Navigating a Feminized Space: Experiences and Identity-Negotiation Strategies of Male Kindergarten Teachers in Ashanti Region, Ghana

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how male kindergarten teachers in Ghana's Ashanti Region experience and negotiate identity in a predominantly female early childhood education (ECE) context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven male kindergarten teachers and four headteachers from schools in Atwima Mponua District and Asante Mampong Municipality, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings show male teachers are frequently perceived as "out of place" and subject to cultural stereotypes that label caregiving as un-manly, producing parental mistrust, limited peer emotional support, role concealment, heavier workloads, and constrained career progression. Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated professional commitment and used identity-work strategies such as professional pride, transparent communication, trust-building caregiving, collaboration with school authorities, and pursuit of further qualifications to counter prejudice and cultivate acceptance. The study highlights how socio-cultural norms both constrain and motivate male teachers' career trajectories, fostering resilience and opportunities for more gender-balanced ECE practice. Recommendations call on policymakers, headteachers, and teacher educators to amplify positive narratives about male kindergarten teachers (through media, community engagement, and school practices), implement mentorship and fair task allocation, and create incentives to recruit and retain men in ECE.

Keywords: Cultural stereotypes, Emotional resilience, Gender dynamics, Male kindergarten teachers, Parental mistrust

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1. 0 Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) establishes children's cognitive, social, and emotional foundations for later schooling (Lemaire et al., 2013). The sector's quality therefore depends not only on curriculum and resources but on the workforce whose pedagogical practice and relational work support children's transitions to formal schooling (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2011; Moosa & Bhana, 2020). Yet ECE remains a highly feminised professional space: men are markedly underrepresented in early years teaching globally (Dogutas, 2021; European Commission, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2020), with studies reporting male proportions as low as 1% in some countries and single-digit figures across many regions (Zhang, 2017; Mofokeng, 2024; Ossai & Ramsaroo, 2022).

This gendered composition is sustained by structural and socio-cultural factors. Low remuneration, the framing of childcare as women's work, institutional hiring hesitancy, and public suspicion of men's interactions with young children combine to hinder recruitment and retention of male ECE staff (McHale, 2023; Moosa & Bhana, 2020; Warin, 2018). Where men do work in early childhood settings, they may offer benefits such as alternative male role models and diversified pedagogies (Cruickshank, 2019; Sahin et al., 2018; Zhang, 2017), yet they also encounter intensified scrutiny, constrained role expectations, and stigmatizing narratives that complicate everyday practice and professional identity (Rentzou, 2011; McHale, 2023).

These tensions position male kindergarten teachers as active negotiators of identity within a feminised occupational field. However, existing literature has primarily described underrepresentation, recruitment barriers, and stakeholder attitudes, leaving comparatively limited empirical attention to the lived experiences and identity-negotiation strategies of men already teaching in early childhood settings. This lacuna is pronounced in Ghana despite the institutionalisation of two years of compulsory kindergarten after the 2007 reforms (Kekesi et al., 2019). Ghanaian studies have explored perceptions of male participation (Laryea et al., 2020), stereotypes, and professional identity formation (Abroampa et al., 2025; Cobbinah & Yamoah, 2025), but little is known about how male kindergarten teachers practically navigate parental mistrust, collegial expectations, and culturally embedded notions of masculinity and caregiving in their day-to-day work.

Responding to this gap, this study examines the experiences and identity-negotiation strategies of male kindergarten teachers in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. It asks how these teachers navigate gendered expectations and professional challenges, and what strategies they deploy to build trust and establish professional legitimacy within a feminised teaching space. By foregrounding practitioners' voices and situating findings in Ghana's socio-educational context, the study contributes empirical depth to debates on gender, identity, and professionalism in early childhood education and offers practical implications for workforce support and inclusive policy.

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Research Questions.

1. What are the Perceptions of the role and experience of males in a female-dominated profession in kindergartens in the Ashanti Region?
2. What strategies Male Teachers in Early Childhood Settings employ to Negotiate Biases, Stereotypes?

2.1 Portraits of Male Teachers and Masculinity in Early Childhood Education

The position of men in early childhood education is shaped by competing social expectations. On one hand, male teachers may view their work as meaningful and recognise the value of providing children with diverse adult role models. On the other, they may encounter assumptions that caring for young children is primarily a woman's responsibility. These competing views influence how male educators understand their professional roles and how their competence is evaluated by parents, colleagues, and the wider community (Utanto et al., 2022; Williams, 2022; Ossai & Ramsaroop, 2022; Petersen, 2014).

