

Dilemmas and Hopes: Preschool Teachers' Gender Concepts and Their Gender Education Practices

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Abstract

The preschool stage is of great significance to the formation of children's concepts of gender roles, and the educational concepts and practices of preschool teachers have a profound impact. Through interviews with seven in-service preschool teachers and two graduate students in preschool education, this paper found that preschool teachers' conceptions of gender are limited by traditional Chinese attitudes, and that play activities, the selection of picture books, and the creation of environments in the kindergarten are all subject to parental supervision, and that the dual role of the teacher makes it difficult for them to carry out gender education in kindergartens because of the dilemmas they face in their educational roles. Some teachers have reflected and acted in a positive direction.

Keywords

Preschool Teachers, Gender Role Concepts, Gender Education.

1. Introduction

The preschool stage is a critical period for the formation of children's gender stereotypes ^[1], and since teachers play a special role and young children often imitate them, child psychologists emphasize the role of preschool teachers in children's education.

Children's gender development is influenced by a variety of factors, including biological genetics and social culture. Although gender equality is the basic national policy of China, some people still hold the concept of gender inequality, which affects the concept of the next generation and their future development. As there is a general lack of sex and gender education at all stages of education in China, the concept of gender roles and the practice of gender education by preschool teachers are particularly important. It has been shown that society and others have an important influence on children's gender role concepts at the preschool stage^[2]. Based on these realities, this paper focuses on several key questions: have preschool teachers received relevant gender education? What are the differences in gender role perceptions among preschool teachers of different genders? How do they practice gender education in their daily interactions? What is the impact of these practices on children? Are they supported by parents and society? In what ways do kindergartens influence the formation of children's conceptions of gender roles? How can children receive scientific gender education and develop scientific concepts of gender roles? This paper is an attempt to explore the issues related to gender role concepts and gender education practices of preschool teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Teachers' Gender Role Perceptions

Research on gender role perceptions of teachers, both domestically and internationally, primarily focuses on gender stereotypes and androgyny. Regarding the impact of teacher gender stereotypes, studies by Sarah and Jill found that teachers with scientific gender concepts

can promote the development of women in vocational education [3]. Li Chaoqun discovered that teachers with more rigid gender role concepts have a positive predictive effect on the formation of gender stereotypes in primary and secondary school students, with teachers' activity gender stereotypes being positively correlated with students' gender role concepts regarding occupations, activities, and traits [4]. Wu Jing found that teachers' gender concepts can influence children's preferences and choices in clothing to some extent [5]. Teacher gender role stereotypes are an important reason for the formation and expansion of gender differences in academic performance and psychology, but Wang Lu's research found that parents' gender expectations for kindergarten children have a stronger effect than kindergarten teachers [6]. In terms of androgynous education, Gai Xiuling believes that teachers' scientific and appropriate intervention in children's role-playing can promote the development of children's androgyny [7]. Hu Juan et al. found that female teachers with higher levels of androgynous education have a more significant positive effect on children's androgynous education [8].

2.2. Research on Gender Education

The conceptualization and content of sex education abroad have evolved from a focus on reproductive systems and knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases to encompass all aspects of sexuality, including gender identity, gender role formation, and the development of gender awareness. Consequently, the content of sex education has expanded and improved, moving beyond narrow knowledge transmission to encompass a comprehensive education on sexuality, including sexual physiology, psychology, and ethics. Sweden was the first country in the world to implement adolescent sex education, while the United States was one of the earliest to initiate sex education programs. Japan emphasizes education on sexual civilization, ethics, and the concept of gender equality.

Regarding the influencing factors in children's sex education, Fitzpatrick and McPherson suggest that gender stereotypes are subtly present in children's coloring books, which may negatively impact children's gender role perceptions [9]. Jessica W. and Gail D.'s research indicates that without appropriate intervention, male children are more likely to exhibit violent behavior, which tends to increase with age. Okanda and Taniguchi found that children's preferred choices largely align with adult gender preferences, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the transmission of gender stereotypes during gender interactions with children [10]. Xu Jia et al.'s research confirms that similar phenomena exist among Chinese children [11]. Unconscious gender biases in female teachers can influence the formation of gender roles in young children during teacher-child interactions [11].

