

In their Own Voices: Ghanaian Male Kindergarten Teachers' Experiences and their Professional Identity Construction

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Abstract

The study explored the experiences and professional identity construction of male kindergarten teachers in Ghana, a highly underrepresented group in the early childhood education space. Using the phenomenological design, in-depth interviews were conducted with five male kindergarten teachers from two districts in Ghana. The narratives were analysed through thematic analysis using the MAXQDA 2020 software to deduce common themes related to motivation, societal perceptions, identity negotiation strategies, and challenges. Findings revealed intrinsic motivations like passion for child development and extrinsic factors like parental recognition drove these men into kindergarten teaching. However, they encountered gender stereotypes questioning their intentions and capacity. Despite challenges, male teachers actively constructed empowering professional identities by embracing caring approaches, highlighting unique contributions, negotiating masculinity, developing expertise, and fostering supportive relationships. Continuous learning, peer support, self-motivation, and adaptability to changing landscapes emerged as key influencers. Notable challenges included lack of teaching resources, inadequate professional development, low prioritization of early childhood education, and negative societal attitudes towards male kindergarten teachers. The study recommends targeted mentorship, advocacy campaigns, curriculum reviews, resource allocation, policy incentives, among others to support and promote males in the early childhood education space.

KEYWORDS: Ghanaian, Kindergarten, Professional identity, Male teachers, experiences

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Early childhood education is the education given to young children from 0–8 years old (NAEYC, 2009). This form of education lays the foundation for children's future development and provides a strong support for lifelong learning skills, including cognitive and social development. This is an important building block for a child's future success (Barnett, 2011; Yoshikawa et. al. 2013). Currently, Ghana's education policy provides children with a two-year free and compulsory kindergarten to ensure young children are enrolled in schools for early learning (Ntumi, 2016).

Early childhood professionals and other stakeholders often assert that teaching young children not only provides care for them but also engages them in learning through carefully constructed environments (Sheridan, 2011; Edwards, 2013). This therefore requires that persons who wish to support early learners are intentionally prepared by exposing them to varying specialised experiences and practices needed for them to become professionals.

An early childhood professional must not only be trained in the care and nurturing of children but also in engaging children in social, physical, intellectual, cognitive, and emotional (SPICE) development and systematically managing young children's learning spaces. To become a competent early childhood professional, which is female dominated, male teachers also require the same training and ongoing professional development as female teachers (Warin, 2019). Due to the current shortage in this area, male teachers may also need targeted support that addresses the unique circumstances they face related to prejudice and biases. Improving the gender balance in early childhood care would offer all children a greater variety of role models at this critical stage in their gender identity development (Drudy, 2008) and would offer males an opportunity to construct their identities based on the realities they encounter.

Construction of occupational identity is the continuous creation of an ideal self in a particular occupation linked to the connection between self-experiences and sociocultural norms and values, expressed in discourses related directly or indirectly to that particular occupation. Research suggest that men have different dispositions compared to women in many aspects of their work, such as their use of language, willingness to take risks, physical play, and humour as well as behaviour in staff meetings and contribution to political discussions. Men are not better than women, but they are different, and together, men and women create a rich culture reflecting an ideal home situation in which to nurture a child (Farquhar, 2012; Brownhill, 2014; Peeters et. al., 2015).

Early childhood education is one of the most female dominated sectors in terms of employment globally with males forming a very small minority. Individuals and families offer reassurance and support for the male early childhood profession, while others view them with curiosity or distrust (Brody, 2015). When a man decides to become a teacher at the early childhood education level, some misconceptions come to mind, particularly about the man's sexuality, and questions of child abuse and molestation are often raised (Skelton, 2003).

In spite of these concerns, young children from 0-8 years must be exposed to a variety of experiences. One such experience is interacting with highly qualified and caring male teachers in early childhood settings (Bullogh, 2015). It has been argued that men involved in early childhood education motivate children and teach them that early childhood is important and a responsibility for everyone, including men. The most effective way to teach young children is modelling, so these children need to actively see men caring for young children to internalize it as true. When men see other men participating in early childhood education, it motivates them to take an active part in their children's education as well. It is important to educate children to treat everyone with respect irrespective of gender. Having a male teacher in the conversation provides an opportunity to model appropriate behaviours between two people of opposite sexes for young children (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017; Brownhill & Oates, 2017).

Male kindergarten teachers model collaborative cross-gender professional relationships, demonstrating respectful communication and equal partnership to children who actively observe adult interactions (Hedlin et al., 2019). When male and female teachers cooperate effectively, children witness practical examples of gender equality, challenging rigid stereotypes during their formative years when gender concepts are developing (Emilsen & Koch, 2010). McGrath and Van Bergen (2017) found gender-diverse teaching teams expand children's understanding of caregiving roles. Brownhill (2015) demonstrated male teachers' presence helps boys with emotional identification, while Rohrmann (2019) found that all children benefit from seeing men in nurturing positions. The need for male involvement stems not from inherent superiority but from representational importance-providing children with diverse adult models. As Peeters et al. (2015) argue, gender-balanced teams create more comprehensive learning environments that better prepare children for navigating a diverse society.