In Indonesia, Utanto et al. (2022) found that male early childhood teachers associated their role with wellbeing, describing their work in terms of passion, values, and ideals, and emphasising patience, role modelling, and parental support as central to their professional identity. In contrast, Williams (2022) reported that, although stakeholders expressed a general preference for male preschool teachers, this was tempered by concerns about men's motivations and fears of disrupting traditional gender roles. Similarly, Ossai and Ramsaroop (2022) showed that sociocultural misconceptions and stereotypes in Nigerian early grade schools led many parents and teachers to view men as less suitable or trustworthy for working with young children, even as some acknowledged the value of male role models and gender balance.

In South Africa, Petersen (2014) documented "good, bad, and ugly" student perspectives: male teachers were seen as important for countering absentee fathers and promoting diversity, yet were simultaneously associated with a risk of sexual abuse and viewed as lacking nurturing qualities. Across these studies, a clear pattern emerges: male teachers' roles are consistently framed through a mix of idealisation and mistrust, with their presence welcomed symbolically but constrained in practice. These ambivalent perceptions resonate with Ghanaian findings, where male kindergarten teachers report stigmatization, competence questioning, and professional marginalisation alongside strong personal fulfilment in their work (Boateng et al., 2023; Boadu & Asiama, 2025; Abroampa et al., 2025). Overall, the literature suggests that while masculinity in ECE can enrich classroom climates and challenge rigid gender norms, male teachers' roles are framed within a context of suspicion and stereotype, shaping their experiences and career trajectories in female-dominated spaces

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2.2 Theoretical Lenses on Masculinity, Identity, and Negotiation in ECE

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To analyse these recurring patterns of ambivalent perceptions and constrained roles, several interrelated theories illuminate how gendered expectations structure the professional lives of male kindergarten teachers and the strategies they use to negotiate bias and stereotype. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) highlights the dominance of masculinities characterised by authority, competitiveness, and emotional restraint, which can clash with the nurturing, relational ethos of early childhood education. In practice, this tension may generate role strain when men downplay warmth or physical comfort with learners to avoid appearing "soft," limiting emotional bonds and inviting parental scepticism about their caring capacity, particularly in culturally conservative contexts such as Ghana's Ashanti Region (Brody, 2014).

Kanter's (1977) tokenism theory further explains the dynamics of numerical minority status, where men constitute a small fraction of the ECE workforce. As "tokens," male teachers experience heightened visibility, over-scrutiny, and role entrapment: their motives and child-safety are questioned, mentorship opportunities are scarce, and they may avoid tasks perceived as "feminine," such as emotional support, despite being celebrated rhetorically as role models (Sahin et al., 2018; Ossai & Ramsaroop, 2022). Judith Butler's (1988) gender performativity adds a more agentic dimension, viewing gender as produced through repeated acts rather than fixed traits. Male ECE teachers can "perform" care through everyday pedagogical routines such as empathetic listening and sensitive play facilitation which gradually reconfigure expectations, normalise male caregiving, and build trust with parents and colleagues (Brody, 2014; Zhang, 2017).

Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Skelton, 2018) and role strain theory (Goode, 1960) together highlight internal and social tensions when masculine self-concepts collide with feminised professional norms. Men may respond through avoidance, overcompensation, or strategic reframing of their roles, with consequences for teacher-parent relations, collegial support, and children's access to holistic care. In contrast, positive deviance (Shields, 2019) foregrounds those male teachers who consciously "break the rules" by embracing relational pedagogy, empathy, and connection, modelling "critical masculinities" that benefit children, erode parental distrust, and inspire colleagues to adopt more inclusive practices (Moosa & Bhana, 2023).

All these theoretical perspectives show how stereotypes, bias, and isolation constrain male kindergarten teachers, while also revealing spaces where hybrid and relational masculinities can emerge. They offer a conceptual framework for examining how Ghanaian male kindergarten teachers negotiate gendered expectations and develop strategies to build trust, professional legitimacy, and resilient identities within a feminised early childhood landscape.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the meanings that male educators and head teachers attach to their lived experiences. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because it focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of particular experiences, a view supported by Byrne (2025) and Stolz (2023), who note that the approach is suitable for exploring participants' lived experiences of a specific phenomenon. The design has also been used by Ghanaian researchers, including Abroampa et al. (2025), Boateng et al. (2024),

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and Laryea et al. (2020), to investigate how male educators construct their professional identities and negotiate cultural expectations, gender stereotypes, and the feminised nature of early childhood and basic-school teaching spaces.

