



# Gender Inequality in China's Preschool Education

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**Abstract.** The study of gender inequality and gender stereotypes in kindergarten teaching and environment layout is helpful to preschool education practitioners to change their gender concepts and teaching methods, which is beneficial for children to form inclusive gender concepts and correct gender cognition. This study illustrates the problems and challenges in realizing gender equity in preschool education in China from three aspects: daily teaching of preschool teachers, the kindergarten environment and teaching materials, and the absence of male teachers in preschool education. This paper found that although teachers hold the education concept of “gender neutrality”, the influence of gender stereotypes still exists in the daily teaching, teaching materials, and decoration of kindergartens. Preschool teachers' different expectations for the roles of children of different genders lead to different degrees of gender-stereotyped impressions, and biased ideas that are reflected in preschool picture books, kindergarten wall decoration, and distribution of children's supplies. Gender stereotypes and prejudice have also caused a serious imbalance in the ratio of male and female preschool teachers and the lack of male teachers in China. However, male teachers play an irreplaceable positive role in shaping the gender concept of children. This study explores the gender bias in preschool education in China and the reasons for the shortage of male preschool teachers and puts forward suggestions and countermeasures for future education implications to reduce gender inequality.

**Keywords:** Preschool education · Gender stereotype · Gender inequality · Picture book · Male preschool teacher

## 1 Introduction

Reducing gender inequality aims to ensure the all-around development of the educated, which means both male and female students should be given fair and free development space in education. However, influenced by gender stereotypes in traditional Chinese culture, male and female students are always expected to play certain gender roles in the process of study, which is not conducive to the formation of neutral gender concepts and the lifelong development of students. At present, the Ministry of Education of China pays more and more attention to cultivating students' inclusive and neutral gender cognition. However, compared with other stages of education, gender education in preschool education has not been paid enough attention. Influenced by traditional gender

concepts, preschool teachers are likely to impose gender stereotypes on students without being aware of them. Such gender stereotypes are also reflected in preschool picture books, kindergarten environment, and necessities procurement. Children's gender consciousness will be affected by preschool teachers' teaching philosophy and kindergarten environment, thus forming gender-related stereotypes. In order to better assist kindergartens to reduce gender inequality, this paper studies the factors leading to preschoolers being constrained by gender stereotypes through a comprehensive investigation of gender inequality in the kindergarten teaching process, teaching materials, and environment. In addition, the paper proposes some suggestions on how to better cultivate children's inclusive gender awareness based on the large gap between male and female kindergarten teachers in China.

## 2 Gender Inequality in Kindergarten Teaching

Although most teachers remain the education concept of "gender neutrality" in daily teaching, due to the influence of gender stereotypes, most teachers find it difficult to treat children of different genders fairly in teaching. In the in-depth observation of kindergartens, it can still be found that gender stereotypes generally exist in the kindergarten environment. Preschool teachers' stereotyped evaluation and role expectations of children of different genders lead to their prejudice against students in kindergarten teaching and games [1].

### 2.1 Gender Inequality in Teachers' Daily Teaching

There is little research on the phenomenon of gender stereotypes or bias in classroom teaching [2]. Although preschool teachers will try their best to evenly distribute the opportunity to students of different genders in class, the different expectations of student's behavior in class will make teachers unconsciously treat male and female students differently.

In daily teaching, boys are often regarded as naughty students in classroom interaction. Teachers' impression of male students in class is that they are "courageous", "willing to cooperate with teachers" and "actively express themselves" [3]. Teachers generally hope to get the learning feedback of children as soon as possible within the limited class time, so as to decide whether to continue to explain or enter the next activity, thereby adjusting the teaching content and rhythm flexibly and timely. Therefore, teachers see boys' more active interaction as a way to participate in classes and activities. Compared with girls, boys are more likely to make fun of each other, compete with each other about who speaks louder, and misunderstand the question. However, under the intervention of teachers, they will be more active in classroom debate and presentation, while girls tend not to be as "radical" as boys.

In terms of kindergarten teachers, the image of girls in kindergarten class is more conventional and cautious, and they often play the role of bystanders or assistants in the classroom stage, only "a few will be very lively and unruly" [3]. From the teacher's perspective, it is noticeable that the expectation of girls' performance in class is "to obey the rules", "clever", "careful and obedient". Preschool teachers can understand

girls' shyness and quietness in class, and take it as a polite performance to educate naughty boys. However, such relatively negative reactions will make it difficult for teachers to interact in class and understand the learning situation. Coupled with the stereotypes of girls as "gentle" and "weak", girls are even more neglected in class.