While early childhood teaching has traditionally been viewed as a female-dominated profession globally (Drudy, 2008; Mills et al., 2004), in the last two decades, more men have entered the teaching profession, including the early childhood space (McGrawth & Van Bergen, 2017; Cruickshank, Pederson & Callingham, 2020). However, the experiences and professional identity development of male kindergarten teachers are not well understood, especially in non-Western contexts. In Ghana, kindergarten teaching is also heavily female-dominated, with less than 2% of teachers being male (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Abroampa, 2017). The few Ghanaian males who enter kindergarten teaching may encounter gender stereotypes and discrimination that could impede their professional identity formation and retention (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Reading & Kean, 2012; Sargent, 2001). As a gender minority, their perspectives and approaches could also uniquely benefit early childhood education (Jones, 2007; Cushman, 2008). This study therefore explored the professional experiences of male kindergarten teachers in Ghana and how they negotiated and created their identities in a highly feminized field which has been under researched. Brownhill and Oates (2017). For instance, bemoans the general lack of research on male ECE teachers' experiences globally, noting that most existing research focuses on recruitment and retention rather than identity formation. In a similar vein, Warin (2019) in conceptualising the value of male practitioners in early childhood education and care, noted significant gaps in research on how male teachers construct their professional identities in ECE settings.

Three research questions considered pertinent to this study were:

1. What motivates Ghanaian kindergarten males to enter the highly feminized field of early childhood teaching?

Several studies have found that men enter teaching and early childhood education for altruistic reasons like desiring to make a difference and enjoying working with children (Cushman, 2005; Drudy, 2008; Jones, 2007; Mills et al., 2004). However, the cultural context in Ghana may lead to different motivations.

2. How do Ghanaian kindergarten males negotiate gendered assumptions and stereotypes about men in early childhood education?

Men also face gender stereotypes, questioning their masculinity, intentions, and capacity to care for young children (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Sargent, 2001). This study illuminates Ghanaian male teachers' motivations and how they navigate gender assumptions.

3. How do Ghanaian male kindergarten teachers construct their professional identities, and what supports or constraints influence this process?

Professional identity formation is an ongoing, contextualized process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004). The feminized culture of early childhood teaching likely impacts Ghanaian males' identity negotiation. Family and peer disapproval, lack of mentors, and isolation could constrain their identity development (Cushman, 2005; Mills et al., 2004; Reading & Kean, 2012), while targeted support could enable the growth of positive teacher identities (Martino, 2008). Examining their identity formation can inform teacher training and policy-making.

1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999) and identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1976) provide highly pertinent lenses for examining the experiences of Ghanaian male kindergarten teachers and their professional identity construction. Social role theory proposes that societal expectations shape the roles men and women assume. These gender roles form the basis for stereotyped assumptions about how men and women should behave and what occupations align with their gender (Eagly, 2020). This explains the cultural perception of teaching as a highly feminized career. Male kindergarten teachers defy traditional gender norms, which likely influences how they are perceived and how they navigate their minority status professionally.

However, identity theory delves into the various sub-identities' individuals form based on the different social roles they occupy (Stets & Serpe, 2016). For Ghanaian men, their identity as a male kindergarten teacher may seem contradictory or disjointed from other masculine identities or roles. Navigating these sub-identities and aligning them into a coherent self-concept is a key process in identity construction. Their professional identity development will involve reconciling any perceived incongruities. The social role theory highlights the gender dynamics, while the

identity theory highlights the identity negotiation process for these men pursuing non-traditional careers. In tandem, these frameworks greatly inform the investigation into how gendered norms and identity factors interplay as Ghanaian male teachers forge their professional paths.

1.3 Teacher Professional Identity

Professional identity refers to how individuals construct their professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences related to their professional role (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). It is a process of answering the question, “Who am I as a professional?” (Beijaard et al., 2004). Teacher professional identity specifically relates to how teachers define themselves within their professional role and the teaching context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It involves both person and context-related factors. As Beijaard et al. (2004) explain, “teacher professional identity then refers to the ways in which teachers themselves, as individuals and as members of a group, answer the question, ‘How do I see myself as a teacher?’ It has both an individual and collective aspect.” (p.108)

Teacher professional identity development is an ongoing process shaped by professional interactions, prior experiences, context, micropolitics within schools, and teachers’ own sense-making (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). It serves to provide a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’, and ‘how to understand their work and their place in society’ (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Teacher identity negotiation also involves reconciling sub-identities such as subject expertise, didactical orientation, and pedagogical role (Beijaard et al., 2004). Understanding teachers’ professional identity formation is key to supporting their professional growth and capacity to respond to evolving educational contexts and expectations (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Sachs, 2005). Some of the key elements or constituents of early childhood education teachers’ professional identity, according to research, are:

- Beliefs about working with young children: This includes their personal interests, motivations, and perceptions of the importance of early childhood education (Osgood, 2006).
- Subject matter knowledge: their understanding of early childhood development, pedagogy, and developmentally appropriate curriculum content areas (Osgood, 2006).
- Pedagogical knowledge: their beliefs about how to teach young children effectively using developmentally appropriate pedagogies (Abroampa, 2017) and classroom management skills (Osgood, 2006).
- Relationships with children: their ability to develop caring, nurturing, and educational relationships with children (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).
- Relationships with families: Their beliefs about partnerships with parents and communication with families and how to explore appropriate parental involvement strategies (Osgood, 2006).

- Commitment to professionalism: their dedication to ongoing professional learning, ethical conduct, and advocating for the field (Osgood, 2006).
- Sense of purpose: their perceptions of their role in supporting children's development and the value of their work (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).
- Positioning within the context: how they see themselves fitting into the early childhood education system and community (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).
- Reconciliation of sub-identities: Navigating any tensions between different aspects of their professional practice and philosophies (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).

The interplay and interaction between and among these elements contribute to constructing the coherent professional identity of an early childhood practitioner.

1.4 Motivations for Males Teaching at the Kindergarten

Despite the longstanding perception of teaching young children as primarily a female-dominated profession, a growing number of men have been drawn to the field of kindergarten teaching in recent years. This shift can be attributed to a complex interplay of societal, personal, and professional factors.

