers in early childhood education and the importance of their career choices in this field [12]. However, most studies have primarily focused on primary-level education, neglecting the role of male preservice teachers in early childhood education, particularly in the context of infancy [19], especially in China [11]. To address these gaps, this study aims to examine male teachers' perspectives on their professional study and internships in early childhood education, specifically focusing on their experiences in infant classrooms. By raising awareness of the need for more male representation in this field, the study will address the concerns and challenges faced by male preservice teachers during their professional study and internship periods through the following two research questions.

3. Research Questions

The following two main research questions guided this study:

- (1) What concerns do males have prior to entering the field of early childhood education?
- (2) What are the challenges/barriers for male preservice teachers in early childhood education during their professional study period?

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was informed by critical theory [32], which provides a framework to explore males' perspectives and experiences in early childhood education from cultural, political, educational, and economic dimensions. The use of critical theory offers opportunities to doubt the conventional concepts and guided this research to explore the influence of commonly accepted traditions, culture beliefs, and societal norms that affect males' experiences and perspectives in early childhood education.

Gender discrimination in education is a well-known issue, and it also resonates in early childhood education where the role of males has sparked inquiries worldwide. The vast majority of the research emphasized the need to recruit and retain more males in early childhood education. Nevertheless, cultural challenges persist as working with young children is often perceived as a female-dominated profession, despite efforts by policymakers to promote male involvement. Culturally, it is challenging for males to be involved in early childhood education if they continue to be a minority in the field. This study is an attempt to unravel

some of the possible hidden issues that may influence males' engagement in early childhood education.

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative [33] approach to do an in-depth exploration by examining the evolution of two male teachers' perspectives regarding working with infants changed throughout their 4-year professional studies at the university. This allows for a rich and detailed exploration of the specific context of working with infants in this field and provides a comprehensive understanding of potential challenges and barriers that males met and are still meeting. It is believed that using this qualitative research method can help to examine the issue more extensively and gain a deeper understanding [33–36]. Thus, despite the small number of participants, this study has the potential to generate valuable insights, contribute to the existing literature, and inform future practices and policies in the field of early childhood education.

5.1. Setting and Participants. To identify a specific setting suitable for this study, a “purposeful sampling” approach was adopted [35, 37]. A kindergarten that offers daycare services, actively recruits male teachers, and accepts male preservice teachers was purposely selected. As part of their early childhood education major, students were provided with a 6-month internship opportunity at this setting prior to their graduation. This particular kindergarten had established strong connections with universities, governments, and the local community, making coteaching a highly innovative approach for both preservice and head teachers in the kindergarten classrooms [38].

For this qualitative study, the focus was on exploring the perspectives and experiences of male preservice teachers working with infants in China. Limited research sources make it challenging to recruit a large number of participants, and this study hired qualitative research method and decided to use in-depth interviews, emphasizes depth rather than breadth when it comes to participation selection period. By looking deeply into the experiences and perspectives of a smaller size, it is also possible to gain meaningful insights and a rich understanding of their unique working circumstances regarding young children, especially infants. Consequently, two male preservice teachers in infant rooms, C and H (pseudonyms), were purposely selected from the aforementioned kindergarten (see Table 1). They were assigned to different infant classrooms, resulting in diverse professional experiences and perspectives. The study involved conducting three interviews with each participant to gather insights into their experiences and perspectives on working

TABLE 2: Information of data findings.

P	T			
	Reflection journal	Interview I (The beginning of their professional study)	Interview II (During their internship)	Interview III (After their professional study)
C	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
H	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

T, type of data; P, participant; C, Chen; H, Han.

with infants in early childhood education within Huangshi City of Hubei Province in China.

