

Exploring Chinese Male Kindergarten Teachers' Job Satisfaction and Work Commitment

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, early childhood education has been predominantly associated with female teachers. However, in recent years, the role of male kindergarten teachers has gained recognition and significance as society becomes more aware of the importance of diverse role models for young children. Changing societal norms and a growing emphasis on gender equality have paved the way for more men to enter the field. Understanding how satisfied MKTs are with their work and how committed they are to this environment becomes crucial for developing and retaining a diverse and dedicated early years workforce. This study involved interviews with Chinese male kindergarten teachers (n=13) to explore how satisfied they were with their work and how committed they were to their kindergarten. Analysis revealed that interviewees attached importance to public attitude towards them, the quality of their interpersonal relationships, pay satisfaction, opportunities for promotion and professional development, work pressures and the physical work environment. Besides, their commitment to kindergarten commitment was also related to satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Recent studies highlight the importance of male kindergarten teachers (MKTs) in children's development, yet they remain vastly outnumbered by female teachers worldwide (Drudy, 2008; Tokić, 2018; Wu, 2016). According to UNESCO-UIS (2019), male pre-primary educators comprise only 3.63% in Europe, 2.06% in Central Asia, and 6.09% in North America. In China, the scarcity of MKTs is even more pronounced, as the proportion of MKT accounts for around 2.22% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

The shortage of MKTs reflects longstanding cultural perceptions that view early childhood education as a female-dominated profession (Zhang et al., 2024). Traditional gender roles and societal expectations discourage men from entering this field, contributing to the extremely low representation of male teachers in Chinese kindergartens. This underrepresentation limits the availability of diverse role models for young learners and may also affect the development of gender awareness among children. Previous research has identified various impacts of this issue on children's development.

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According to some studies, the disadvantages of a lack of MKTs for boys include academic struggles (Chen, 2008), reduced physical activity (Jiang et al., 2004), and difficulty adapting to school (Zheng & Shi, 2011). The absence of male role models may also contribute to poor attendance and performance (Mills et al., 2008). Additionally, increasing MKTs promotes gender equality and enhances children's gender awareness (Li, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the factors influencing the employment rate of MKTs.

Based on the previous articles, improving teachers' job satisfaction can promote motivation and efficiency and give full play to their enthusiasm for work (Ololube, 2006; Zhang, 2022). Organisational commitment is closely related to employees' job satisfaction (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Clugston, 2000), and their commitment to stay working for their organisation can also be predicted by their satisfaction with their work (Yao & Wang, 2007; Singh & Loncar, 2010; Zhang et al., 2024).

Given the critical role of MKTs in early childhood education (ECE) and their potential to contribute to a more balanced learning environment, it is essential to examine their work experiences, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment to better understand the challenges they face and the factors that influence their retention in the field. In this context, the present study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the factors that Chinese MKTs associate with work satisfaction and investigating how they perceive the relationship between their job satisfaction and their commitment to remain in the profession. By deepening our understanding of these dynamics, the study seeks to inform policies and practices that support improved teacher retention and more effective early childhood education.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinning

This qualitative study draws upon the frameworks of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, Allen and Meyer's (1990) Organisational Commitment Theory, and Herzberg et al.'s (1959) Two-Factor Theory to explore the factors influencing male kindergarten teachers' jobs. Maslow's framework provides a hierarchical understanding of human needs, from physiological to self-actualisation, while Allen and Meyer's theory categorises organisational commitment into affective, continuance, and normative commitment, explaining how personal and emotional connections to the organisation influence job satisfaction. Satisfaction and its relationship with their organisational commitment.

Herzberg's (1959) theory distinguishes between hygiene factors, which prevent dissatisfaction, and motivators, which enhance satisfaction. Hygiene factors include company policies and management, supervision, wages, colleague relations and working conditions, and motivators are related to the work itself or the work content, including achievement, appreciation, significance and challenge of the work itself, responsibility, promotion, and development (Herzberg et al., 1959). According to Herzberg et al. (1959), motivators refer to the factors that could satisfy and motivate people, while hygiene factors refer to those that tend to produce opinions and negative behaviours.

Overall, the framework of these theories provides a lens through which to understand how different aspects of job satisfaction and organisational commitment interconnect to shape the experiences of male kindergarten teachers in China. It highlights the roles public attitude, the quality of interpersonal relationships, pay satisfaction, opportunities for promotion and professional development, work pressures and the physical work environment play in job satisfaction in early childhood education.

The theoretical framework of this research is presented in the Figure 1.