One key factor that has motivated some men to pursue careers in kindergarten teaching is a desire to serve as positive role models for young children, particularly those from single-parent or otherwise disadvantaged households. As research has shown, the presence of male teachers can have a profound impact on the social, emotional, and academic development of male students (Dee, 2006; Holmlund & Sund, 2008). By bringing a unique perspective and approach to the classroom, male kindergarten teachers can help challenge gender stereotypes and provide children with a more diverse and inclusive educational experience.

Additionally, some men have been drawn to the inherent rewards and fulfillment of working with young children. The opportunity to nurture, guide, and witness the intellectual and personal growth of their students can be a powerful motivator for those seeking a career that aligns with their values and passions (Cushman, 2005). Furthermore, the flexibility and work-life balance often associated with kindergarten teaching can be particularly appealing to men seeking a more balanced and family-friendly career path.

Moreover, the increased focus on early childhood education and its importance for child development has also contributed to the growing interest of men in the field. As policymakers and educational institutions have emphasized the critical role of high-quality early childhood education, the prestige and recognition associated with kindergarten teaching have also risen, making it a more attractive option for men seeking rewarding and influential careers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).

Despite these motivations, the persistent societal perceptions of kindergarten teaching as a predominantly female domain continue to pose challenges for men entering the field. Overcoming

stereotypes and biases, as well as navigating the unique dynamics and expectations placed on male teachers in a female-dominated environment, can be significant hurdles for some male kindergarten teachers (Cushman, 2005). Nonetheless, the steadfast commitment and unique contributions of these men to the field of early childhood education have the potential to reshape societal attitudes and inspire future generations of male educators.

While the general motivations for men to pursue careers in kindergarten teaching, such as serving as positive role models and finding fulfillment in working with young children, may be applicable across various cultures and contexts, the specific dynamics in Africa and Ghana may present unique factors that influence men's decisions to enter this field.

In many African societies, including Ghana, traditional gender roles and expectations have historically placed a greater emphasis on men as the primary breadwinners and heads of households. This societal mindset can make it more challenging for men to consider careers in the typically female-dominated field of early childhood education (Casely-Hayford, 2011). However, some men in these regions may be motivated by a desire to challenge these gender norms and stereotypes, seeking to redefine masculinity and demonstrate that nurturing and caring for young children is not solely a female responsibility.

Additionally, the limited availability of employment opportunities, particularly in more rural or economically disadvantaged areas of Africa, may drive some men to consider teaching positions, including those in the kindergarten setting, as a viable and stable career path (Oduro & Akyeampong, 2006). The potential for job security, steady income, and opportunities for career advancement can be significant motivating factors for men in these contexts.

Furthermore, the growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education in Africa, driven by initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals and national education policies, may also contribute to the increased interest of men in the kindergarten teaching profession. As the demand for quality early childhood educators rises, men may see this as an opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the lives of young children and contribute to the development of their communities (Casely-Hayford, 2011).

However, the dynamics and challenges faced by male kindergarten teachers in Africa and Ghana may differ from those experienced in other regions. For instance, societal expectations and perceptions of masculinity may create additional barriers for men, as they navigate the stereotypes and potential stigma associated with a traditionally female-dominated profession (Oduro & Akyeampong, 2006). Furthermore, the availability of support systems, professional development opportunities, and social acceptance within the teaching community may play a more crucial role in the experiences and retention of male kindergarten teachers in these contexts.

While the general motivations for men to enter the field of kindergarten teaching may be similar across different regions, the specific dynamics and challenges faced by men in Africa, and particularly Ghana, may be influenced by societal norms, economic factors, and the evolving landscape of early childhood education in these settings.

1.5 How Male Kindergarten Teachers Negotiate Gendered Assumptions

Men navigating the highly feminized field of early childhood education often have to negotiate a complex set of gendered assumptions and stereotypes in various ways, such as:

Male teachers in early childhood settings may actively challenge the societal perception that caring for and nurturing young children is inherently feminine work. They can redefine masculinity by demonstrating their ability to be nurturing, patient, and emotionally attuned to the needs of their students (Allan, 1993; Sargent, 2000). This can involve consciously modeling alternative forms of masculinity that are more inclusive of traditionally "feminine" caregiving traits.

Being a numerical minority in the early childhood education field, male teachers may strategically leverage their unique position to their advantage. They can use their visibility to serve as positive role models, particularly for young boys who may lack male figures in their lives (Sumsion, 2000). Additionally, male teachers can draw attention to the benefits that a gender-diverse teaching staff can bring to young children's development and learning experiences.

To overcome assumptions that they are less capable or committed to the field, male teachers may need to work harder to establish their professional credibility. This can involve actively seeking out opportunities for professional development, specializing in areas of early childhood education, and demonstrating their expertise and dedication to their students and colleagues (Cushman, 2005; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).

Building strong relationships with their female colleagues can be crucial for male teachers in early childhood education. By collaborating with and learning from experienced female teachers, they can navigate the unique dynamics of the profession and gain acceptance within the teaching community (Allan, 1993; Cushman, 2005).

Some male teachers may take on a more proactive role in advocating for greater gender diversity and inclusion within the early childhood education field. This can involve participating in policy discussions, promoting recruitment and retention strategies, and challenging institutional biases that perpetuate the perception of early childhood teaching as a predominantly female domain (Sumsion, 2000; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).