5.2. Data Sources. For data collection in this study, a combination of in-depth interviews and document analysis was utilized. Each participant was interviewed a total of three times at different stages: the beginning of their professional studies, during their internship period, and after the completion of their professional studies in the early childhood education program. Prior to the interviews, a meeting was held to introduce the purpose and significance of research to two participants. During the meeting, it was communicated that the interviews would be conducted in Chinese. In this research study, both researcher and participants were Chinese, the research decided to utilize Chinese as the language for interviews so that it can build a good connection between researcher and participants by establishing a familiar and comfortable environment for participants to express their real feelings fluently.

Participants who would like to contribute to the research were required to fill and sign consent forms. The interview dates were then individually determined through email correspondence. All interviews were semistructured, audio-taped, and all participants' names were anonymous. Pseudonyms were assigned to respect and protect the privacy of participants, ensuring a secure and comfortable platform to share their genuine thoughts and feelings during the interviews and in their reflection journals. Subsequently, the lead investigator transcribed all interview recordings into Microsoft Word documents. Since we used Chinese in data collection process, it can ensure that the data analysis and interpretation were based on the participants' actual words and meaning. Whenever the lead investigator met some confusing issues, effective communications were easily conducted. All transcribing data were securely stored all data in a protected folder with password protection.

5.3. Data Analysis. To ensure the validity of data and accuracy of interpretations, this study employed a rigorous approach that incorporated recommended techniques such as inductive analysis, triangulation, member checking, and external audit, as suggested by Creswell [39]. During the analysis phase, particular attention was given to understanding the unique barriers and challenges perceived by each male infant teacher during their internships in an infant classroom. The following outlines the process of data analysis:

(1) The first phase.

At the beginning of data analysis process, interview data and document data were organized into separate folders

based on the name of participants and the dates of the interviews. For instance, a folder named "C interview 20210910" means that participant C was interviewed on September 10, 2021 (with "C" being a pseudonym). The organization of the folders facilitated efficient data management throughout the analysis. Despite being a time-consuming task, the main investigator transcribed all the interviews diligently and independently, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.

(2) The second phase.

Throughout the second phase of data analysis process, we read and re-read all the interview transcripts and participants' journals thoroughly. The journals presented the participants' reflections of their experiences during their internship, offering valuable insights. Our attention was directed toward identifying the challenges and barriers encountered by the two male participants, along with understanding how these experiences influenced their perceptions of working with young children in early childhood education. We took careful notes and typed all potential emerging themes into a Microsoft Word document.

(3) The third phase.

After the previous two phases, we attempted to identify common or recurring emerging themes across all files. Drawing inspiration from Merriam [40], we used "cross-case" analysis to check where there were similar themes. Through meticulous scrutiny of the data, we compiled a list of emerging themes and supported each theme with evidence extracted from the data sources. Table 2 presents all the data that were collected.

The findings of the current research were extracted from interviews and documents, shedding lights on the challenges or barriers the participants encountered by the participants and illuminating the evolution of their perspectives regarding working in infant classroom changed throughout their internship (see Table 2). Drawing upon their interview statements and journal reflections, the research questions were examined through three key themes: (a) males' concerns at the beginning of their professional studies, (b) challenges faced by male students while working with young children during their internship, and (c) the perspectives of male students on working in early childhood education upon completion of their professional studies (see Table 3).

These emerging key themes reflected two participants' unique perspectives in three stages of their individual experiences in infant rooms as well as their reflections regarding their working in a female-dominated environment. Collectively,

TABLE 3: Emerging themes.

No.	Emerging themes
1	Males' concerns at the beginning of their professional studies (i) Concerns from parents (ii) Concerns regarding future career
2	Challenges faced by male students while working with young children during their internship (i) The irreplaceable period—infancy (ii) Designing activities for infants (iii) Female-dominated work environment
3	The perspectives of male students on working in early childhood education upon completion of their professional studies (i) Working in an infant classroom (ii) The significance of mentorship in internships

the findings of this qualitative study provided a detailed description of how male preservice teachers' perspectives toward working in kindergarten settings are shaped and transformed throughout their 4-year professional studies.