In terms of the implementation of sex education, Germany has integrated gender equality education into secondary education curricula [12] to ensure relatively equal employment and educational opportunities for both genders, as well as relatively equal future development prospects [13]. Lin Jianying has proposed specific requirements for the goals, content, and implementation of sex education curricula in Chinese kindergartens [14].

3. Research Methodology

This study focuses on preschool teachers, encompassing both male and female educators currently or formerly engaged in frontline teaching roles within public and private kindergartens. Furthermore, the research includes early childhood education graduate students with 3-5 months of practical experience in kindergarten settings. These students, as prospective preschool teachers, represent the future of the early childhood education workforce. Their experiences, particularly the challenges arising from the dissonance between gender education theory and practical application, are crucial. Addressing these issues and determining effective strategies for navigating them will directly impact their future gender education practices upon formal employment.

3.1. Interview Method

In this study, "purposeful sampling" and "snowball sampling" were employed to select the interviewees. When the author was participating in a kindergarten - related project under the guidance of a supervisor, the author noticed gender - based differences in teachers' instructions, tones, and requirements for children of different genders, which aroused the author's research interest. In subsequent communications, the author got in touch with many in - service preschool teachers. The preliminary research indicated that the preschool teacher group did not show strong heterogeneity in gender education issues. Factors such as different ethnic groups, regions, educational backgrounds, training methods, types of kindergartens where they taught, positions, and career development paths had little impact on their gender education concepts. Ultimately, considering the internal differences and diversity of the interviewees, 6 female and 1 male in - service preschool teachers were selected as research subjects from among those who were accessible and willing to be interviewed. In addition, for a comprehensive analysis, 2 female postgraduate students majoring in preschool education with rich first - line kindergarten internship experience were selected for supplementary interviews. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

The study conducted in - depth interviews with these 9 interviewees. The duration of a single interview ranged from 0.5 to 1.5 hours. Some of the interviewees were revisited, and their identity information was anonymized. The interviews revolved around the interviewees' life experiences to understand the formation process of their gender concepts and how they incorporated these concepts into their work.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Interviewees

Serial Number	Gender	Age	Ethnic Group	Years of Work Experience	Educational Background	Position	Nature of Kindergarten	Marital and Childbearing Status
F1	Female	31	Dong	5 years	Bachelor's degree	Head Teacher	Public	Married and with children
F2	Female	26	Han	6 years	Secondary vocational school education	Head Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children
M1	Male	28	Han	6 years	Secondary vocational school education	Physical Fitness Teacher	Public	Engaged and without children
F3	Female	25	Han	2 years	Bachelor's degree	Assistant Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children
F4	Female	25	Han	2 years	Bachelor's degree	Assistant Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children
F5	Female	33	Han	10 years	Bachelor's degree	Head Teacher	Private	Married and with children
F6	Female	23	Han	1 year	Bachelor's degree	Assistant Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children
F7	Female	22	Han	3 months	Master's degree (in progress)	Probationary Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children
F8	Female	23	Han	5 months	Master's degree (in progress)	Probationary Teacher	Public	Unmarried and without children

3.2. Observation Method

In addition to interviews, during the research, the author conducted non - participant observations in the kindergarten where the interviewee F5 worked to supplement the

interview data. After communicating with the kindergarten's management, the author entered the kindergarten when conditions permitted. The author observed from the sidelines during teachers' activity preparation and after - class activities without expressing opinions. Since children's outdoor courses, classroom courses, and "Vocational Education Mini - classes" were not within the scope of participation, the observation scope was limited. The observation results were only used as supplements to the interviews and for auxiliary verification. The observation content was carried out around the observation outline and focused on children and teachers.