1.6 How Male Kindergarten Teachers Construct their Professional Identities

Male kindergarten teachers often have to navigate complex and sometimes conflicting processes in constructing their professional identities within the highly feminized field of early childhood education. These males may construct their professional identities through:

One important aspect of identity construction for male kindergarten teachers is embracing a caring and nurturing approach to their work. Rather than distancing themselves from traditionally feminine traits, they may actively incorporate these qualities into their professional persona, seeing them as essential to effective teaching and learning (Sargent, 2001; Sumsion, 2000). This allows them to challenge the notion that caring is inherently feminine and demonstrate their ability to provide emotional support and meet the developmental needs of young children.

Male teachers may highlight the unique perspectives and skills they bring to the early childhood classroom, such as providing strong male role models, offering different disciplinary approaches, and fostering diverse forms of play and learning (Cushman, 2005; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). By emphasizing these distinctive contributions, they can construct a professional identity that complements and enhances the work of their female colleagues, rather than positioning themselves as competitors.

Some male kindergarten teachers may carefully negotiate their masculinity, selectively adopting or rejecting certain masculine traits depending on the context. This can involve downplaying traditionally masculine behaviors that may be perceived as incompatible with the nurturing demands of early childhood education while strategically highlighting other masculine characteristics, such as physical strength or problem-solving abilities (Sargent, 2001; Sumsion, 2000).

To establish their professional credibility, male teachers may choose to develop specialized expertise in areas such as early childhood development, curriculum design, or educational technology. By positioning themselves as subject matter experts, they can construct a professional identity that is grounded in their technical knowledge and skills rather than solely on their gender (Cushman, 2005; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). Building strong collaborative relationships with their female colleagues can be an important aspect of identity construction for male kindergarten teachers. By working closely with experienced female teachers, they can learn from their expertise, gain acceptance within the teaching community, and develop a shared sense of professional identity (Allan, 1993; Cushman, 2005).

Through these various strategies, male kindergarten teachers navigate the complex terrain of their profession, constructing professional identities that allow them to thrive and make meaningful contributions to the field of early childhood education.

2.0 METHODS

The interpretivist orientation of the researchers influenced their understanding of the lived experiences and reconstruction of the realities of male kindergarten teachers. The study thus adopted the qualitative approach, which lent itself to the use of the phenomenological design to explore male kindergarten teachers' experiences. Phenomenological design effectively explored male kindergarten teachers' lived experiences by capturing their subjective realities and meaning-making processes. The approach, allowed researchers to bracket preconceptions and focus on participants' authentic perspectives. As Peeters et al. (2015) demonstrated, phenomenology revealed how male teachers navigated gender expectations in female-dominated settings. Similarly, Xu and Waniganayake (2018) employed this methodology to uncover how male kindergarten teachers constructed professional identities amid societal scrutiny. The design's in-depth interviews and thematic analysis illuminated nuanced experiences that quantitative methods would have missed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Early childhood coordinators of two districts—one in Ashanti Region and the other in Central Region—were contacted to help identify male kindergarten teachers in their district. Eleven male teachers were conveniently selected. After explaining the purpose of the study to them, six declined to participate, leaving five. Data was therefore collected from three male KG teachers from the selected district in Central Region, while two were involved from the selected district in Ashanti Region using an interview schedule. Through the in-depth, open-ended interviews KG teachers were required to narrate their experiences, critical events, relationships and turning points that impacted their personal and professional identities. All interviews were conducted via telephone calls, with each lasting about 30 minutes.

The narratives were analysed for common themes related to identity construction using MAXQDA 2020. MAXQDA 2020 is a software for analysing qualitative data. It delves deep into the rich tapestry of textual narratives, unveiling hidden insights and patterns that might otherwise remain elusive. The approach provided an emic perspective from the teachers' point of view rather than etic assumptions. It was thus an ideal design for elucidating the complex process of professional identity formation in context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The analysis approach captured rich insights into men's unique experiences as kindergarten teachers and the tensions and triumphs they encountered developing their identities in a traditionally female-dominated domain.

A total of 26 sub-themes were extracted from the five KG teachers to response to the open-ended questions. Responses of male teachers' perspective on males in early childhood education, including their lived experiences and construction of professional identity were divided into five broad categories: (1) motivation to enter a highly feminized field; (2) People perception; (3) creation of identity; (4) challenges encountered teaching at KG; and (5) dealing with negative perceptions. Out of the 26 sub-themes extracted from the text mining, seven mentions were related to motivation as a male teacher in a feminized field, two mentions were related to people perception. Nine mentions were attributed to creation of identity, six mentions were in line with challenges encountered teaching at KG, while two mentions were related to dealing with perceived perceptions.

3.0 RESULTS INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Background Information

Information gathered on teachers indicates that two have a bachelor's in early childhood education, another two have backgrounds in basic education while one has bachelor's in mathematics. Two have taught for three years while the other three have been teaching for 13 to 15 years at the kindergarten level. The foregoing shows that though all respondents are professional teachers, only two have been trained to teach early learners. The expectations are that from the considerable

number of years they have taught they would have gone through enormous experiences that would have shaped their perspectives and professional identity construction.

The study explored the experiences of male kindergarten teachers in Ghana and how they constructed their professional identities. Figure 1 is a model exemplifying the interactions among the experiences that shape the professional identity of male KG teachers in Ghana.