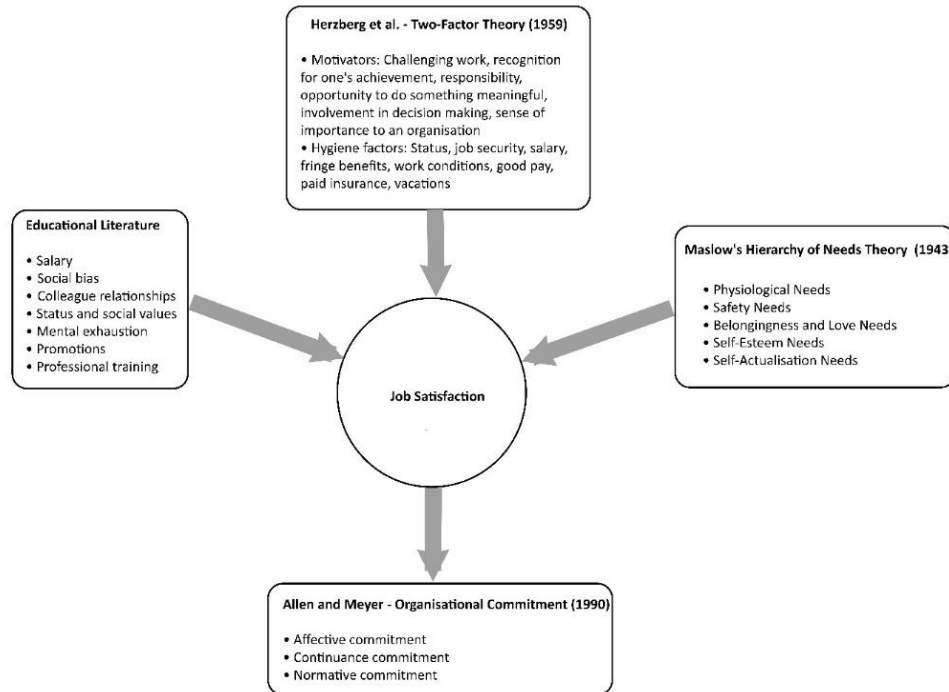


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Public Attitude Towards MKTs

Public attitude towards MKTs is defined as MKTs' perception of society towards them in their roles as early years educators, focusing on their emotional and behavioural tendencies. Johnson et al. (2010) state that male teachers, when trying to get along with young children, often face doubts from their parents, such as their work motivation, sexual orientation, and whether their personalities are suitable for the job. Compared with female kindergarten teachers, MKTs experience stereotyping from society and parents and may face a higher level of questioning and supervision of their work (Cushman, 2005). For instance, Foster and Newman (2005) assert that some men who are interested in primary education are sometimes even considered abnormal, homosexual and a threat to children. Akman et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative survey on parents from Turkey and found that more than half of the parents were not willing to allow their children to learn with male teachers.

A quantitative study conducted on MKTs (n=5) in China identified that when they chose to become kindergarten teachers, they were not understood and acknowledged by their friends, the children's parents or their female colleagues (Zhang & Wang, 2018). The study went on to state that MKTs were often considered to be no more than male nannies and were marginalised in the workplace, leading to frequent complaints and an increased motivation to quit. Tasks that might be ordinarily regarded as being more suited to males mean that MKTs are often asked to deal with computer and technology issues (Atkinson, 2011). In support of this, Yang (2015) reports that MKTs are often required to do physical work, such as moving tables or repairing computers, and were called on more often to work overtime.

2.2 Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are defined as MKTs' perception of the quality of their relationships with colleagues at work. As minorities in primary education, male teachers

often feel socially isolated (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Hedger, 2008; Yang & McNair, 2019). Societal stereotypes and prejudices can often contribute to them not having a sense of belonging to the broader group of early years educators (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Drudy, 2008; Gosse, 2011). Interviewing MKTs in China (n=3), Yang (2005) found that they expressed loneliness at work due to differing interests and conversation topics between men and women. Furthermore, the MKTs often hesitated to participate in activities with their female colleagues despite them admitting the need for interaction at work.

More recently, Mistry and Sood (2015) also identified societal prejudice against MKTs that contributed to their isolation and unfriendly work environments. An earlier study by Barış (2013) found that female kindergarten teachers (n=30) in Turkey held a negative attitude towards hiring MKTs, although their reasons were not disclosed. Furthermore, an Australian male kindergarten teacher felt compelled to reassure parents of "his sameness rather than difference" (Sumsion, 2000, p. 134) by mentioning his marital and parental status, despite believing it should be unnecessary. Yin (2018) also claims that male kindergarten teachers often feel alienated and isolated in school, which might lead to their leaving the job.

2.3 Pay Satisfaction

Pay satisfaction can be defined as MKTs' evaluation of how well they feel their pay reflects their worth. According to Schweitzer et al. (2014), women and men have a different understanding of the labour market and what might constitute a fair wage such that young men have higher initial and maximum salary expectations than women. Since early childhood educators often receive a lower salary than other sectors (Yang, 2015), the consequence can be that a low salary becomes one of the barriers for men choosing this industry (Rice & Goessling, 2005). Some researchers also argue that men's shift away from ECE reflects male privilege within a female-dominated field, where men benefit from a glass escalator that helps them ascend to higher-paying, higher-status positions (Scurfield, 2017; Zhang et al., 2024). Similarly, according to McDonald et al. (2016), low wages and poor working conditions are more unacceptable for male workers.

In a comparative study of kindergarten teachers in Turkey (n=163), Şahin and Sak (2016) found that salary, working conditions, co-working status, and organisational climate all influenced levels of job satisfaction. Notably, they found that men tended to be less satisfied with their salary than women. Mukuna and Mutsotso (2011) explain that the traditional expectation is that men are the primary breadwinners for their families, so if they perceive their income is lower than society might expect, they would feel undervalued and dissatisfied.