In teacher-child interaction, teachers usually encourage children to actively participate in class by making boys and girls compete in groups, so as to improve students' attention and teaching effect. In daily life, teachers often emphasize the principle of "ladies first," which no longer appears in learning activities, but instead turns to "men first". In the children's song learning activities, because the boys' group's voice and proficiency are not as good as the girls' group, the teacher will say "Boys, try harder! You should take care of girls in life, but you should be better than girls in class participation" [4]. Teachers encourage children to compete fairly, but it is easy to reflect the attitude of "boys should be winners" in attitude and behavior, and unconsciously show the view of "boys are better than girls" in teaching behavior: girls' temporary priority is due to boys' modesty, and boys should be better than girls in activities. In some activities requiring strength, teachers would give priority to boys to demonstrate and describe the reason for success as "boys have more strength", which shows the seeds of stereotyped knowledge of gender in students' minds and reduces girls' motivation for achievement and willingness to participate [1]. These preconceived views make teachers seem tolerant to girls but ignore them in daily teaching activities while being strict with boys is more conducive to their growth.

## 2.2 Gender Stereotypes in Kindergarten Environment

According to professor Yao's research, social culture has a great influence on the growth of children's gender concepts and mental development, and the spread of the factor has a strong uncontrollability [5]. Therefore, as a place for children to learn, whether the environment of kindergarten can convey the concept of gender equality plays an important role in children's avoidance of gender stereotypes.

Different from the changes in the concept of gender education, the material environment and materials of kindergartens are difficult to replace and updated in time, resulting in children still exposed to gender stereotypes in the content of picture books, classroom layout and activity materials.

According to Sunderland's research, characters in children's stories have traditionally been constructed through a language based on established and pre-determined stereotypes [6]. In a large number of picture books, male characters generally play a more active role, while female characters seem more focused on pleasing the other participants around them. In addition, the number of female characters is also less than that of male characters, leading to the fact that women are usually not valued enough from the perspective of children.

Through actual observation in kindergarten, there are still different degrees of gender stereotype influence in kindergarten classes, especially in the aspect of occupation [7]. Male characters in picture books have more types of jobs and most of them are technology-intensive, such as engineers, doctors and police officers; women's roles are less diverse and mostly service-intensive, such as secretaries and nurses. Although some

picture books can balance the number of male and female characters, their career models are more male-dominated and deepen the auxiliary image of women in the career, implying that gender roles expect men to be in leadership and dominance [1]. In a survey of award-winning children's picture books, the ratio of male leaders to female leaders was 3:1, and 21 out of 25 pictures depicted women wearing aprons [8]. No matter the occupation type or position in the workplace, there is obvious gender bias in the depiction of male and female occupations in children's picture books, which may lead to gender bias in children's cognition of occupation.

In addition, there are obvious gender stereotypes in the description of family relations in children's picture books, especially in the role of the mother's participation far exceeds that of the father. Unlike mothers, fathers are invisible in many picture books, and it is difficult to see their participation in the stories. Even if there are father characters in some picture books, they are mostly described as silent, unable to take care of the family, and dedicated to work [9]. Fathers were significantly underrepresented in the 60 bestselling pre-school picture books in The UK in 2008, and when they do appear, although they are as disciplined as mothers, they are often verbally unemotional and rarely engage fully with their children [10]. Another study of children's books found that mothers in picture books provided more parenting and care than fathers, who were more frequent partners and financial providers [11]. The information conveyed in such picture books is opposite and disjoint from the concept of equality in modern gender education. In this kind of picture book, the favoritism of parents, not only children will have an incorrect understanding of the role of parents in the family, but also new parents will be confused to deciding what kind of parents they want to be [12].

Similar to the problems in picture books, gender stereotypes can also be reflected in environmental creation and material placement. In the class wall decoration of kindergarten, the image of female characters can be summarized into two categories: one is the image of household attendants wearing aprons and headscarves, and the other is the image of professional women wearing skirts and braids. In contrast, men in wall decorations are more likely to appear in the image of casual sportswear and suit shirts, which are more likely to give students the impression that they do not undertake housework and have a higher degree of professionalism in their profession [13]. In terms of color collocation, the environment of kindergarten is mostly created with bright colors in strong contrast, but the use of colors tends to be relatively rigid and simple when it comes to gender. For example, kindergarten teachers divide boys' and girls' play areas with blue and pink.

The kindergarten also provides children with quilts, toothbrushes, towels and other daily necessities. Aiming to distinguish the daily necessities of boys and girls, blue and plaid products are often chosen for boys, while pink and cartoon products are preferred for girls [14]. Admittedly, it is convenient for teachers to manage and makes it easier for children to find their own items. But on the other hand, this distinction reinforces children's color stereotypes. In fact, there are many effective ways to distinguish students' daily necessities. Teachers can try to have students mark their belongings with different stickers or graffiti. Rather than using color to reinforce boys and girls' stereotypes of each other's gender, it is better for each individual to express their own individuality. In the distribution of props for kindergarten activities, boys are usually provided with

dark props while girls are provided with bright colors. And boys are often recommended to play with legos and puzzles, which require more spatial and logical thinking, while girls are more likely to play with dolls and role-playing games, which in fact are equally suitable for both [14]. Another good example is in the performance activity area of kindergarten. Teachers usually only think that girls need to dress up, so they will provide them with various decorations, while there are relatively few clothes for boys, which directly leads to the decrease of boys' enthusiasm for playing games [1].