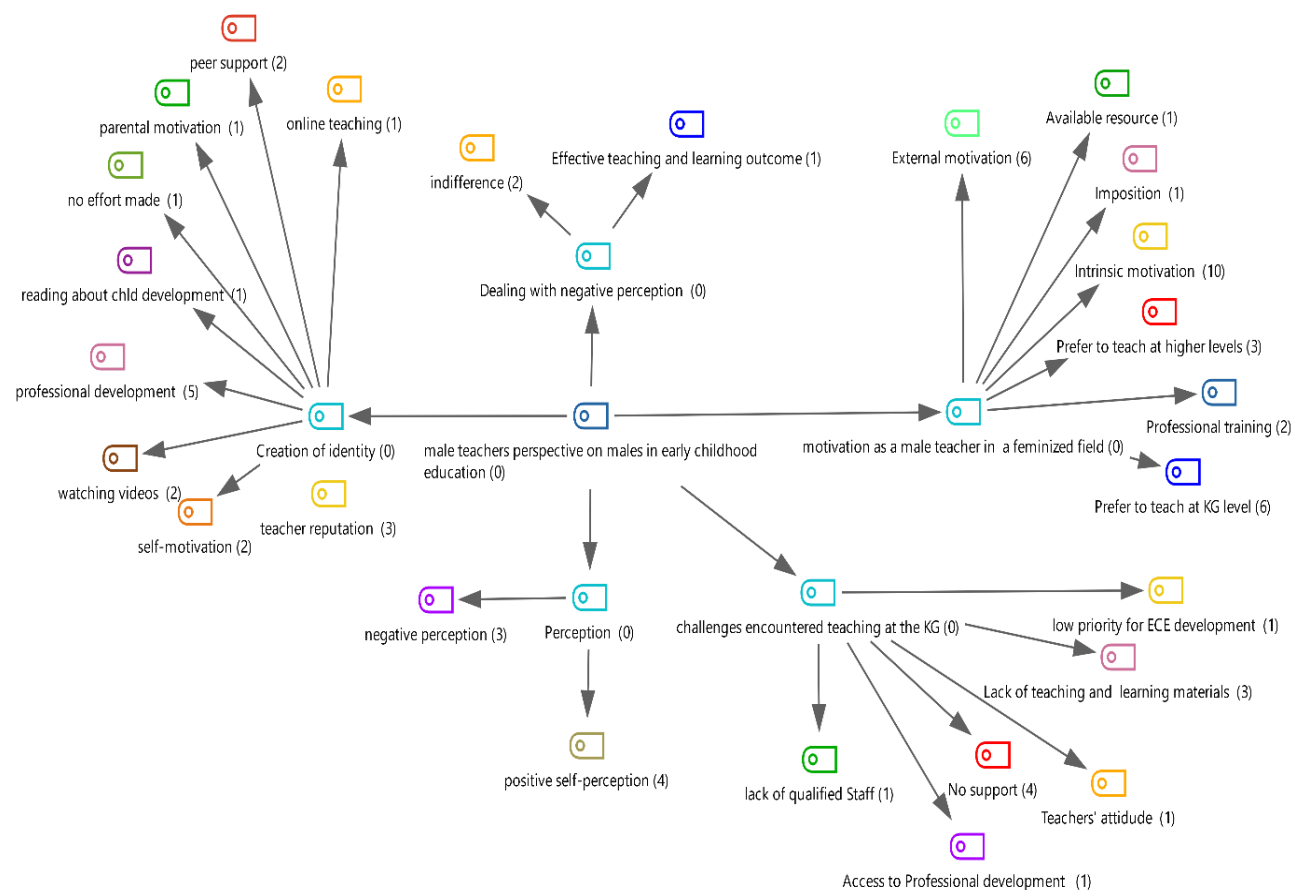


Figure 1: Model of Male KG teachers' experiences

The model exemplifies how male kindergarten teachers construct their professional identities within the context of a highly feminized field. The various codes and their interconnections illustrate the complex interplay of personal motivations, societal perceptions, environmental factors, and ongoing negotiation processes that shape the identity formation journey of these educators.

The data indicates that “Motivations” are critical in driving male teachers to pursue a career in kindergarten education. The model highlights intrinsic motivations, such as a genuine passion for working with young children and a desire to make a positive impact, as well as extrinsic motivations, including societal recognition, job stability, and available resources. These motivations serve as the initial catalyst for men to enter and navigate this non-traditional career path.

However, the data also suggests the presence of “Societal Perceptions” which either supports or hinders the professional identity construction process. Positive perceptions, such as recognizing the value of male role models in early childhood settings, reinforces and validates the male teachers’ identities. Conversely, negative perceptions, including gender stereotypes and stigmas questioning men’s suitability for nurturing roles, poses significant threats and require active negotiation strategies. The “Environmental Factors” code encompasses various external influences that shape the professional identity formation process. These factors can include institutional support systems, availability of mentors and professional development opportunities, as well as the dynamics within the teaching community and broader societal norms.

To navigate these complexities, male kindergarten teachers engage in a continuous process of “Negotiation Strategies”. The model suggests that male KG teacher employ various tactics to construct their professional identities, such as challenging traditional gender norms, leveraging their minority status, establishing professional credibility, fostering supportive relationships with colleagues, and advocating for change within the field.

Importantly, the model recognizes that the professional identity construction process is not a linear journey but rather a dynamic and iterative one. The bidirectional arrows between the various codes indicate the reciprocal influences and feedback loops that exist and the complex interplay among the various experiences male KG teachers go through in the journeys. For instance, successful negotiation strategies may positively influence societal perceptions, while shifts in environmental factors could necessitate adjustments in motivations or negotiation approaches.

3.2 Motivation as a male teacher in a feminized field

The responses about motivation to enter a highly feminized field from the teachers’ perspective were grouped into 7 sub-theme areas after a key word cloud mapping, thus (1) Intrinsic motivation, (2) Prefer to teach at KG level, (3) Prefer to teach at higher levels, (4) Imposition, (5) External motivation, (6) Available resources, and (7) Professional training.