In China, Yang (2015) discussed the reasons for the lack of male teachers and reported the issue of *Mianzi* (a term based on culture), which refers to making people feel proud, special, confident, and more easily accepted by relevant reference groups through social status, income and social recognition (Filiari et al., 2019). Again, a low salary can make men hesitate to become an MKT because the lower salary can make them feel inferior in social interactions (Yang, 2015).

2.4 Opportunities for Promotion and Professional Development

Opportunities for promotion and professional development refer to the chances for promotion and training for MKTs. Research reports the gender differences in satisfaction levels with opportunities for promotion (Yang & McNair, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022), with Wong and Wong's (2005) study in Hong Kong suggesting higher satisfaction levels among male teachers. Similarly, Şahin and Sak (2016) found that MKTs in Turkey are generally more satisfied with their opportunities for promotion than their female counterparts. A reason

behind this may stem from the stereotypical notion that society favours men in management roles or that female teachers doubt their managerial capabilities and prospects for promotion (Uwizeyimana & Mathevula, 2014).

Regarding MKTs' professional development, Tucker (2015) conducted exploratory research on three primary school teachers in America. The participants complained about the few training opportunities to "examine, navigate, and address identity" (p. 16) and further expressed their desire to receive the professional training provided by schools, as it helps them to be more aware of their professional identity and advantages (Tucker, 2015).

In ECE, Koch (2015) conducted research on MKTs in Austria, indicating that men who actively display their profession in school training are more likely to promote a positive image of MKTs, including reducing the stereotypes that suggest they abuse children and the notion that early childhood educators are woman's job.

2.5 Work Pressure

Work pressure in this study refers to the fatigue and anxiety that overwork can cause MKTs to experience dissatisfaction with their work. Overwork can cause work pressure, which is another factor affecting job satisfaction (Lea et al., 2012). Fabian and Breunig (2019) also suggest that working hours, pay, security and flexibility can contribute to job satisfaction. Furthermore, a reasonable workload is important in ensuring employees' work efficiency (Bruggen, 2015; Elliott et al., 2014; Nwinyokpugi, 2018). In contrast, unreasonable work intensity and workload levels may lead to employees' increased sense of pressure and job dissatisfaction (Tentama et al., 2019).

The nature of ECE is such that kindergarten teachers' daily roles involve interacting with very young children, so they experience the dual pressures of teaching and caring (Tsai et al., 2006; Liping et al., 2023). Goldstein (2007) also reports that kindergarten teachers work with children in the early stages of cognitive and emotional development, and they need to behave like a teacher but also care like a parent, increasing the workload.

Moreover, when children's behaviour is unruly, it can cause more pressure (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Research indicates that teachers at this level experience higher work pressure and greater burnout rates compared to their counterparts in other stages of education (Li et al., 2020). Working overtime, uncooperative children and large class sizes can also have an impact on teachers' working environment (Gordon, 2002). Jeon et al. report that the consequence is that psychological issues such as stress and fatigue are common.

A quantitative study carried out on both male (n=92) and female (n=141) kindergarten teachers in Turkey found that MKTs had a greater sense of burnout than females, although the reasons behind this were not cited (Sak, 2018). A recent study conducted with kindergarten teachers in Croatia (n=206; female participants=202; male participants=4) found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the length of time in post and the levels of stress and fatigue, indicating that kindergarten teachers with between 3 and 15 years of experience identified as having the most significant level of burnout due to high levels of exhaustion (Vukušić & Krstulović, 2024).

2.6 Physical Work Environment

Physical work environment refers to the conditions in MKTs' workplaces. Nordberg (2002) highlights distinct work cultures across various industries, emphasising that female-dominated behaviour patterns and perspectives predominantly shape the work culture within

kindergartens. This prevailing norm is attributed to the predominantly female composition of kindergarten teachers.

However, Børve and Børve (2017) argue that kindergartens must tailor the environment considering genders. They propose that activities involving male teachers and boys should exude traits like "toughness" and "roughness" (p. 1078), while exercises associated with female teachers and girls should emphasise gentleness and femininity (Børve & Børve, 2017). They go on to say that the presence of male teachers in some kindergartens involved in the physical environment's design is limited, often reflecting the prevailing female-centric culture in this aspect.

Contrary to this perceived necessity, Brownhill and Oates (2017) challenge the notion of "imposing" (p. 664) masculine roles and the presumed benefits of a male role model. Instead, they advocate for "celebrating the diversity and capacities" (p. 668) of workers in early years settings.

To summarise, based on the previous articles focussing on male teachers' work experience and job satisfaction, our study is conducted against the themes of public attitude towards MKTs, pay satisfaction, work pressures, interpersonal relationships, opportunities for promotion and professional development, and physical work environment.

2.7 Organisational Commitment

The notion of organisational commitment is based on Allen and Meyer's theory (Allen & Meyer, 1990), which includes affective, continuance, and normative commitment. According to Fu and Deshpande (2014), affective commitment refers to employees' emotional dependence, identification and commitment to the organisation, which is reflected in employees' loyalty to the organisation and work performance. Continuance commitment refers to the commitment that employees have to stay in an organisation in order not to lose their position and the benefits they have received after years of investment (Colquitt et al., 2011). Normative commitment is defined as the employee's perceived obligation to stay in the organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1996) or their personal and organisational values that fit well (Stephens et al., 2004).