5.3.1. Males' Concerns at the Beginning of Their Professional Studies. Participants C and H, two male students enrolled in an early childhood education program at a university in China, were selected as participants for this study. During the initial semistructured interview conducted at the beginning of their professional studies, both participants expressed concerns regarding their limited experience in working with young children, particularly infants. They revealed that they chose this major based on strong recommendations from their parents, relatives, and friends.

(1) *Participant C.* Participant C, a male intern scheduled to graduate in 2023, was assigned to an infant classroom as part of his early childhood education program. When queried about his motivation for choosing early childhood education as his major, C responded and shared his concerns:

“At first, I wanted to choose other majors to study. But some of my friends told me that males in early childhood education could be a really good job right now and in the future in China, and it is easy to find a job in some kindergartens because they need more males in this area. I did not know this area at all, and I did not have many experiences with young children, so I was really nervous before I decided to enter this area.”

“Later, my parents became aware of the growing significance of early childhood education in China. Despite my limited knowledge and the accompanying anxiety, I decided to pursue this major. However, upon reviewing the core courses, I discovered that there were dance and music classes, which raised concerns about my ability to adapt to this major. Because, you know, dance and music, to me, they are not really my area of interest or strength.”

“I do have a lot of experiences with young children. I have a younger sister and I always played

with her, but I really did not have enough skills to help them grow or study. So I really felt worried about my studies in this program and always felt lost at the very beginning of the first whole semester.”

Furthermore, when questioned about his experiences and perspectives regarding his studies at the very beginning of the program, he expressed that the professional courses posed challenges and seemed to lack a focus on catering to male students.

“I (Participant C) think the courses in this major (early childhood education) were not designed appropriately, because they did not really consider males in the class. For example, there were dance classes and music classes, and teachers were all females, and I knew that they didn't have an early childhood education background. They only knew how to teach us to move and singing skills, nothing about how we can use what we learned in the class to teach young children. I always felt it was difficult to learn. Sometimes I really wanted to find an excuse to not have the class. I always felt lost and challenged all the time.”

(2) *Participant H.* H, the other male participant, has worked in infant classrooms for nearly 3 years. When asked about the reason behind his choice to pursue early childhood education as his major, he also expressed his negative sentiments. Participant H commented:

“I did not know anything about this area, but my uncle works in a university. He told me to choose early childhood education as my major because he found that there were so many universities and colleges that had opened and would like to open this program soon.”

“He thought it would be a good future for me, therefore, he persuaded me to choose this major. But my parents and I all felt lost and worried because they did not know how males can work

in a kindergarten, you know, with lots of females in there. It was kind of hard for me and my family to decide.”

When asked about his experiences and perspectives at the beginning of his professional studies, he responded:

“I felt challenged and embarrassed at first because courses sometimes need us to pretend that we are teaching young children in the class, so I always felt challenged. Also, we also have painting and art courses that I was not good at. It was hard for me at first.”

In sum, their experiences and feelings regarding the early childhood education indicated that they had concerns and both felt worried because they did not know this area at all. Moreover, they had low confidence when they entered the program because they felt that the courses were challenging for them.

5.3.2. Challenges Faced by Male Students While Working with Young Children during Their Internship. As reflected in participant C’s interview statements, he did not have confidence working in an infant classroom since his professional studies only provided him knowledge of caring for infants without providing him an opportunity to practice. He indicated:

“You know, it is really hard for me to believe that I was assigned to an infant classroom, and they were all under 3 years old. We did have a course that was about how infants and toddlers grow. I can remember what I read through the book, but I did not have a chance to practice so that I can know if I did it correctly.”

Participant H also found that it was difficult and stressful for him during his internship because there was no one who could really lead him in the classroom.

“It was so awkward when I first entered the classroom because I didn’t even really know what to do for young children under 3 years old. I remembered that there was one little baby who kept crying, and I was like trying to do something, but did not know how to hold her, how to comfort her, so I waited for the head teacher and watched. It was really difficult.”