There was a total of 10 mentions of some form of intrinsic motivation, a teacher narrated that *“there's no greater joy than watching children transform and then all the things that you take them through, you see that, uh, a whole lot of development changes have gone on in them”*. Six of the mentions indicated preference for KG level. A teacher indicated *“I feel excited and fulfilled teaching at the pre-operational stage”*. Three of the mentions indicated preference for higher

levels, a teacher argued that *“maybe if my services are needed at that place I will go. The JHS students are not many and I wish to be there teaching”*. One mention of some form of imposition, a teacher said that, *“It is my headteacher who did the classification. And he sent me there”*. Three mentions of external motivation were made, a teacher described that *“you know, the way parents and people there were saying, I am good at handling children, we like the way you handle the children”*. One mention was made of available resources, a teacher said, *“the resource that I'm getting”*. Two mentions of professional training were cited, a teacher intimated that, *“this is what I've been trained for. So, I don't think that there will be a better person in my school to teach at that level than myself”*.

The data as reflected in figure 1 indicates that the motivation to teach at the early childhood level is more intrinsic. For instance, factors like the joy of watching children's growth and development found to be major motivators for male kindergarten teachers aligns with Cushman (2005), Jones (2007), and Mills et al. (2004). The studies have consistently found that altruistic reasons, such as a desire to make a positive difference in children's lives, are common motivations for both male and female teachers early childhood practitioners. Contrarily, the data revealed that some male teachers explicitly expressed a preference for teaching at the kindergarten level, finding it exciting and fulfilling. This finding contradicts the notion that male teachers are often discouraged from or resistant to teaching younger children (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). The finding underscores that fact that some men are intrinsically drawn to the unique rewards and challenges of working with young children.

Conversely, some male teachers indicated a preference for teaching at higher grade levels, suggesting that the motivations for teaching kindergarteners may not always be voluntary or intentional. This endorses studies by Cunningham and Watson (2002) and Sargent (2001), which found that some male teachers feel pressured or steered into early childhood education due to societal biases or administrative decisions such as postings as the case may be in Ghana, rather than personal choice. The analysis also identified external factors, such as positive feedback from parents and the availability of resources, as motivators for male kindergarten teachers. While not extensively discussed in the literature, these suggest that extrinsic factors like community recognition and adequate teaching resources can play a role in attracting and retaining male teachers in early childhood education. Further, the data revealed that some male teachers cited their professional training as a motivating factor, feeling well-prepared and qualified to teach at the kindergarten level. This aligns with research by Osgood (2006) and Elfer and Dearnley (2007), which highlights the importance of high-quality teacher education programmes in developing a strong professional identity and commitment to early childhood education among both male and female teachers.

3.3 Perceptions of male KG teachers

The responses about people perception were grouped into two sub-theme areas after a key word cloud mapping of (1) positive self-perception, and (2) negative perception. There was a total of 4 mentions of positive self-perception. A teacher said that, *"I don't feel bad at all; in fact, I feel quite content and safe as everything revolves around my decisions and actions."*. There were three mentions of negative perception. A teacher recounted that, *"there is this kind of stigmatization about a male teacher teaching children at the lower level"*.

The responses about dealing with negative perceptions from the teachers' perspective were also grouped into 2 sub-theme areas after a key word cloud mapping of (1) effective teaching and learning outcome, and (2) indifference. There was one mention of using effective teaching and improved learning outcome. A teacher said that *"I handle the negative perception through effective teaching and children improved performance. If you teach well, you will gain respect and recognition from both parents and colleagues as the children learning outcome improves over the period"*. Whiles another teacher simply is indifferent as shown in his response that *"I don't care what they say about me teaching at the KG because I also help my wife at home with the kids and if I come to school and you say I should teach the kids I'm willing to do it"*

The notion of teaching young children being perceived as incompatible with traditional masculinity is a well-documented phenomenon in literature (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Sargent, 2001). These studies consistently highlight the gendered assumptions and suspicions that male teachers in early childhood education often encounter, ranging from questioning their motivations and sexuality to concerns about potential child abuse. The data also cites instances of negative perceptions and stigmatization faced by male kindergarten teachers in Ghana. However, the finding that some male kindergarten teachers reported feeling content and safe in their roles, with a sense of control over their decisions and actions, suggests a positive self-perception and confidence in their professional identities. This aligns with research by Jones (2007) and Martino (2008), which highlights the ability of some male early childhood teachers to construct empowering identities that challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Such favourable perceptions may be attributed to the nurturing teacher would have received growing up and the natural propensity to work with children.

The narrative also revealed instances of negative perceptions and stigmatization faced by male kindergarten teachers, particularly regarding the perceived incompatibility of men teaching at lower levels. This finding resonates with numerous studies that have documented the gendered assumptions and suspicions surrounding male teachers in early childhood education (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Sargent, 2001). The societal biases and stereotypes questioning men's motivations, abilities, and even potential for child abuse have been widely reported in the literature.

In dealing with negative perceptions and stereotypes, two contrasting approaches emerge. One approach focused on demonstrating effective teaching and improved learning outcomes as a means of gaining respect and recognition from parents and colleagues. This aligns with research by Cushman (2005) and Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012), which suggests that male teachers often strive to establish professional credibility and leverage their positive impact on students to counter negative stereotypes. The second approach showcased indifference or a lack of concern for negative perceptions, with one teacher expressing willingness to teach at the kindergarten level regardless of societal opinions. This response may be influenced by personal motivations, cultural factors, or a sense of confidence in one's abilities and role as an educator.