Tarkar et al. (2019) conducted questionnaire research on 310 retirees in India to explore the relationship between passion for work, satisfaction with work and affective commitment. The results indicate that the higher the employee's satisfaction, the higher their affective commitment to the organisation (Tarkar et al., 2019). In some other regions and occupations, studies also report a positive relationship between affective commitment and employee satisfaction, such as the police profession in Taiwan (Kuo, 2015), the IT profession in India (Patrick & Sonia, 2012), and the teacher profession in Germany (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019).

According to Clugston (2000), there is a positive relationship between satisfaction with work and continuance commitment and the higher the employee's satisfaction, the harder it was for them to find another job with the same level of satisfaction, so there was a higher continuance commitment to the organisation. Some studies also reveal that continuance commitment, as an intermediate factor, has a mediating impact between pay satisfaction and turnover intention (Panaccio et al., 2014; Vandenberghe & Tremblay, 2008). Panaccio et al. (2014) report that employees with high continuance commitment to the organisation have a stronger relationship between pay satisfaction and turnover intention, whereas employees with low organisational commitment have a weaker relationship.

McCormick and Donohue (2016) report that aligning individual values with an organisation's mission and values positively influences normative commitment. Typically, volunteers are

drawn to organisations whose values resonate with their personal beliefs, leading to a generally elevated normative commitment (Souza & Dhami, 2008). Imam et al. (2013) also demonstrate that employees' satisfaction positively correlates with normative commitment. Also, De Nobile's (2016) quantitative study establishes a statistically significant relationship between teachers' satisfaction and normative commitment in primary schools.

3. Methods

Our study adopted a qualitative methodology in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with MKTs (n=13) employed in Chinese kindergartens. The research questions were:

1. What factors do Chinese MKTs feel associated with satisfaction with their work?
2. How do MKTs perceive the connection between job satisfaction and commitment to continue working in kindergartens?

3.1 Theoretical Underpinning

The research employs semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore these factors in depth. Thematic categories are aligned with Maslow's, Herzberg's, and Meyer's theories, linking them to different levels of needs and motivational factors. This alignment allows for a comprehensive understanding of factors Chinese MKTs felt that were associated with satisfaction with their work, as well as their perceptions of the connection between their job satisfaction and their commitment to continuing work in kindergartens. The Figure 2 shows the conceptual model of this research.

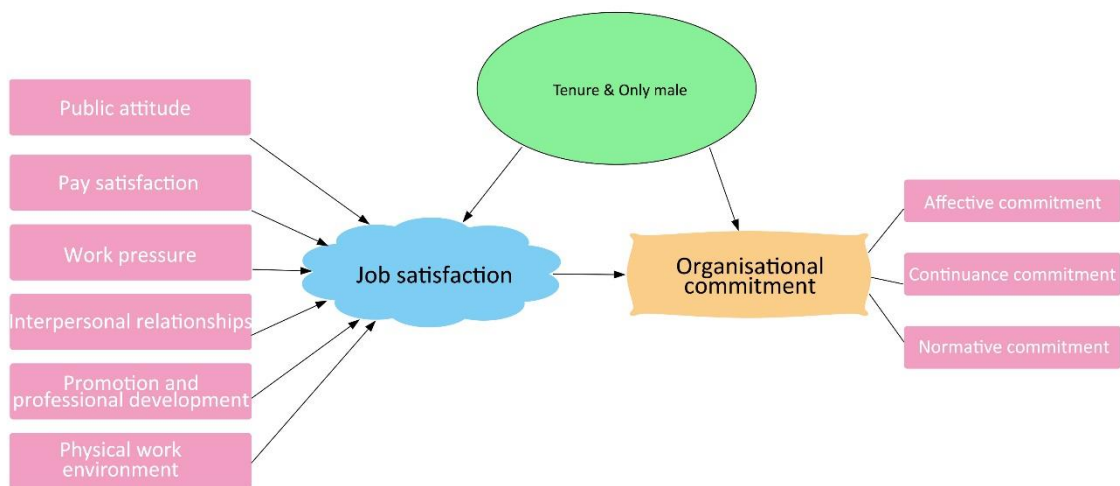


Figure 2. Conceptual Model

3.2 Participants

The recruitment of participants for this study was based on two criteria. The first was that they were MKTs working in China. The second was that they should have worked as a kindergarten teacher in their current organisation for at least one year.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

The interviews comprised semi-structured questions relating to MKTs' work experience based on reviews of previous studies relating to job satisfaction (Gao & Zhang, 2012; Lester, 1987) and organisational commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

Participants were contacted via WeChat and provided with study information and consent forms following organisational ethical approval for the study. Interviews, conducted in Mandarin via WeChat voice calls, lasted around 40 minutes each. Recordings were transcribed by a Chinese translation company and were sent to interviewees to check for accuracy. Mandarin transcripts were also translated into English and back to Mandarin for further accuracy checks.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. Themes were initially derived from semi-structured interview questions and existing literature on MKTs' work experience. Subsequently, themes and codes underwent review and editing, ensuring alignment with previous research and raw data. The final step involved testing coder reliability through peer review and assessing internal consistency.