3.2. *Data Sampling Procedures*

This study employed purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling, a non-probability technique in which participants are selected based on the researcher's judgement of their relevance to the research problem. The approach involves deliberately choosing individuals who possess particular characteristics or experiences that align with the study's objectives, and it is widely used in qualitative research (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Purposive sampling was considered suitable for this study because it enabled the researcher to identify and recruit male early childhood teachers and their headteachers who could provide rich and varied information relevant to the research purpose. Although male kindergarten teachers were scarce in several districts of the Ashanti Region, two districts with male teachers in early childhood schools were identified through the respective District Education Directorates. These were the Atwima Mponua District and the Asante Mampong Municipality. In all, the study involved seven male kindergarten teachers and four headteachers, giving a total of eleven participants. Four male teachers were selected from Atwima Mponua District and the three other teachers were selected from Asante Mampong Municipality, resulting in a sample size of seven teachers. Schools with male kindergarten teachers were formally contacted to provide information about the study, after which suitable dates, times, and venues were arranged for the interviews. The relatively small sample size reflects the limited number of male early childhood teachers available in the Ashanti Region.

The recurring themes for each of the questions

3.3. *Data Analysis*

Phenomenological analysis involves understanding the essence of the phenomenon being studied, which is based on the data collected and how it is presented. In qualitative studies, the descriptive stage is crucial, as it allows the researcher to become familiar with the data (Burns & Grove, 2003). To ensure the credibility of the study, the researchers employed reflexivity, bracketing, and intuiting to avoid any preconceived notions about the phenomenon being studied. The researchers also listened to the audio recording after the interview to analyze voice, tone, pauses, and responses, as well as the entire content, to gain a deeper understanding (Burns & Grove, 2003). The data from the audio recording were transcribed verbatim, including any pauses, exclamations or laughter (Burns & Grove, 2003). The first step in the data analysis process was the transcription of the interview recordings. This was done using Express Scribe, a free transcription software, together with a foot pedal and headsets, to facilitate accurate and efficient transcription of the data.

To strengthen the credibility and dependability of the findings, member checking was utilized by sending the transcripts to the teachers involved for them to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. To ensure anonymity, codes were assigned to the selected schools (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The study employed ATLAS.ti, a qualitative research software, to analyze the interview data (Muhr, 2004). The transcribed interviews were uploaded as primary documents, and codes were assigned freely based on the research questions and major ideas of the interview items (Bazeley, 2007). To ensure a comprehensive coverage, many codes were generated to cover

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all the items in the interview schedule, and then sorted into categories for easier analysis (Saldaña, 2016; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). The software allowed for memos to be inserted from field notes and primary documents to aid interpretation and recall of important information (Muhr, 2004). From the codes, the researchers identified themes and important quotations that provided rich and interesting stories of the participants. The headteachers and teachers who participated in the study were assigned codes to maintain anonymity. The codes were in the form of serial numbers generated based on the initials of their schools and numbered from HT 1-4 and T 1-7, with each participant represented by a number ranging from one to four (1-4) and one to seven (1-7) (Bazeley, 2007).

3.4. Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic Data of the Participants

As indicated in the methodology, the study comprised eight male teachers and four headteachers as participants. Their ages ranged from 25 to 38 years. Regarding their educational backgrounds, two of the seven male teachers had studied early childhood education. In addition, all participants had a minimum of four years of experience in early childhood education.

Variable	**Category**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender/Role	Male Teachers	7	63.6
	Head Teachers	4	36.4
	Total	**11**	**100**
Age Range	25–38 years	11	100
Educational Background	Early Childhood Education Specialization	2	18.2
	Other Educational Backgrounds	9	81.8
	Total	**11**	**100**
Teaching Experience	At least 4 years' experience	11	100

Table 1.1: Emerging Themes

N^{O}	**Research Question**	**Emerging Theme**
Perceptions of men's roles and experiences within the female-dominated kindergarten profession in the Ashanti Region.	1. What perceptions exist regarding the roles and experiences of men in the female-dominated kindergarten	• Males in early childhood education are perceived as unusual or "unmanly." • Teaching at the kindergarten level is not a preferred choice

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	profession in the Ashanti Region?	but is undertaken out of necessity. • Stigma and the concealment of one's role. • Perceived gender differences in nurturing and emotional support. • Perceived gender differences in nurturing and emotional support. • Initial hesitation gradually giving way to acceptance.
How Male Teachers in Early Childhood Settings Negotiate Biases, Stereotypes, and Preconceptions	2. What Strategies do Male Teachers in Early Childhood settings use to address Biases and Stereotypes?	• Teaching Children with Pride • Building Trust through Care and Positive Relationships • Promoting Transparency and Effective Communication • The Role of Head Teachers

Source: Data Collection (2025)

3.4 Presentation and Analysis of Findings

3.4.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

The study engaged eleven participants comprising seven male kindergarten teachers and four head teachers drawn from selected basic schools in the Atwima Mponua District and Asante Mampong Municipal in the Ashanti Region. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 38 years, and all possessed a minimum of four years of professional experience in early childhood education settings. Notably, only two of the seven male teachers held a formal specialisation in early childhood education, with the remaining nine entering ECE from other educational backgrounds. Table 1 summarises the demographic distribution of participants.