While the findings on positive self-perception, negative perceptions, and strategies for dealing with biases resonate with broader literature, the narrative may also offer a unique perspective rooted in the Ghanaian cultural and societal context. The response highlighting indifference to negative perceptions and a willingness to teach based on personal motivations and familial experiences could be influenced by cultural norms, gender roles, or societal expectations specific to the Ghanaian context.

3.4 Construction of Identity by Kindergarten Teachers

The responses about people's perception were grouped into 9 sub-theme areas after a key word cloud mapping, thus (1) online teaching, (2) parental motivation, (3) watching online videos, (4) professional development, (5) reading about child development, (6) peer support, (7) self-motivation, (8) teacher reputation, and (9) no effort made. There was one mention of online teaching, a teacher said that, *"I have created online platform where I upload my lesson for parents assess the work I do and for learners to continue learning at home"*; one mention of parental influence, a teacher narrated that, *"my mom and father were both teachers at the KG level and I was motivated by the level of patience and care they exhibited in executing their responsibilities to these children at the KG level"*; two mentions of watching online videos, a teacher said that, *"also give myself the opportunity to also learn by watching online videos on dealing with children in the classroom by so doing from other colleagues"*; five mentions related to professional development, a teacher recounted that, *"the experience and knowledge I have gained through training workshops I have attended"*; one mention of reading about child development, a teacher said that, *"when I read about Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Sigmund Freud, all these people, great personalities influenced by reading their work on how children learn and how you will be able to understand them and affect their lives positively"*; two mentions related to peer support, a teacher indicated that, *"a female teacher in my school encourages me to do more and to do my best to help the children I teach get a good foundation"*.

Additional there were two mentions of self-motivation, with a teacher saying that, *“I influence myself as a teacher as I could be sent anywhere to perform my duties, and will have to professionally execute my duties irrespective of the level”*. There were also three mentions related to teacher reputation, with a teacher recounting that, *“whenever parents visit the school, they invariably point to my classroom. They express a strong desire for their children to be enrolled in my class, knowing the positive impact I’ve had on previous pupils”*.

From the responses, one of the keys defining factors of male KG teachers’ professional identity is continuous learning and professional development. Several teachers mentioned attending training workshops, reading relevant child development literature and watching online videos to enhance their teaching practices. This aligns with studies that highlights ongoing professional development for early childhood educators to stay updated with the latest pedagogical approaches and to continuously improve their skills (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Byington & Tannock, 2011). The influence of peer support and self-motivation on the construction of KG teachers’ identities was notable. This resonates with previous studies that have explored the role of social support networks, mentorship and self-efficacy in shaping teachers’ professional identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman, 2012).

Interestingly, the analysis also revealed the impact of parental motivation and teacher reputation on the KG teachers’ identities. One teacher cited the influence of their parents, who were also KG teachers, while others mentioned the positive feedback and high demand from parents for their classes, reflecting their reputation as effective teachers. These findings agree with research highlighting the importance of parental involvement and community recognition in shaping teachers’ professional identities (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Lasky, 2005). Motivation from parents of learners, peers and mentors are critical defining factors.

The mention of creating an online platform for sharing lessons with parents and enabling continued learning at home is considered unique. This highlights the adaptability and innovation of some KG teachers in response to the changing educational landscape, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance on online learning (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). The foregoing reveals a diverse range of factors influencing the construction of professional identities among male KG teachers including continuous learning, peer support, self-motivation, parental influence, and teacher reputation.