4. Research Results

4.1. Words That Cannot Be Spoken: Limitations of Teachers' Own Gender Concepts

Language has a non-negligible power in cultural inheritance. This power is not only a continuous vitality but also an invisible constraint. The Chinese traditional culture's taboo on discussions related to "sex" has persisted until now, which makes many people unable to talk about sex education. At the same time, in the process of inheriting traditional culture, some words with very obvious gender stereotypes have continued to be used, and ideas such as "valuing men over women" and "men being superior to women" have never been truly erased. Such gender concepts easily lead teachers to form gender role stereotypes themselves, which are unconsciously revealed in daily life and subtly influence children. During the interview process, the author found that only three interviewees, F6, F7, and F8, could calmly accept relatively straightforward sex education courses focusing on biological gender from a conceptual perspective. They believed that scientific sex education should be popularized.

"Genital organs are originally a part of the body. There are always many people who feel ashamed, which is really unnecessary. It's already the 21st century. There's no need to be secretive about scientific sex education. It is itself a part of science." (F7)

Some teachers also expressed their "openness" and "tolerance". Both M1 and F4 said, "We can play relevant educational popular science animations." However, if children immediately raise questions or follow-up inquiries, they are unable to continue expressing and will "feel very embarrassed." But more interviewees indicated that they were relatively conservative. They could not accept saying words related to sex education or engaging in sex education teaching behaviors, let alone putting them into practice in skills teaching or picture book reading activities.

In teaching, all female interviewees showed their agreement with the idea that "girls are more obedient, gentler, and easier to discipline than boys." For the quieter boys in the class, some teachers said they were "very anxious" and believed that "boys should all be lively and active." Such expressions imply that their own gender role concepts are rather stereotyped, endorsing the view that "girls should be gentle and quiet, and boys should be naughty." During the observation process, the author also noticed that teachers are always more tolerant of naughty boys. After failing to criticize them, they will choose to ignore them. However, when two girls are distracted (discussing whose clothes look better) while the teacher is speaking, the teacher will be quite angry, with a stiffer expression and a harsher tone, even scolding, "You are girls. Why are you not obedient?"

Teachers should always maintain a high level of sensitivity to the invisible gender stereotypes in language and culture and try their best to avoid saying such words. One interviewee said that she was ashamed to learn sexual knowledge due to gender barriers. She was aware of her own deficiencies and hoped to make efforts to remedy them. She also reflected on her language habits, but due to habit, the effect was minimal.

"During junior high school biology class, when the reproductive organs were mentioned, everyone would laugh, and the teacher would skip that part and ask us to study it by ourselves. And the teacher would always say things like what girls should do and what boys should do, or give you such hints more or less, and it became a fixed mindset. In university, I should have been more open-minded and more proactive in contacting new things, but I still didn't dare and wanted to escape. Sometimes I would subconsciously say some words with strong gender colors like 'Girls are the cutest' and 'Boys are simply unmanageable.' But after saying them, I would realize that it was actually wrong. But the words had already been spoken, and I could only tell myself to pay attention next time. But maybe I still won't notice next time, after all, that's how my subconscious works." (F3)

The interviewees' own experiences of receiving gender education and the social discourse environment in which they grew up have continuously deepened their existing gender role concepts. Such limitations make words related to sex words that cannot be spoken, and the subconsciously blurted-out gender evaluation-like words continue to quietly deepen the current situation of their stereotyped gender role concepts. The gender education awareness ability and behavioral level of preschool teachers urgently need to be improved [15], and this is exactly the reason.

4.2. Omnipresent Eyes: Requirements from Parents and the Teaching Environment

In modern society, under the requirements and regulations of the "Technical Requirements for Safety Prevention and Control Systems in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens", monitoring technology basically covers every corner of kindergartens. In addition to safety protection and accountability, the omnipresent monitoring also brings great pressure to preschool teachers. All nine interviewees said that the monitoring caused them a certain degree of distress. As a male preschool teacher, M1 said that he faced greater pressure than other teachers. In addition to physical fitness activities, he occasionally needed to help female teachers who were unable to spare time manage the class, especially tying the girls' braids after the lunch break. However, later he received feedback from parents who thought that the male teacher had been in too close contact with the girls. Therefore, he paid more attention to physical contact with children afterwards.