This demographic profile is analytically significant in its own right. The overwhelming predominance of non-specialist male teachers, nine out of eleven, suggests that most male participants arrived in ECE through institutional placement rather than deliberate vocational preparation. This structural baseline sets the conditions within which the themes explored below must be read: the perceptions, challenges, and strategies documented in this study are not those of men who chose ECE as a vocation, but predominantly of men navigating a professional space they did not design for themselves.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)

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Gender/Role	Male Teachers	7	63.6
	Head Teachers	4	36.4
	Total	**11**	**100**
Age Range	25–38 years	11	100
Educational Background	ECE Specialisation	2	18.2
	Other Backgrounds	9	81.8
	Total	**11**	**100**
Teaching Experience	≥ 4 years	11	100

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded two major themes, each comprising several sub-themes, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from Interview Data

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Perceptions of the role and experience of males in a female-dominated profession	(i) Males in ECE viewed as unusual or "unmanly"; (ii) Entry by circumstance rather than vocation; (iii) Stigma and concealment of role; (iv) Perceived gender differences in nurturing capacity; (v) Passion and dedication despite bias; (vi) Initial hesitation turning into acceptance
Theme 2: Strategies male teachers employ to negotiate biases and stereotypes	(i) Teaching with pride; (ii) Building trust through care and connection; (iii) Transparency and communication; (iv) Utilisation of head teacher authority

3.4.2 Theme 1: Perceptions of the Role and Experience of Male Teachers in Kindergartens

(i) Males in ECE Viewed as Unusual or "Unmanly"

A defining perception across all interviews was that men do not belong in early childhood settings, a view expressed not only by parents and the wider community, but internalised and reproduced

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by the participants themselves and, notably, by their fellow male colleagues. Participants consistently described being perceived as transgressing a culturally sanctioned gender boundary, with their masculinity directly called into question.

> *"You become less of a man if you are always seen around in the upbringing of children at that stage." (Head Teacher 1)*
>
> *"I was one time told by a colleague male teacher that I am not a man… 'real' men study courses that will bring money into their pockets." (Teacher 4)*

Two intersecting axes of stigma are operative in these accounts: gender identity and economic worth. The first positions caregiving as incompatible with manhood; the second equates masculine value with financial productivity and dismisses ECE as economically beneath men. What is analytically significant is that this dual stigma is not confined to external community voices. Teacher 4 reports being stigmatised by another male colleague, a fellow ECE teacher, which reveals that the gender policing is internalised and reproduced even within the profession itself. This self-reinforcing dynamic, in which men in ECE marginalise each other using the same gendered scripts society uses to marginalise them, represents a particularly entrenched dimension of the problem. It suggests that any shift in perception cannot rely solely on external attitude change; it must also address how male teachers relate to and affirm one another within the professional space.

(ii) Entry by Circumstance Rather Than Vocation

A second prominent pattern across the data was that most male participants had entered ECE not through deliberate career choice but through structural necessity, staff shortages, institutional posting decisions, or the absence of alternatives. This was expressed with considerable consistency and candour.

> *"I did not pursue a career in Early Childhood Education, but I happen to find myself there." (Teacher 1)*
>
> *"My family does not know I handle the KG in my school… I will never aspire to be a KG teacher." (Head Teacher 1)*

The language used across these accounts is telling. Phrases such as *"happen to find myself"* and *"will never aspire"* convey passivity, displacement, and a fundamental disconnection between professional role and professional identity. The teacher is positioned as an object of institutional circumstance rather than an agent of career decision. A critical internal contradiction emerges here, however, that warrants attention: Head Teacher 1, who explicitly disavows any aspiration to be a KG teacher, is the same institutional figure responsible for managing, deploying, and reassuring parents about male teachers in his school. The dissonance between his private disavowal and his public institutional role raises important questions about the extent to which institutional leadership on gender inclusion can be authentic when the leaders themselves have not resolved their own ambivalence about the profession. This contradiction is not peripheral; it points to a structural fragility at the heart of whatever support systems exist for male ECE teachers.

(iii) Stigma and Concealment of Role

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A particularly striking finding, and one that extends the pattern established in sub-theme (ii), was that several male teachers actively concealed their professional role, misrepresenting themselves as teaching older year groups to protect their social standing.

> *"I am not able to tell people I teach kindergarten learners but I tell them I teach at Basic One." (Teacher 1)*
>
> *"Most Ashantis believe it is a woman's duty to raise children… any man who is seen assisting in nurturing is given all sorts of names." (Teacher 4)*

Role concealment is the behavioural enactment of the displacement described in sub-theme (ii): where circumstantial entry produces a lack of professional identification with ECE, concealment is the social management of that disidentification under conditions of stigma. The two sub-themes are therefore not independent but causally linked; a teacher who never aspired to be a KG teacher is also a teacher with the least psychological investment in owning that identity publicly. What strengthens this interpretation is the geographic and relational specificity of the concealment: Teacher 1 does not simply avoid mentioning his role to strangers; he actively lies about it. And Teacher 4's account of community-level naming, *"given all sorts of names,"* indicates that the concealment is a rational response to a genuine and proximate social threat. The social cost of disclosure is not hypothetical for these participants; it is experienced and specific.