In addition, as reflected in participant C’s daily journal, he wrote:

“I played with young children before, however, not within this age group, under 3 years old. They were wearing diapers, and I did not know how to deal with this situation. It was really stressful at the very beginning of my internship. I could not forget this first day.”

According to their experiences and perspectives, it is reasonable to assume that they had challenging and stressful

moments during their internship. As reflected in their statements, the female head teachers in the infant classroom also had concerns about their role as a male, revealing that there existed potential challenges for males in an infant classroom.

(1) The irreplaceable period—infancy.

As reflected in both participants’ experiences and perspectives, they all agreed that infancy is irreplaceable and unique from any other grade-level children because infants’ behaviors can change rapidly, and sometimes they cry for reasons that may not be obvious.

“I think infants are really different, you know, irreplaceable because they expressed themselves with body languages that I could not understand if I did not observe and know this infant.” (Participant C)

“I felt that the infants were unique, they needed more attention from our adults because they were not able to talk very much, and sometimes they just cried for a long while and I felt embarrassed and upset, so I did not want the head teacher to think that I did nothing right. It is just different from what I learned through the courses.” (Participant H)

Moreover, participant C shared his experiences of working with infants during his internship.

“Infants were all different, like their schedules, needs, characters, and family backgrounds that we needed to be aware of and treat them different. Everyone has something different to deal with. It is hard for me to observe all the time and get all their individual needs. There was a baby boy who really needed help and cried. I stood there and had no clue. The head teacher came to me and told me to hold him up and walk around. It worked. It surprised me, even though I knew that it was because the head teacher really knew this infant well. I decided to learn how to observe and know them better.”

(2) Designing activities for infants.

When asked about the problems that they encountered during their internship, both of the participants shared their challenging tasks and stressful moments regarding designing activities for the infants.

“I learned through courses in the university, and they were all about how to teach young children from 3-years-old to 6-years-old, so that infant class was really challenging for me. I did not even know how to deal with them. Designing activities I kind of lost my mind. I didn’t know

what kind of materials were fit for them. It was really hard.” (Participant C)

“I was like an observer when I first entered the infant classroom because I really know nothing about designing activities for infants. The skill that I learned and practiced in university was designing curriculum for children above 3-years-old. The head teacher told me to write a plan for infants. I had so many questions to ask but she just told me to check online. I felt frustrated.” (Participant H)

Additionally, as shared in participant H’s daily journal, it was especially stressful when he heard that he needed to design activities for infants and implement them in the classroom.

“I felt so stressed that the head teacher told me to design activities for the class and use them in the class. The head teacher did not really help me at all, and I did not have a chance to really observe how the head teacher designed and used them. This was the moment that I felt stressed and want to leave as soon as possible. I think I did not belong there.”

(3) Female-dominated work environment.

Most employees in this kindergarten were female. There were two male teachers in toddler classrooms, and it was obvious that participants C and H were the only two males in the infant classroom. In participant C’s interview II, he shared his experiences of being in a female-dominated work environment and his perspectives of assisting with the needs of this age group.

“There were six baby girls in my classroom, and three of them needed teachers to change diapers for them. The other three baby girls could go to the bathroom, so it was kind of awkward for me if I followed the girls to the bathroom. Female teachers do not need to worry about this. It is easy for them.”

In participant C’s journal, he wrote:

“I always felt embarrassed during my internship when female teachers treated me as a male, not an infant teacher. Whenever the baby girl needs to get a change (diaper), female teachers would come and change for them. I feel awkward to stay there and watch, so I left. Even now we are told about the ‘gender neutrality,’ we (males infant teachers) are still facing the unequal treatment due to the influence of gender stereotypes. My parents are now still feeling too embarrassed to mention my job with relatives and their friends. These all made me feel hard to continue sometimes.”

As illustrated in participant H’s reflection journal, he also felt embarrassed when the young girls needed to remove articles of clothing.