"There are monitors everywhere. We give parents the right to view the real-time monitoring. But sometimes you don't know that your actions will be misunderstood by parents. You can't defend yourself even if you try, and there's nothing you can do about it. If I put myself in the parents' shoes, I can understand them. After all, the safety of children comes first." (M1)

Picture books, as the main body of children's reading, play the role of preschool teaching materials and are an important medium for constructing children's gender awareness. The characters presented in picture book stories play a significant role in the formation of young children's gender role concepts [16]. The expectations of gender roles in society and gender physiological knowledge are conveyed to children through picture books, and scientific picture books can help teachers conduct gender education better. However, through interviews, the author found that teachers often cannot choose picture books independently. All picture books are ordered uniformly by the kindergarten, and teachers can only passively accept them. F5 said that she could realize that sometimes the gender stereotypes conveyed in picture books were not advanced, but she could not make any changes.

"The school will check the number of picture books in the class, and parents will ask the teacher for the electronic version. There are invisible eyes supervising you everywhere. It's impossible to rely on your own strength. You can only follow the school's requirements and go along with the wishes of most parents. We preschool teachers are already in the service industry, and we

still have to consider parents' satisfaction. There are so many restrictions, and there's no way around it." (F5)

The same is true for the environmental creation in kindergartens. Due to her excellent handicraft and painting abilities, F2 undertook most of the environmental creation work in the kindergarten. She said that she could feel very obvious gender stereotypes during the environmental creation process. For example, there were fixed templates for character image design: girls have long hair, wear pink bows, pink skirts, and pink shoes; boys have short hair, wear blue tops, black shorts, and white sports shoes. There are few changes that can be made in environmental creation because "parents coming and going are watching, and if there are things that are different from their concepts, they will give feedback on various platforms" (F8). The developed network has become a "double-edged sword" for society to supervise the work of preschool teachers. It seems to be the "omnipresent eyes" that limit their progress towards more scientific and advanced gender education.

4.3. The Collision between Ideal and Reality: The Dilemma of Teachers' Dual Identities

Human beings are social animals existing and developing in society, and people in society always have multiple identities. Among the author's interviewees, in addition to the identity of a teacher, two of the various social identities, such as son and sister, are the most noticeable. One is the "mother", which is associated with blood relationship and family affection; the other is the "student", which is related to knowledge and development. Both F1 and F5, the two interviewees, are married and have children. When talking about the influence of the kindergarten on their children's gender development, they all expressed their distress. F1's child is currently two years old. She has not deliberately carried out relevant gender education, so the child cannot clearly distinguish between male and female genders. However, the surrounding environment and the people the child comes into contact with will inevitably provide "onlooker-style" education to the child, and occasional jokes will also make the child confused about the distinction between male and female.

"Originally, this is a place where ethnic minorities live in compact communities, so it's relatively backward. There's basically no standard given. As long as the child is safe, parents don't care either. I don't want my child to be like them. But since I have a job here, it's not easy to leave. And I don't know how to teach correctly by myself. In case I teach wrongly or unscientifically, I'll regret it too late in the future." (F1)

F5's distress lies in that her son in the upper grades of primary school has typical "masculine characteristics", being careless, noisy, and irritable, and he needs to be guided. However, her own gender concepts are still deeply rooted, and she will unconsciously convey gender stereotype viewpoints in her usual kindergarten teaching. Such a conflict troubles her a lot.

The student identities of the interviewees F7 and F8 are the main reasons for their distress. As interns, they both participated in front-line preschool teaching work. The connection between theory and practice does not happen overnight, and the accumulation of experience always progresses in a spiral. Having received higher education, they are full of expectations and hold advanced gender concepts and interaction methods with children. They strive to make sex education and gender education take a place in the educational content of kindergartens starting from themselves. However, these attempts were stopped by senior teachers, and the new ideas are challenging the old viewpoints of the "senior teachers".