Structural coding was used in the first cycle of coding, which is a problem-based coding method (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding was used in the second cycle of coding to discover and establish various relationships between subthemes and show the association between various elements (Charmaz, 2014).

3.5 Ethical Consideration

This research upheld respect for participants, avoiding coercion or intimidation. Informed consent was obtained, detailing the researcher's affiliation with the University of Lincoln and the study's purpose. Interviewees could withdraw before data analysis, and data remained anonymous and was securely stored on the researcher's encrypted university OneDrive.

The researcher ensured anonymity, privacy, and secure data storage, concealing participants' identities and kindergarten names. The selection was fair, and all participants were treated equally. Direct quotes from translated interviews were used only with the participant's approval. The researcher respected their wishes and ensured identifying details were excluded, quoting only relevant content.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Participant Backgrounds

Table 1 lists the participants' background information, including pseudonyms, tenure, and whether they are the only male teachers in the kindergarten. By summarising and analysing the interview content of the participants, nine themes (Table 2) were established that closely related to their work experience, job satisfaction and commitment to their organisations.

Table 1. Interviewees' Basic Information

Name	Tenure	Only male teacher
Bassam	Six years	No
Blair	Three years	Yes
Colin	Four years	Yes
Curtis	Two years	Yes
Garrett	One year	No
Henry	Two years	No
Liam	One year	Yes
Mamba	A year and a half	Yes
Mark	Five years	Yes
Orin	Four years	No
Stevie	One year	Yes
Yosef	Two years	Yes
Ziad	A year and a half	No

Table 2. Summary of Each Theme

Satisfaction with work	Public attitude towards MKTs (Tenure & Only male)	1Unvalued job 2Males' stereotyped work 3Bias towards males
	Interpersonal relationships	1Leaders 2Colleagues 3Children
	Pay satisfaction	1Salary
	Opportunities for promotion and professional development	1Promotion 2Training
	Work pressure	1Work intensity
	Physical work environment	1Environment
Commitment to kindergarten	Sense of belonging (Tenure)	1Philosophy and values 2Relationships
	Turnover intention	1Low salary 2Development and promotion
	Sense of loyalty (Tenure)	1Leadership 2Development, promotion and training 3Salary

4.2 Theme 1 – Public Attitude Towards MKTs

Colin commented, "The societal perception of ECE is less important than other stages, with parents prioritising safety over learning" (Field Notes, April 2021). Orin believed most men prefer higher education over ECE due to social status, which made him consider resigning for a higher education role. Meanwhile, Garrett and Stevie faced additional tasks that were seen as "gender consistent". Stevie felt burdened by tasks like physical labour and equipment repair, as "I perceived this as diverging from my teaching role" (Field Notes, April 2021). Blair and Mamba also recounted incidents where their competence was questioned or undermined due to their gender, which influenced their work evaluation.

Based on participant responses, public attitude towards MKTs appears to be important in achieving satisfaction in their work. Participants expressed feeling undervalued, often categorised as "male nannies" or "caregivers" rather than being recognised as teachers. Qin (2012) also agrees that the public does not recognise kindergarten teachers' professional quality and work value. For a long time, kindergarten teachers have been undervalued in their professional status and are labelled as having a "low entry-level" and "low social prestige" (p. 310) by society (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008). This also has been highlighted in some previous studies (Cushman, 2005; Johnson, 2008). Anliak and Beyazkurk (2008) suggest that

people may not be encouraged to enter this profession when choosing a career because of its low social status. This is consistent with interviewees' dissatisfaction in this regard. They expected social recognition and attention while not receiving it, affecting their evaluation and persistence in work.

Many interviewees also reported that some children's parents questioned their ability to work with children because of perceived male characteristics and personalities. There has also been literature about the pressure that MKTs suffer due to gender bias, gendered occupations and stereotypes in various aspects of work and to different degrees (Fu & Li, 2010; Sargent, 2004). The stereotypes from children's parents also affected their enthusiasm and willingness to do this work. This is consistent with Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Herzberg et al.'s (1959) Two-Factor Theory, indicating that high employee satisfaction not only comes from salary but also from the recognition of the organisation and social recognition.

Without support and understanding, MKTs are often placed in marginal roles in this field and are often expected to do extra tasks that match their gender and ability (Osgood, 2005). According to Colin, Garrett and Stevie, they not only needed to do the teaching work but also could be assigned some other "gender-consistent" work tasks, which affected their satisfaction. Hansen and Mulholland (2005) also indicate that male teachers may be employed to address gender imbalances in education, often assigned tasks aligning with traditional gender roles, like manual labour and technical work such as computer repair (Atkinson, 2011; Yang, 2015).

4.3 Theme 2 – Interpersonal Relationships

Yosef praised "the leaders' openness to feedback and understanding of my concerns" (Field Notes, April 2021). Liam also reported, "The supported leader is one of the most satisfying aspects that makes me want to stay" (Field Notes, April 2021). Conversely, Blair, Mamba, and Stevie expressed dissatisfaction with their leaders' management, feeling unheard and stressed.