“It was really hard when they took a nap and they needed to take off their clothes and put on clothes when they woke up. Also, sometimes they needed a diaper change. I did not have any experiences with this. I think the female teachers were more comfortable doing this work, so I always tried to go away and let head teacher deal with it.”

Based on the interview statements from participant H, it was further evident that the absence of male professions in the settings, who could serve as mentors for male preservice teachers, can contribute to their negative attitude toward working with young children. Participant H said:

“It is a challenging task for me to find a real mentor because head teachers are all female. There are certain matters that I feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. discussing with them, and I suspect they might feel the same way. In situations where a baby girl needs to be changed, I often find myself overlooked and not considered as someone who can provide help.”

5.3.3. Perspectives of Male Students on Working in Early Childhood Education upon Completion of Their Professional Studies. Prior to their coursework and internship, both participants considered infancy as a unique period and worried about their situation in an infant classroom due to their lack of prior knowledge and experience. However, though they met challenges, their perspectives were shaped and changed after their intern experiences and 4 years of professional studies at the university.

(1) Working in an infant classroom.

As reflected in participant C’s statements, his perspectives toward infancy had changed a considerable amount. At the very beginning of his internship, he was concerned about working in an infant classroom. Even though he had learned some basic knowledge about infancy through his courses, he did not have the practical experience to enter the infant classroom with confidence in his skills to facilitate and nurture infant growth. After he had completed his internship, participant C said in Interview III:

“After three weeks, I found it was really easy to be with infants if you know them well by observing. I took time to observe them and wrote down details for individuals. So I got to know everyone in the first two weeks. Then, whenever I was in the classroom, I did not feel anxious. I realized that the best way was attracting their attention in the activity, and they were really smart. I think they know more things than we assume.

This kind of experience really changed my views of infants.”

In participant H’s Interview III, he compared what he had learned in his studies with what he was experiencing in the infant classroom. Prior to his internship, his preference was to work with toddlers. However, after his internship in the infant classroom, participant H found that his confidence working with infants had grown considerably. In his journal, participant H wrote:

“It was really a wonderful and special journey throughout my four years of professional studies. I never thought that I was good at teaching infants before this experience, but now, I found that teaching infants was similar to what I learned in courses. I realized that there were formal and informal activities plans for infants in one day. If I really know their (infants) interests, I can attract their attention successfully. I am very good at observing. I began to know each of them during the first two weeks. After this, I felt confident being with them all day.”

(2) The significance of mentorship in internships.

Due to their lack of knowledge and practical experiences in the development in infancy, mentorship was viewed as a crucial component of the participants’ internship. In their interviews and reflection journals, both participants C and H emphasized the significant role that mentorship played in their internship.

“There are lots of teacher meetings in a week. So sometimes I needed to take care of the whole class by myself when other teachers were in a meeting. It was really hard for me, especially when I had just begun my internship there. I always felt stressed when I needed to deal with everything by myself.” (Participant C’s interview statement)

“Today, the head teacher Lin was still at home due to the COVID-19 issue. Until now, I have not had enough opportunities to learn from Lin. Directors of this kindergarten sometimes came to our classroom and helped, but they were not “experts” in our class, cause they (directors) needed to take care of the whole kindergarten. When they were here, I felt anxious because I did not have much confidence in my interactions with infants.” (Participant H’s interview statement)

As stated in the participants’ reflection journal, the head teachers helped during their internship, and they would seek guidance from them whenever they had questions.

“After one month’s observation, we needed to design an activity and practice it in the classroom. I have experiences with writing curriculum plans for toddlers, but for infants, I really had no practical experience. I tried to find activities online, but I had no clue, so I went to our head teacher and asked for help. She provided me materials so that I could learn from her actual teaching experiences. Whenever I had questions, I went to her. With her help, I finished my first activity with infants early (in my internship).” (Participant H’s reflection journal)

Participants C and H’s perspectives working in an infant classroom changed considerably after the completion of their internship. Both participants found that they had gained a great deal from their experience working with infants. When asked about which grade level they would prefer to teach in the future, their responses in interview statements indirectly revealed that they felt more comfortable working with infants after their internship.