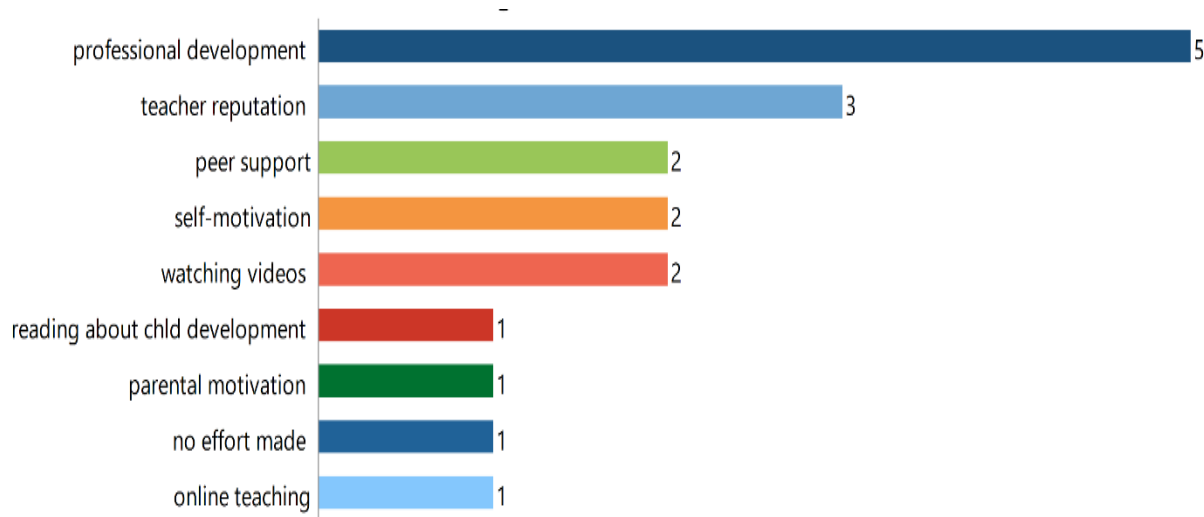


Figure 2: Influencers of Identity Construction

3.5 Challenges encountered by male Kindergarten teachers

The responses about challenges KG teachers encounter were grouped into 6 sub-theme areas after a key word cloud mapping; (1) teachers' attitude, (2) lack of qualified staff, (3) lack of teaching and learning materials, (4) Access to professional development, (5) low priority for ECE development, and (6) No support. There was one mention related to teachers' attitude, a teacher said that, *"teachers accepting or willingness to teach at the KG level"*; one mention of lack of qualified staff, a teacher said that, *"the lack of teachers to support me in class at the district I belong to, and per the education policy I know that at least a KG class should have two teachers, where one will be teaching as the other provide assistance to the children, but in my case I do not have"*. There was a total of three mentions related to lack of teaching and learning materials, a teacher said that, *"most of teaching and learning materials are not available, but we are doing our best to improve our output"*; one mentioned access to professional development, with a teacher indicated, *"inadequate training workshops"*. One mention related to *"low priority for ECE development"* was also made. Lastly there was a total of four mentions related to teachers having no support, where a teacher recounted that, *"throughout my teaching at the KG 1, I have not received any support"*.



Figure 3: Word Cloud on challenges KG teachers encounter

From the analysis, one of the key challenges highlighted is the lack of teaching and learning materials, with three mentions from the teachers. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of adequate resources and materials for effective early childhood education (Stipek, 2004; Mashburn et al., 2008). Insufficient resources can hinder teachers' ability to create engaging and stimulating learning environments, which are crucial for young children's cognitive and social-emotional development. Teachers further expressed concerns about not having enough support in the classroom and inadequate access to professional development opportunities. These challenges are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the need for ongoing professional development and collaborative support systems for early childhood educators (Sheridan et al., 2009; Byington & Tannock, 2011; Zaslow et al., 2010).

Interestingly, one of the teachers mentioned the low priority given to ECE development as a challenge. This resonates with broader concerns about the undervaluing and underfunding of early childhood education in many contexts (Barnett, 2008; Gambaro, Stewart, & Waldfogel, 2015). Insufficient investment and prioritization of ECE can lead to resource constraints, limited professional development opportunities, and a general lack of support for early childhood educators. It is however, instructive to note that since 2016 to date, Ghana has engaged in curriculum reforms, policy reviews and capacity development initiatives at the early childhood level. Teachers' attitudes towards teaching at the KG level is also cited as a challenge. This aspect is often overlooked in discussions about challenges in early childhood education but can significantly impact the quality of teaching and learning experiences for young children (Meier & Prochner, 2014; Moloney, 2010). Especially for men, the negative attitudes and perceptions of peers and critical others may fuel the stereotypes and misconceptions attributed to the level which may deter and discourage males who choose careers in early childhood education.

3.6 Practical Curriculum Implications

Teacher education programmes for Initial Teacher Education Institutions should integrate gender-responsive pedagogy modules that prepare all ECE teachers to challenge stereotypes and create inclusive environments (Warin & Wernersson, 2016). Curriculum developers should incorporate diverse teaching approaches that validate both nurturing and active learning styles, recognizing the spectrum of teaching techniques that transcend gender (Brownhill, 2014).

Training resources should feature male ECE teacher role models and case studies highlighting successful practices across genders (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017). Practicum experiences during Supported Teaching in Schools (STS) should be restructured to pair male student-teachers with experienced male mentors where possible, while creating safe spaces to discuss gender-specific challenges (Brody, 2015). Professional development modules for inservice KG teachers should include specific components on navigating societal perceptions and building professional identity in gender-imbalanced settings (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2018).

Education policies promoted by the Ministry of Education and the National Teaching Council should mandate gender-sensitive content in all ECE training materials, reinforcing that quality teaching transcends gender while acknowledging the unique contributions different perspectives bring to early childhood education (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015).

3.7 Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into the experiences and professional identity construction of male kindergarten teachers in Ghana, a highly underrepresented group in the field of early childhood education. The findings highlight the complex interplay of motivations, societal perceptions, environmental factors, and negotiation strategies that shape these teachers' journeys. Male kindergarten teachers in Ghana are driven by a combination of intrinsic motivations, such as the joy of witnessing children's growth and development, and extrinsic factors, including parental recognition and available resources. However, they also encounter negative societal perceptions and gender stereotypes that question their masculinity, intentions, and ability to care for young children.

Despite these challenges, the study reveals that male kindergarten teachers actively construct their professional identities through various strategies, such as embracing a caring approach, emphasizing their unique contributions, negotiating masculinity, developing specialized expertise, and fostering collaborative relationships with colleagues. The findings underscore the importance of continuous learning, professional development, peer support, and self-motivation in strengthening the professional identities of male kindergarten teachers.

3.8 Recommendations

1. The ECE coordinating units under district education directorates should design targeted professional development programmes and mentorship initiatives for male kindergarten teachers. These programmes should focus on enhancing their pedagogical skills, addressing gender-related challenges, and fostering a supportive community of practice.
2. The ECE coordinating units under district education directorates should conduct advocacy and awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the value of male role models in early childhood education by using male teacher ambassadors for career talks, workshops for stakeholders and school open day sessions with males as demonstrators
3. The ECE coordinating units under district education directorates should prioritize resource allocation and infrastructure development for early childhood education in their districts. Ensure that kindergarten classrooms are well-equipped with age-appropriate teaching and learning materials.
4. The Ghana Education Service in collaboration with Ghana Tertiary Education Commission and Conference of Principals of Colleges of Education should develop teacher education policies that intentionally promote gender diversity in early childhood education practice and consider implementing incentives and supportive systems to increase males enrollement in ECE and retain male teachers in kindergarten classrooms.

DECLARATION

Data Availability: All data used for the study were primarily gathered and transcribed. The data is available upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Ethical clearance was sought from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Ethics Committee, KNUST and all considerations were addressed.

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