For colleagues, Ziad said, "Even though I spend most of my time with another male teacher, I bond well with female colleagues during lunch breaks" (Field Notes, April 2021). Bassam had been in his job for a long time and got on well with a male colleague, which enhanced his satisfaction and sense of belonging to the kindergarten. Conversely, as the only male teachers in their workplace, Mamba and Orin initially faced challenges finding common ground with female colleagues.

For the relationships with children, Mark found "joy in the heartfelt words of children, feeling dedicated to my job due to the positive influence" (Field Notes, April 2021). Henry felt touched by the bond with a particular child, as "their fulfilment in progress and growth makes me proud" (Field Notes, April 2021).

Interviewees described their relationships with children, leaders, and colleagues, all of which played a crucial role in influencing their overall evaluation of work and their decision to stay. This is consistent with the results of Wong and Zhang (2014), indicating that teachers who have good interpersonal relationships often have higher satisfaction with work, and their mental health complaints are often less.

As described by interviewees, their friend-like relationship with their leaders made them feel valued at work. Liam, Yosef and Ziad all reported that their leaders were reasonable and willing to listen to their opinions when making decisions and arrangements. According to Luszczynska and Cieslak (2005), the support of leaders helps to reduce employees' perceived

pressure at work, and such negative pressure often affects employees' burnout, work efficiency and commitment. A good organisational climate is reflected in a harmonious, helpful and mutually supportive relationship between teachers and a democratic and open atmosphere (Astuti et al., 2019).

Regarding the relationships with colleagues, Yang (2015) reports that the sense of isolation at work is a major problem for MKTs since it is difficult for them to integrate into the activities dominated by female teachers as a minority in the workplace. Yin (2018) and Yang (2015) also indicate that Chinese MKTs often feel alienated in the school climate. However, in this study, most interviewees described very harmonious relationships with their colleagues, especially for long-tenured teachers, which positively impacted their satisfaction.

Concerning the relationship with children, most interviewees rated this part positively. They love the children, and the children respond with love. This is also supported by Yang (2015), who indicates that kindergarten teachers' happiness mostly comes from the children, and a good relationship with children is one of their motivations for sticking with this job.

4.4 Theme 3 – Pay Satisfaction

Among the interviewees, most complained about the issue of salary disparity in kindergarten teaching, particularly emphasising its lower status in China's overall pay structure, especially for male teachers.

Orin expressed, "I feel frustrated over limited salary growth" (Field Notes, March 2021). Stevie was contemplating leaving to address future financial needs like marriage and mortgage payments. Mark and Bassam also noted low salaries compared to peers in other fields. Blair complained that during the Covid lockdown in China, all teachers' salaries were halved despite having the same workload, which made him dissatisfied. Curtis mentioned that "higher-paying fields like programming are attractive for men" (Field Notes, April 2021), while Colin also described that MKTs had to bear more financial obligations than females.

When interviewees revealed their salary, most reflected their dissatisfaction and mentioned that kindergarten teachers' salary was generally lower in the overall salary structure in China, especially for men. This is in line with The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (2019, OECD) salary statistics for ECE and other levels of education in 2019. The results show that the initial salaries of upper-secondary teachers are generally higher than those of teachers in ECE (OECD, 2019). Liu (2018) also states that this phenomenon exists globally.

Orin complained that kindergarten teachers had a low salary ceiling, and even senior principals earned less than their peers in other fields. Both Orin and Stevie noted that some teachers had quit for this reason. This is consistent with the previous research results. Pay satisfaction with kindergarten teachers has an important influence on their satisfaction with work, which can often predict their stability and turnover intention (Chen et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2016).

However, the inequity in salary often brings great material pressure to the lives of MKTs since they are generally considered to be the main source of income for their families, and lower wages often make them face pressure from their families (Johnson, 2008). Colin agreed that he was more inclined to choose a job with a high salary and short holiday than a job with a low salary and long holiday.

4.5 Theme 4 – Opportunities for Promotion and Professional Development

Most participants addressed the limited promotion opportunities and minimal career advancement in kindergarten teaching. Orin reported, "Teaching in kindergartens is not a long-term job, as there were few opportunities for development and promotion in kindergarten" (Field Notes, March 2021). Henry expressed doubts about his ability to continue frontline work as he aged. Curtis also noted, "Kindergarten teaching is unstable and often seen as a young and energetic job" (Field Notes, April 2021). Mamba echoed this sentiment and said he might not stay in the kindergarten for long since limited promotion opportunities could influence his satisfaction and intention to leave.

Concerning professional development, Bassam, Blair, Henry, Mark, and Ziad valued training as a means of self-improvement and were content with the opportunities provided by their kindergartens. Blair said, "The training is beneficial for enhancing professional skills and understanding parenting methods" (Field Notes, April 2021). However, Mamba found theoretical training irrelevant to teaching, while Orin felt burdened by online courses without financial compensation.