(iv) Perceived Gender Differences in Nurturing Capacity

Participants, including head teachers, consistently expressed the view that women are naturally better suited to early childhood caregiving, citing patience, emotional attunement, and an intuitive understanding of young children's needs as inherently female qualities.

> *"Females can better handle and understand learners at the KG level… They are more patient and can better provide emotional support." (Teacher 2)*
>
> *"From my experience, the females do it easily compared to males; they do not have to force it. It looks like they naturally understand the physical and emotional needs of young children." (Head Teacher 4)*

The analytical significance of these accounts lies not in their content, essentialist beliefs about gender and care are well documented, but in their source. These views are not attributed to parents or community members; they are articulated by male teachers and head teachers about themselves and their male colleagues. This represents an internalisation of gendered inadequacy: the teachers have absorbed the broader society's verdict on their suitability for the role and reproduce it as their own assessment. This creates a powerful internal contradiction when read against sub-theme (v). If male teachers genuinely believe women are naturally more competent nurturers, and if they experienced themselves as forced into ECE by circumstance rather than drawn into it by vocation, then the passion, dedication, and commitment documented in sub-theme (v), exhibited by some of the same participants, is doubly significant. It cannot be explained as the natural expression of felt aptitude; it must be understood as something these teachers construct and sustain in spite of, and in resistance to, their own internalised self-doubt. This contradiction, between privately held inadequacy and publicly enacted commitment, is one of the most analytically important tensions in the dataset.

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(v) Passion and Dedication Despite Bias

Counterbalancing the deficit narratives running through sub-themes (i) to (iv), a subset of participants articulated genuine and sustained vocational commitment to early childhood education. Significantly, this passion was expressed both by participants who had deliberately chosen ECE and by some who had entered the field by circumstance, suggesting that professional identity can be actively constructed even in the absence of original vocational intent.

> *"The formative years are… the most important in a child's life… My passion for early childhood education has captured my attention since I was a little child even though I did not intend to pursue a career along this line." (Teacher 3)*
>
> *"When I see these innocent and fragile beings, I become happy and feel the need to do my best for them once their care has been entrusted in my hands." (Teacher 6)*

Teacher 3's account is particularly nuanced: he acknowledges that he did not intend to pursue ECE, yet describes a passion that *"captured his attention since childhood."* This is neither simple vocationalism nor straightforward circumstantial placement; it is an account of a person who retrospectively reconstructs meaning around a role he did not originally plan for. Teacher 6's account introduces an affective trigger, the sight of young children, as the mechanism through which professional commitment is activated and renewed. These accounts reveal that professional passion in this context is not a stable trait that teachers either bring or do not bring to the role; it is dynamically produced through the encounter between the person and the work itself. This has implications for how the data is read as a whole: the binary framing of *"those who chose ECE*" versus *"those who were placed in ECE*" may be less analytically productive than a continuum of professional identification that can evolve, regardless of the mode of entry.

(vi) Initial Hesitation Turning into Acceptance

A final and practically significant pattern in the data was the documented trajectory from parental mistrust and resistance toward endorsement and active advocacy, following direct exposure to male teachers' classroom practice.

> *"She couldn't hide her joy… I was surprised to see her again the next day with three other parents bringing their wards to be entrusted to me." (Teacher 3)*
>
> *"Many parents expressed their displeasure with teachers males handling their children… they came back to me to testify. Some say their toddlers say good things about them and they trust their toddlers." (Head Teacher 2)*

This sub-theme stands in direct and productive tension with sub-theme (iv). The parents who eventually endorsed male teachers are, by implication, the same community members who initially held the essentialist view that women are naturally better suited to caregiving. Their revision of that view was not produced by argument or advocacy but by the lived experience of observing competent male teachers in practice and, critically, by the testimony of their own children. The children's endorsement functions as an unimpeachable relay of evidence, bypassing adult scepticism. This pattern reveals that the essentialist beliefs documented in sub-theme (iv) are not fixed convictions but experientially revisable ones. The same community that produces and

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enforces the stigma documented in sub-themes (i) and (iii) is also capable of dismantling it when confronted with sufficient counter-evidence. The analytical implication is that visibility-structured, sustained, and observed-rather than advocacy is the most effective mechanism for perception change in this context.