“Before this internship, I always felt lost and anxious about what I will do after my four years of professional studies. This experience provided me a chance to know what I could be capable of. Therefore, whenever they ask me about my job, I could say that I have skills working with infants. This experience really shaped my views of infants’ growth and my role.” (Participant C)

“I think it is really useful if we have mentors to lead us. Through my internship, I really gained a lot of knowledge that I never learned from books, you know. (In my courses,) I learned how to observe and assess young children, but not specific for infants. But in this experience, I kind of got a chance to know how to take observation notes and reflect on them, assess young children, I mean, infants’ behaviors, then, I could know them well. This is the most important tool before I design a suitable activity for infants. It is good for my work with infants, also good for my future career.” (Participant H)

In conclusion, their statements and reflections emphasized the importance of having a well-designed preparation program and a good mentorship for all preservice teachers who would like to devote their efforts to teaching in an infant classroom, especially males.

6. Discussion

A considerable amount of studies have consistently highlighted the significance of male presence and involvement in early childhood education, echoing the equal role played by females in this field [4–5, 14]. While much of the research has focused on the role of male teachers in primary education, it has also

shed light on the specific challenges and barriers faced by male teachers in early childhood education settings, such as low salaries and a female-dominated work environment [9]. Surprisingly, the vital role that male teachers play in infant classrooms has received limited attention in existing literature.

Findings in this study align with previous research [11, 5] that underscore the significant contributions of males in early childhood education. These previous studies have indicated the challenges experienced by male teachers, which can impede their recruitment and retention compared to their female counterparts. Our current study not only confirms these patterns but also presents additional evidence highlighting the crucial role of males in an infant classroom and the potential challenges that males may encounter. It is important to note that while male teachers face barriers in their early childhood experiences, the choices made by individual learners can also have a profound impact on their career paths [23]. By addressing the challenges and fostering a supportive environment, we can work toward encouraging more males to actively participate in the early childhood education field [19].

Framed by critical theory [32], the present study explored how males' experiences and perspectives of early childhood education changed, especially during their internship in an infant classroom. Neither participant had any professional experience working with infants at the very beginning of their internship nor was anxious about teaching children of such a young age. Their lack of knowledge and skills in this domain resulted in low confidence when it came to handling potential challenges [3]. Additionally, the participants noted that their friends mocked their internship when they were asked to share their concerns. This reaction from their social circle reflects societal perspectives that cast a negative light on males choosing a career path in early childhood education [11]. Moreover, both Chen and Han expressed their anxiousness before receiving guidance from their mentors in the infant classroom. Although there were challenging moments at the very beginning of their professional studies, they gained confidence through their practical experience in their internship.

Through "cross-case analysis," this study revealed that the participants were aware of the significance of infants' development and exhibited respect for this period. By the completion of their program and internship in infant classrooms, both Chen and Han felt comfortable teaching and interacting with infants. With this new consciousness and confidence in their skills working with infants, they began to rethink their future career. Their perspectives on working with such young children would not have shifted without the internship experience.

7. Conclusion

Evidence from this study indicates that mentorship is vital. It is evident that learning from a mentor can have a profound impact on preservice teachers, particularly when interns enter with limited knowledge and skills. Despite feeling that the internship lacked a targeted training program for

their specific needs, both male interns acknowledged substantial benefits from their experience. Therefore, to attract and retain male preservice early childhood teachers, it is crucial for universities to prioritize the development of a well-designed preparation program in early childhood education that appeals to prospective teachers of all genders [19].