The findings show that interviewees valued both material satisfaction and personal growth, aligning with Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasises physical, security, and self-realisation needs. Promotion was one of the aspects that many interviewees complained about, and it was also the biggest concern many interviewees had when they first chose this field. This is because kindergarten teachers often face obstacles to career promotion, emotional exhaustion and age issues (Tan & Qin, 2018). Mamba echoed this sentiment, mentioning intense competition for promotion and the tendency to switch careers or start his own businesses.

Regarding professional training, corresponding courses can be the key to determining teachers' success in school (Liu & Jih-Lian, 2016). As stated by Özden et al. (2019), training is beneficial for employees, letting them receive education again and improve their necessary skills and professional abilities; this is especially important for MKTs, who may be less good at reading and music teaching than female teachers (Pompper & Jung, 2013; Wingfield, 2009) and lack experience interacting with grandparents and parents (Yang, 2015). It can help teachers better understand the student-centred teaching model and promote students' efficient learning (Hanbury et al., 2008).

Blair felt that kindergarten training improved his professionalism in parenting, psychology, and child education. In contrast, Mamba, Garrett, and Orin were dissatisfied with inadequate and unreasonable training. Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) also report that employees who have been trained are often more satisfied with their jobs than those with limited promotions and fewer training opportunities.

4.6 Theme 5 – Work Pressure

Most participants, including Blair, Curtis, Mark, Garrett, and Orin, found their workload manageable with regular hours, weekends off, and no overtime, resulting in high job satisfaction. Orin reported, "Although I have some occasional additional tasks assigned by leaders, my teaching responsibilities are still easy to handle" (Field Notes, March 2021). Mark valued his flexible schedule, teaching only half a day, while Blair and Curtis appreciated leaving work on time without extra tasks, unlike more demanding jobs. Curtis highlighted the physical stamina of male teachers: "I feel less fatigued primarily due to my teaching-focused responsibilities" (Field Notes, April 2021).

Work pressure affects employees' satisfaction with work (Lee & Quek, 2018; Parveen & Bano, 2019). A reasonable workload is one of the critical factors in ensuring work efficiency (Elliott et al., 2014). This is consistent with the interviewees' opinions, who believed that their work intensity was not too high and that the holiday system had advantages compared with other industries. This was also one of the important factors that contributed positively to their satisfaction.

Furthermore, some literature on kindergarten teachers describes the heavy workload (ČeCHO et al., 2019). However, this phenomenon was not reflected in most of the interviewees in this study, possibly because of the differences between male and female teachers in their expectations and requirements on work intensity.

4.7 Theme 6 – Physical Work Environment

When Blair talked about his kindergarten environment, he expressed a cheerful attitude and described the environment at his workplace as a "good and colourful" environment. He reported that "the wall decoration uses a soft pack, which is one reason I liked this job and feel enjoyment at the workplace" (Field Notes, April 2021).

Also, Stevie mentioned that he enjoyed such a good physical work environment as a kindergarten teacher since "I have enough space for activities and do not have to face the computer every day" (Field Notes, April 2021). Ziad emphasised that he preferred his current kindergarten's facilities, teaching approach, and environment, as "it offers more teaching space and resources compared to my previous workplace" (Field Notes, April 2021).

Physical work environment's influence on employees' satisfaction has been often mentioned in previous literature (Albashayreh et al., 2019; Al-Hamdan et al., 2017), whilst in ECE, the impact has not been explored in detail. According to the results, Blair, Stevie, and Ziad described how this positively influenced the choice of ECE work. Blair reported that the kindergarten environment gave him a sense of pleasure when he initially entered this profession. This is supported by Baernholdt and Mark (2009), who indicate a pleasant physical work environment positively impacts employees' working mood.

Stevie also described that the physical work environment often made him feel supported and relaxed, which was one of the factors that made him feel satisfied and motivated. Nowakowska et al. (2016) also report that employees' performance can be largely affected when they work in an unacceptable environment.

4.8 Theme 7 – Sense of Belonging

Liam felt deeply connected to his kindergarten and reported, "My kindergarten is a Montessori kindergarten, and its facilities, environment and teaching philosophy have deeply attracted me" (Field Notes, April 2021). He identified with kindergarten's concept of parenting and education, fostering a strong sense of loyalty.

Mark's emotional bond grew stronger over five years, built on close relationships with children and colleagues, deepening his sense of belonging. He said, "Despite tempting offers from other schools, I value the current environment and hope for long-term tenure" (Field Notes, April 2021). Ziad valued his kindergarten's democratic, harmonious environment, which reflected its high-end education philosophy, fostering his sense of belonging and strong relationships with colleagues and leaders.

According to the results, Liam, Mark and Ziad reported a positive sense of belonging and attachment to the kindergarten. Liam described his kindergarten as a Montessori

kindergarten, and he was attracted by the teaching philosophy based on freedom and innovation, which gave him a strong sense of belonging to his kindergarten. This is supported by Fu and Deshpande (2014), who show that affective commitment can make employees develop an attachment to the organisation and regard themselves as part of it.

Mark gave a strong impression of the close affective connection with his colleagues and children. He also described such a relationship as needing to be valued since he was a minority at work and was not excluded by the larger group, and his colleagues treated him all well. This is supported by Tarkar and Dhamija (2019), indicating that the relationship between intimacy with colleagues and affective commitment is positively regulated by satisfaction.