### 3 Gender Imbalance of Preschool Education Teachers

The low number of male employees is a universal problem in the preschool education field all over the world. According to Brody's statistics, in most countries around the world, only 1 to 3 percent of male professional's work in preschool education, and few countries have more than 3 percent [15]. In China, there are 5.198 million teachers and staff in kindergartens. Among them, there were about 4.802 million female teaching staff and 2.848 million full-time female teachers, accounting for 92.3 percent and 97.7 percent of the total, respectively [16].

#### 3.1 The Absence of Male Kindergarten Teachers

Deep-rooted traditional attitudes and social perceptions make Chinese men either disdain preschool education or afraid of being judged by others. In the traditional concept of China, men are regarded as the leader of the family, so people often have certain discrimination and distrust towards male preschool teachers [17]. As a result, male preschool teachers are generally less recognized than female preschool teachers by parents and kindergarten leaders. Moreover, the educational role of kindergartens in Chinese society is not paid enough attention, and the expectation level of preschool teachers is still equivalent to "nanny" [18]. Most parents do not think that male preschool teachers can take good care of their children, which discourages the enthusiasm of men to dedicate themselves to preschool education.

For male kindergarten teachers, the more serious problems are lower salaries and limited opportunities for advancement. According to Jia's statistics, the average salary of kindergarten teachers in Jieshou city is about 2,500 yuan per month, while that of private kindergarten teachers is less than 2,000 yuan per month [18]. Men from poor families are less likely to work in the preschool education industry because they are the breadwinner of the family. In the comparison of male and female preschool teachers with teacher honors, it is obvious that the professional title level of male teachers is generally low. Male teachers are rarely promoted because their performance in basic skills and curriculum competitions is lower than that of female teachers of similar age [19].

Even with a stable income and the support of national policies, the heavy workload still discourages many men from taking the job. As a few male teachers, they were often required to undertake hard work and technical work: in the interview, teacher Henry said that they even "used an electrical drill and a saw to decorate the classroom walls" [20]. Among them, male teachers were asked to do the most part-time jobs in information technology, most of the time in the management of Wechat official accounts, websites

and other publicity media [19]. In the current situation that all kindergartens attach importance to network publicity and strive to get more parents' attention, male preschool teachers undoubtedly need to spend a lot of time and energy on the management of these platforms. Due to social stereotypes of men, male teachers are expected by their colleagues and superiors to take on more work, which is out of their scope and seldom paid for. It can be seen that male teachers are expected to exhibit domineering masculinity, that is, they are expected to play the role of disciplinarian, deal with unruly students, and throw themselves into work at all costs [21]. However, such high expectations and heavy work burdens are unfair to male teachers and may cause them great psychological pressure.

### **3.2 Pre-school Education Needs Male Teachers**

Male teachers play an important role in children's gender education, which helps children to establish a correct gender awareness. Male teachers are like "fathers" for children in kindergartens, which can effectively make up for the lack of male education in family education and the absence of fathers in family companionship. At the same time, male teachers' participation in educational activities can eliminate the deficiency of children imitating female teachers' behavior. Most of children's behaviors in society are completed by observing or imitating the people around them. For them, their teachers are the best imitation models [22].

The participation of male teachers provides children with male social imitation samples, and enables them to compare men and women to explore the differences between different genders. When children have a certain understanding of their own gender and characteristics of the opposite sex, they can more clearly and actively make behaviors in line with their gender identity, which is conducive to their personality building.

In terms of physical characteristics, male teachers are more adaptable and responsive than female teachers and can organize more challenging activities in the actual teaching process and ensure the safety of students [23]. Intense strenuous and challenging exercise can better promote the development of children's physical function so that children are more willing to challenge themselves.

## **4 Conclusion**

To conclude, the result reviews the existence of gender stereotypes and gender inequality in kindergarten teaching in China. Influenced by the traditional gender concept, preschool teachers will unconsciously guide children to acquire characters that conform to social gender expectations in the daily teaching process. In addition, gender bias is also reflected in the inappropriate depiction of gender characteristics in children's picture books, as well as in the layout of the kindergarten environment and procurement of supplies. The absence of male preschool teachers in kindergartens leads to the absence of gender reference objects and further reduces the possibility of forming correct gender cognition. Therefore, more attention should be paid to these factors in the kindergarten curriculum and environmental design in the future.

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