3.4.3 Theme 2: Strategies Male Teachers Employ to Negotiate Biases and Stereotypes

(i) Teaching with Pride

Several participants described a deliberate and conscious choice to perform their roles with visible pride, using the quality and visibility of their practice as a direct counter-argument to the gendered stigma they faced. This strategy was most explicitly articulated by those who had some degree of vocational identification with ECE, but it also appeared, in a more defiant register, among those who had entered by circumstance.

> *"Children need nurturing from both men and women… So once I find myself here, I will do it and do it well to shame society." (Teacher 6)*
>
> *"What motivated me to pursue B.Ed in Early Childhood was learners' abysmal performance… I realized there was a challenge at the foundational level." (Teacher 4)*

The phrase *"to shame society*" deserves close analytical attention. It frames professional excellence not as intrinsic satisfaction, but as a form of public rebuttal; the teacher's performance becomes evidence in an ongoing social argument about whether men belong in ECE. This is a fundamentally different orientation from Teacher 4's account, in which the motivation is child welfare and educational quality rather than social vindication. Both teachers deploy professional pride as a strategy, but for different underlying reasons. Teacher 6's pride is oppositional and outward-facing; Teacher 4's is purposive and inward-facing. This difference in orientation- pride-as-defiance versus pride-as-vocation-suggests that *"teaching with pride*" is not a singular strategy but a family of related but distinct responses to the same structural pressure, shaped by the individual teacher's relationship to the profession.

(ii) Building Trust Through Care and Connection

Participants described proactive, relationship-intensive strategies for converting parental scepticism into trust, including home visits, deliberate parental observation of classroom practice, and sustained affective engagement with children in contexts visible to parents.

> *"I do a lot of home visits of learners to interact on upbringing/nurturing." (Teacher 5)*
>
> *"I told her to invite the parent without my notice for her to come and observe my lessons. After sometime my colleague did and the parent came to me after to tell me she is marveled as to how a male can be that caring and supportive." (Teacher 6)*

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Teacher 6's account reveals a strategically sophisticated approach: rather than defending his competence verbally, he arranged for his practice to be witnessed under conditions that approximated independent observation; the parent came unannounced, at a colleague's invitation, without Teacher 6's visible prior knowledge of the visit. This is not simply openness; it is a carefully engineered encounter designed to produce the most persuasive form of evidence, unmediated observation. The strategy directly mirrors the pattern identified in sub-theme (vi) of Theme 1, where parental acceptance followed from observed practice rather than argument. What is significant here is that this teacher appears to have identified that mechanism intuitively and is deliberately reproducing it. This convergence between the conditions under which perceptions change (Theme 1, sub-theme vi) and the strategies teachers deploy to produce that change (Theme 2, sub-theme ii) is one of the most coherent and analytically significant patterns across the entire dataset.

(iii) Transparency and Communication

Open and proactive communication with parents, colleagues, and school authorities was consistently identified as a protective mechanism, one that managed risk and preempted misunderstandings before they could become incidents.

> *"The best strategy that has helped me so far is communication. I let parents in on their wards anytime. Whatever I see on their children I share with them." (Teacher 1)*
>
> *"Already, men are looked at in a different way in this field, so when you communicate well with school authorities and parents, you avoid a lot of problems if something goes wrong." (Head Teacher 2)*

Head Teacher 2's account introduces a dimension of this strategy that goes beyond professional courtesy: communication is framed explicitly as a form of institutional self-protection against the assumption of wrongdoing. The underlying logic is that, for male teachers in this setting, something going wrong will be interpreted through the lens of pre-existing suspicion, and that transparency reduces the interpretive space available for that suspicion to operate. This is a fundamentally different motivation from the trust-building described in sub-theme (ii). Where sub-theme (ii) involves proactive relationship investment aimed at changing perceptions, transparency in this account is defensive; it reduces exposure to an environment of presumptive distrust rather than seeking to transform it. The two strategies are therefore not simply complementary variations; they reflect a meaningful tension between an orientation toward perception change and an orientation toward risk management. A teacher cannot simultaneously invest emotionally in transforming how parents see him and operate from a position of managed detachment designed to limit his liability. This tension across strategies likely reflects different stages of the trust-building process, or different teacher dispositions toward the possibility of perception change itself.

(iv) Utilisation of Head Teacher Authority

A fourth strategy involved the deliberate delegation of sensitive parental interactions and certain emotional support functions to head teachers, who were perceived as carrying institutional authority and credibility that male classroom teachers lacked.