7.1. The Future Direction of This Research. Moving forward, this research just hired a small sample size of two males, thus, further investigation is needed to deeply explore the perspectives and experiences of females who work with males in early childhood education. This could provide opportunities to gain richer data with diverse samples to understand this topic. Additionally, research should develop useful strategies to attract and retain more males in this field instead of just addressing issues.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Additional Points

Limitations of the Study. The study utilized a "purposeful sampling method" [36] to select participants and the setting. It was limited to one location, and the findings in this specific setting may not apply to other settings. With a small sample size of two participants, valuable in-depth information was gathered. Although it did not fully address the impact of gender on males in early childhood education settings, future research should focus on attracting males to the field and exploring support strategies. Despite its limitations, the study provides insights into how early childhood programs can shape one male's perspective.

Ethical Approval

That Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for the use of human subjects was granted prior to conduct of the research and guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors do not have any interests that might be interpreted as influencing the research.

Acknowledgments

The authors (Dr. Yanhui Liu and Xuecheng Zou) will pay the fee of the journal. This research project was approved by the Hubei Normal University in 2021 which was "A study on the challenges and countermeasures of career development for male preschool teachers."

References

- [1] N. Bryan and T. M. Williams, "We need more than just male bodies in classrooms: recruiting and retaining culturally