"I originally thought I could 'do an experiment' and show what I'm capable of, combining theory with practice. But there's no way. There are still many restrictions. After all, the kindergarten stage is an important period for children's development, and every aspect must be treated with great care. As someone who is seen as 'doing an experiment' by other teachers, I can't be

responsible for the children's future. I can't do these things until I can guarantee 100% that the influence will be good." (F8)

Being a preschool teacher and a mother; being a preschool teacher and still a student, such dual identities have put the interviewees in a dilemma of gender education. The collision between the ideal and the reality makes them urgently need scientific gender education guidelines and proven scientific and effective gender education methods.

4.4. Compromise after Futile Efforts: The Reserve Force for the Progress and Development of Concepts

"Helplessness" seems to be the word mentioned most frequently in the interviews. "Helplessness" due to the limitations of their own gender concepts, "helplessness" because of the requirements of the kindergarten and parents, and "helplessness" from not being able to find guidelines. These actually reflect their thinking and efforts from the side. After reflection, new ideas are generated, and they want to change the current situation through hard work. However, in the process of implementing these new ideas, they are restricted and hindered in various ways. This indicates that the current situation of preschool teachers' gender education and the change of gender concepts are already in preparation. New teachers start to interact with children with new viewpoints, hoping to bring positive gender education, and such behaviors have already attracted attention. "A single spark can start a prairie fire." Although further practice is still needed, it can be regarded as the "reserve force" for accepting advanced concepts. Through follow-up interviews and brief understanding, the author learned that F6 spontaneously supplemented scientific sex education short videos for children during their indoor free activities to help them learn relevant physiological knowledge; F4 and F7, under the author's introduction, tried to cooperate in applying for a gender education research project; M1 encouraged more children to actively participate in various physical fitness activities. They actively look for sex education books suitable for preschool children and try to understand androgyny education. Even F3, who does not plan to continue working as a front-line preschool teacher in the future, has shown an interest in the research on teachers' gender concepts. Although some efforts were once in vain and they compromised with the practical requirements due to "helplessness", the momentum for the progress and development of concepts has emerged, and the future seems promising.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

After an in-depth exploration of preschool teachers' gender role concepts and gender education practices, this study found that current preschool teachers' gender education faces multiple dilemmas. Under the influence of traditional culture, teachers have limitations in their own gender concepts, making it difficult to carry out sex education and having gender stereotypes; the supervision from parents and the teaching environment, such as the restrictions in aspects of monitoring, picture book selection, and environmental creation, have hindered the promotion of scientific gender education; teachers' dual identities have put them in a dilemma between the ideal and the reality in educational practice. However, teachers have already reflected on themselves and taken actions. Some teachers have tried to carry out sex education, apply for research projects, and explore new educational methods. This shows that the current situation and concepts of preschool teachers' gender education are changing in a positive direction. Although there are still challenges at present, the future development trend is promising, and it is expected to provide more scientific gender education for preschool children. To promote the all-round development of preschool children, it is crucial to carry out scientific gender education in the preschool stage. Specifically, it should start from two aspects: gender-emphasizing education and gender-weakening education. In gender-emphasizing education, all sectors of society need to establish correct awareness, and relevant departments should

formulate educational guidelines to provide scientific guidance for educational practice; educational bureaus and publishers should strictly control the publication of picture books to ensure the transmission of correct gender knowledge; teachers and parents should be trained separately to correct their stereotyped gender concepts; preschool teachers should cooperate with parents to carry out parent-child activities, implement the "co-education by family and school" in practice, and help preschool children master gender knowledge, understand physiological differences, and learn to protect themselves. In terms of gender-weakening education, according to the social interaction theory, parents and teachers should correct their own gender stereotypes, weaken the distinction between the two genders, and take androgyny as the training goal. This requires relevant departments to formulate educational and action guidelines, educational bureaus and publishers to strictly screen picture books to avoid the negative impact of gender stereotypes on children; professional personnel should organize the training of teachers and parents to help them change their concepts; teachers should reduce the differential treatment of children of different genders in daily interactions with children, dilute children's gender stereotype impressions, and help children establish scientific gender concepts.

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