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"I refer learners who need emotional support to my head teacher." (Teacher 2)

"Some parents will forever be difficult, but we have ways of reassuring them that the male teachers are as competent as the females." (Head Teacher 2)

This strategy presents an important internal contradiction when read against sub-theme (ii) of Theme 1. There, it was established that Head Teacher 1 privately disavows any aspiration to ECE, yet publicly functions as the institutional legitimiser of male teachers' roles. Here, the strategy of relying on head teacher authority assumes that the head teacher's endorsement is a reliable and stable source of institutional protection. If head teachers are themselves unresolved in their relationship to ECE, as the data in Theme 1 suggest, then this strategy is more fragile than the participants relying on it appear to recognise. Furthermore, this is the only strategy in Theme 2 that is fundamentally passive: where pride, trust-building, and communication all involve the male teacher taking action, reliance on head teacher authority involves withdrawal, handing the problem to someone else. This withdrawal may be rational given the power dynamics involved, but it is qualitatively distinct from the other three strategies and underscores the precariousness of male teachers' position: they require institutional sponsorship to function in a space where their own authority is not accepted.

3.5 Discussion of Findings

3.5.1 Perceptions of Male Teachers in Kindergartens

The findings from Theme 1 illuminate the extent to which male kindergarten teachers in the Ashanti Region occupy a structurally marginal and socially precarious position within ECE, a position that is not merely assigned from without but actively reproduced from within the profession itself. The pervasive framing of male ECE teachers as *"unmanly"* is consistent with the global literature on gender and early childhood education, which has documented across multiple cultural contexts how feminised occupational identities and masculine gender norms operate in fundamental tension (Brody, 2014; Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). However, the Ashanti-specific data extend this global pattern in two analytically important directions.

First, the stigma in this context operates simultaneously along gendered and economic axes. Male teachers are not merely perceived as doing women's work; they are perceived as financially failing men, unable to secure the kinds of careers that, in Ghanaian Ashanti cultural logic, confer masculine status. This dual stigma is more debilitating than either dimension alone, because it attacks both the teacher's professional identity and his social worth as a man. This finding resonates with Connell's (1995) theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, which positions caregiving and financial dependency as incompatible with dominant masculine ideals, and adds an economically specific dimension to how this plays out in the Ghanaian context.

Second, and more significantly, the data reveal that the stigma is not only externally imposed but internalised and reproduced by male teachers themselves. Sub-theme (iv) documents male teachers and head teachers articulating essentialist beliefs about women's natural superiority in nurturing, a finding consistent with research on how dominant gender ideologies become self-reinforcing within feminised occupational spaces (Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). This internalisation creates a crucial contradiction in the data: the same participants who subscribe to

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the view that women are natural nurturers are also the ones who, in sub-themes (v) and (vi), demonstrate high levels of passion, dedication, and capacity to produce parental acceptance. The data therefore surface a productive paradox enacted competence in direct tension with internalised inadequacy which cannot be resolved within the framework of individual disposition and must instead be understood as evidence of the dynamic and reconstructive nature of professional identity under conditions of structural stigma (Aderet-German et al., 2021).

The finding that most participants entered ECE by circumstance rather than vocation introduces a dimension that the existing literature has not adequately addressed. Studies documenting the challenges men face in ECE including cultural stereotyping, parental mistrust, and limited career advancement (Ossai & Ramsaroop, 2022; Xu, 2019), have largely been conducted with populations that include at least some proportion of deliberately choosing practitioners. The present study finds that, in this Ashanti Region context, deliberate vocational choice is the exception. This has significant implications for how the profession's challenges are interpreted: where most research frames the problems as obstacles men choosing ECE must overcome, the present data suggest that the majority of male ECE teachers in this setting are not overcoming obstacles to a chosen path but navigating a role they never sought and cannot easily exit. The compounding of circumstantial entry with gendered stigma, the absence of ECE-specific training for most participants, and the private disavowal of the profession even by those who publicly manage it, exemplified by the Head Teacher 1 contradiction collectively suggest a professional ecosystem at significant risk of chronic attrition.

Counterbalancing this, the trajectory from parental hesitation to acceptance documented in sub-theme (vi) provides a theoretically important corrective. In alignment with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, the data demonstrate that sustained, direct, and competent engagement between male teachers and parents produces genuine perceptual revision and, critically, that this revision extends to adults who initially held entrenched essentialist beliefs about gender and care. The mechanism of revision, as the data reveal, is not argumentation but observation, and not adult testimony but children's endorsement relayed by parents. This suggests that the perceived unsuitability of men in ECE is a socially constructed and experientially revisable belief, not a fixed cultural given, and that the most effective institutional response is not advocacy but the creation of conditions under which sustained, visible, and competent male practice can be witnessed.

3.5.2 Strategies for Negotiating Biases and Stereotypes

The four strategies documented in Theme 2 constitute what may be understood, drawing on Gee (2000), as a repertoire of professional identity work, a set of deliberate, socially oriented practices through which male teachers manage the gap between their ascribed social identity (stigmatised male in a feminised professional space) and a desired professional identity (competent, trusted, valued educator). The consistency of these strategies with those documented in comparable international contexts, including professional pride, trust-building through practice, transparency, and institutional reliance (Garza, 2022; Roberts, 2020; Xu, 2019), suggests that they represent a generalisable response to the structural conditions of gender minority status in ECE, rather than locally specific adaptations.