- relevant black male teachers in early childhood education," *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 209–222, 2017.
- [2] T. Besnard and M.-J. Letarte, "Effect of male and female early childhood education teacher's educational practices on children's social adaptation," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 453–464, 2017.
 - [3] S. Moosa and D. Bhana, "Men who teach early childhood education: mediating masculinity, authority and sexuality," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 122, Article ID 103959, 2023.
 - [4] Y. Xu and M. Waniganayake, "An exploratory study of gender and male teachers in early childhood education and care centres in China," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 518–534, 2018.
 - [5] J. Warin, "Fathers and Male Preschool Workers," in *Men in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education, pp. 59–78, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018.
 - [6] P. Cushman, "Male primary school teachers: helping or hindering a move to gender equity?" *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 1211–1218, 2010.
 - [7] R. G. de Sousa, *Men Who Care: A Review of Studies on Male Practitioners in Early Childhood Education and Care*, SDU, 2021.
 - [8] S. Al Baqi, "How teacher's gender influence student's gender identity in early childhood," *Jurnal Pendidikan Usia Dini*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 108–119, 2023.
 - [9] J. Y. Plaisir, T. Thordardottir, and Y. Xu, "Societal factors impacting male turnover in ECEC," in *Exploring Career Trajectories of Men in the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce*, pp. 98–110, Routledge, 2020.
 - [10] J. Jung, "Finding a culture of collegiality and mentorship as a support system for male preschool teachers," *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 147–165, 2012.
 - [11] Y. Yang and D. E. McNair, "Chinese male early childhood education teachers' perceptions of their roles and professional development," *Gender and Education*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 468–482, 2021.
 - [12] C. E. Jones and C. Aubrey, "I mean, why wouldn't men be involved?" The life histories of six male practitioners working within early childhood education and care in England," *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 279–293, 2019.
 - [13] P. Tadi and A. Sadeghi, "Teachers' perceptions of fathers' participation in early childhood education in New Zealand," *Early Education*, vol. 67, pp. 15–23, 2021.
 - [14] U. G. Wohlgemuth, "Why do men choose to become pedagogues? A profession continuously in pursuit of male colleagues," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 392–404, 2015.
 - [15] P. Cushman, "The male teacher shortage: a synthesis of research and worldwide strategies for addressing the shortage," *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007.
 - [16] M. Lyons, A. Quinn, and J. Sumsion, "Gender, the labour market, the workplace and policy in children's services: parent, staff and student attitudes," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 6–13, 2005.
 - [17] K. Cao and X. Wu, "Current situations, reasons, and corresponding solutions on the lack of prospective male kindergarten teachers," *Xinkecheng*, vol. 7, [In Chinese], Article ID 434, 2016.
 - [18] M. Matsvange, C. Mudimba, and M. C. S. Sithole, "Parental perceptions of male early childhood development teachers in Khambi District, Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa*, vol. 5, Article ID 19, 2020.
 - [19] D. J. Cabugsa, J. M. Torres, L. S. Galicia, A. C. Devanadera, and E. O. Alieto, "Men in a women's world: motivations and perceptions on the teaching profession of male early childhood pre-service teachers," in *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference of the Asia Association of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (AsiaCALL 2022)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, pp. 305–335, Atlantis Press, 28 April 2023.
 - [20] J. L. Spilt, H. M. Koomen, J. T. Thijs, and A. Van der Leij, "Supporting teachers' relationships with disruptive children: the potential of relationship-focused reflection," *Attachment & Human Development*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 305–318, 2012.
 - [21] M. E. Lamb, "How do fathers influence children's development? Let me count the ways," in *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, M. E. Lamb, Ed., pp. 1–26, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010.
 - [22] K. Thorpe, V. Sullivan, E. Jansen, P. McDonald, J. Sumsion, and S. Irvine, "A man in the centre: inclusion and contribution of male educators in early childhood education and care teaching teams," *Early Child Development and Care*, vol. 190, no. 6, pp. 921–934, 2020.
 - [23] M. Saha, "Language learner beliefs: EFL and ESL contexts," *The Asian EFL Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 79–103, 2021.
 - [24] X. Deng, Y. Tang, L. Wang, and F. Zhou, "Gender stereotypes of male preschool teachers: taking the investigation of changsha international kindergarten as an example," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 8, pp. 541–548, 2023.
 - [25] S. Friedman, "Male voices in early childhood education: and what they have to say about . . ." *Young Children*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 41–45, 2010.
 - [26] R. Sak, "Comparison of self-efficacy between male and female pre-service early childhood teachers," *Early Child Development and Care*, vol. 185, no. 10, pp. 1629–1640, 2015.
 - [27] M. E. Thornton and P. Brichenon, *Missing Men in Education*, Trentham Books, 2006.
 - [28] Y. Chen, "The causes and countermeasures of male teachers' shortage in Kindergartens-based on Zaozhang District," *Journal of Zaozhang University*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 121–124, [In Chinese], 2015.
 - [29] S. Jing, "The lack current situation and influence of male kindergarten teachers in China: from the perspective of infants' sex degree development," *Modern Education Science*, vol. 11, pp. 117–122, [In Chinese], 2016.
 - [30] T. Rohrmann, "More men wanted!," CHILD Links, 2023.
 - [31] S. Li, Y. Li, H. Lv et al., "The prevalence and correlates of burnout among Chinese preschool teachers," *BMC Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 1, Article ID 160, 2020.
 - [32] M. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, CRC Press, 2019.
 - [33] R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, Inc., 2017.
 - [34] Y. Liu and E. Geist, "Learning through dramatic play in infancy: a case study in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center," *Academia Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 7, no. 9, pp. 286–294, 2019.
 - [35] M. R. Roller and P. J. Lavrakas, *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*, Guilford Press, 2015.
 - [36] M. Saha, "English teachers' attitudes towards learners: effects on the rural pedagogies in Bangladesh," *Ampersand*, vol. 10, Article ID 100107, 2023.

- [37] K. Ramage, A. Ducey, N. V. Scime, E. Knox, and E. A. Brennand, "Factors affecting women's decision between uterine-preserving versus hysterectomy-based surgery for pelvic organ prolapse," *Women's Health*, vol. 19, 2023.
- [38] J. Henning, J. Falco, C. Grabowski, and N. Esposito, "The mentor academy: building capacity for clinically-based teacher preparation," *PDS Partners*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 10–14, 2019.
- [39] J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2007.
- [40] S. B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA, Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research in Education, 2nd edition, 1998.
- [41] K. Brooking, "Board of trustees' selection practices of primary school principals in New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 27–31, 2004.