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However, a closer reading of the data reveals that these four strategies are not a coherent or unified repertoire. They reflect two fundamentally different orientations toward the problem of stigma. Strategies (i) teaching with pride and (ii) building trust through care and connection are transformation-oriented: they seek to change how others perceive male teachers by making competent practice visible. Strategies (iii) transparency and communication and (iv) utilisation of head teacher authority are protection-oriented: they seek to manage risk and reduce exposure to the consequences of pre-existing suspicion, without necessarily aiming to alter the underlying perceptions. This distinction has practical importance: transformation-oriented strategies require sustained emotional investment, relational continuity, and the confidence that perception change is achievable, conditions that are fragile in a context where most male teachers entered ECE involuntarily, and many privately doubt their own suitability. Protection-oriented strategies, by contrast, are available to any teacher regardless of professional confidence, but they do not produce the social change that would make such protection unnecessary over time.

The most significant analytical tension across both themes lies in the relationship between what male teachers believe about themselves (Theme 1) and what they do in practice (Theme 2). Teachers who have internalised the gendered deficit narrative, believing that women are naturally more competent nurturers, nonetheless deploy active, sophisticated, and in some cases highly effective strategies for asserting professional competence and building trust. This is not a simple contradiction; it reflects the capacity of professional practice to operate semi-independently of professional self-concept, particularly when external pressures accountability to children, institutional expectations, and the desire for social acceptance provide motivation that self-belief alone does not. From a theoretical standpoint, this finding cautions against any framework that treats professional identity as the primary determinant of professional behaviour. The data suggest instead that the two are related but separable: a teacher can enact a competent professional identity without fully believing in it, and can be driven toward excellence by social defiance *"to shame society"* as much as by felt vocation.

A final critical observation concerns the structural character of all four strategies: they are, without exception, individual-level coping responses. The burden of managing a systemic and institutionally reproduced form of gender inequality falls entirely on the individuals most disadvantaged by it. As Gajda (2020) and Xu (2019) have argued, individual resilience, however sophisticated, cannot substitute for structural institutional change. The present findings not only document how male ECE teachers survive; they expose the institutional absence that makes such survival individually costly, professionally unsustainable, and ultimately insufficient as the basis for meaningful gender transformation in early childhood education in the Ashanti Region.

Implications of the Findings

The experiences of male teachers in early childhood education have highlighted several important implications for educational planning and administration. Teacher recruitment and deployment at all levels should be more deliberate and strategic, rather than focusing solely on increasing the number of men entering the ECE field. It is equally important to ensure that male teachers feel welcomed, respected, and valued once they enter the profession. Many men remain reluctant to pursue careers in ECE because of prevailing stereotypes and public mistrust, while those who

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challenge these perceptions often encounter difficulties in sustaining their presence in the field. Educational planners and administrators can therefore address these challenges by introducing awareness campaigns to counter negative stereotypes, establishing mentorship programmes, and providing incentives that encourage male teachers to remain in the profession.

Early childhood schools should also ensure that duties and responsibilities are distributed fairly, irrespective of gender. Furthermore, male teachers should have genuine opportunities for career advancement within early childhood education. Key stakeholders, particularly head teachers and male teachers themselves, can help promote positive accounts of male kindergarten teachers' experiences. Their commitment, dedication, and contributions can be showcased through the media, community gatherings, and classroom activities. Such efforts may help reshape public perceptions and motivate more men to consider early childhood education as a viable career option.

Conclusion

This study examined male kindergarten teachers in Ghana's Ashanti Region and how they negotiate professional identity within a predominantly female field. Findings show persistent socio-cultural stereotypes that cast early childhood education as feminine, causing stigma, parental mistrust, threats to masculinity, and pressure to conceal roles. Despite this, male teachers demonstrated strong commitment to children's learning and well-being. They challenged bias through professional pride, transparent communication, relationship-building, consistent competence, and collaboration with headteachers, strategies that often converted skepticism into trust. Supportive leadership emerged as vital. We conclude that men's underrepresentation stems mainly from societal perceptions rather than lack of competence. Promoting gender inclusivity requires coordinated recruitment, gender-sensitive training, leadership support, and community outreach to provide diverse role models.

Declaration of Competing Interest:

We, the authors, declare that we have no known financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work presented in this paper.

Data availability:

The data supporting the findings of this study were primarily collected and transcribed. The data are available upon reasonable request.

Informed Consent:

Informed written consent was obtained from study participants involved in this research.

Consent to Participate:

All participants were given detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and the measures taken to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. They voluntarily consented to participate after being fully informed.

Declaration of conflict of interest:

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