Moreover, leadership styles (Jackson et al., 2013), harmonious relationships with colleagues (De Nobile, 2016), and supportive organisational communication (Bray & Williams, 2017; De Nobile, 2016) are also helpful for employees to receive good emotional support in the workplace and increase their affective commitment to the organisation. As Ziad mentioned, because of the democratic and harmonious environment in the kindergarten and the friendly relationship with colleagues, he developed a positive commitment to the organisation.

4.9 Theme 8 – Turnover Intention

Curtis and Garrett attributed this turnover to dissatisfaction with salary, and Curtis emphasised, "The low salary is the main reason for my kindergarten's high turnover rate" (Field Notes, April 2021). Colin also noted that his colleagues were leaving for better prospects and higher salaries since "male teachers often face economic stress and higher expectations for promotion" (Field Notes, April 2021).

Liam shared worries about men's job suitability and development prospects, citing insufficient material support from his kindergarten, which made him dissatisfied. Stevie also expressed, "There is not much room for improving salary and development, and that is what I care about" (Field Notes, April 2021). In contrast, Ziad's decision to switch kindergartens was driven by better benefits and salary, emphasising his financial commitment and satisfaction with other aspects of his new workplace.

Concerning the turnover, the interviewees reflected on their consideration of salary and material value when evaluating this commitment to their kindergarten. This is consistent with Allen and Meyer's (1990) definition of continuance commitment, which means that employees stay in the organisation so as not to lose the position they already have and the benefits they have gained from years of investment.

Many interviewees rated their work as a high-turnover job, especially for males, since they had a higher expectation of salary. Because of their dissatisfaction with salaries and development opportunities, most of them were less satisfied with their jobs in this regard and had a low continuous commitment to their kindergarten. This is also consistent with Colquitt et al. (2011), indicating that continuance commitment exists in the case that employees can gain from staying in the organisation while paying the cost of leaving.

Colin said that his job did not attract him materially. Instead, he needed to do some part-time jobs in his spare time to improve his material life. As a result, he was planning to start his own business in the future. Agarwal and Sajid (2017) state that continuance commitment is based on costs and benefits. Interviewees such as Colin did not receive material support from the kindergarten, and there were alternative opportunities. Therefore, their continuance commitment could be easily transferred.

4.10 Theme 9 – Sense of Loyalty

Henry and Mark emphasised strong organisational commitment fostered by supportive leadership and training opportunities. Henry said, "I am transitioning from a teaching position to a management position and receive great support from my leader and kindergarten" (Field Notes, April 2021). Mark appreciated his kindergarten's training opportunities for professional growth. After five years there, he hoped to stay longer, feeling a moral responsibility to the institution. Conversely, Curtis, Mamba, and Orin lacked enthusiasm for their current positions, citing dissatisfaction with pay, promotion, and training. Mamba and Orin expressed willingness to seek better opportunities elsewhere due to inadequate training and low satisfaction.

Regarding the sense of belonging, Henry described that as he was very satisfied with his colleagues, leaders, training opportunities and promotion, he thought changing his job to other kindergartens was immoral. This resonates with Van der Werf's (2020) report, which illustrates that loyal employees often feel guilty about leaving an organisation for various reasons. This guilt may stem from the organisational culture or concerns about the knowledge or skills gaps their departure might create. Similarly, Mark also gave a high evaluation of commitment to his kindergarten, and he wished he could work in the kindergarten for a long time since he had a moral responsibility to his organisation. According to Meyer et al. (2002), experienced and long-tenured employees easily develop an attachment to their organisation as their long-term service can increase their sense of responsibility.

In contrast, Curtis, Mamba, and Orin negatively evaluated their organisational loyalty since they had low promotion and professional development evaluations. Wayne et al. (2009) also support that the employee's perceived moral obligation contributes to a high normative commitment. Because of the sense of mission given by the organisation, they consider leaving their jobs immoral behaviour (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). In the case of Curtis, Mamba, and Orin, they did not feel supported by their kindergarten. Thus, they would not feel guilty about leaving their job.

In summary, previous researchers have also confirmed the close relationship between job satisfaction and organisational commitment as two variables, which means that high job satisfaction leads to high organisational commitment (Agarwal & Sajid, 2017; Imam et al., 2013). In the context of ECE, some studies explore the factors related to the organisational commitment of kindergarten teachers (Lee et al., 2012; Mahmood & Abid, 2016). This study also shows that the job satisfaction of MKTs has a positive impact on organisational commitment, indicating that improving their job satisfaction helps kindergarten obtain their high commitment.

4.11 Limitations

First, since there are limited studies on the organisational commitment of MKTs, the question design of organisational commitment might be theoretical. As a limitation of this study, it might provide a reference for future research on MKTs.

The second limitation relates to data collection. In the interview process, most questions about satisfaction with work were arranged at the beginning of the interviews, and the follow-up questions about salary were generally more than prepared. However, the questions about organisational commitment were placed at the end of the interviews. This might have affected the frequency of interviewees discussing and reporting on these issues.

4.12 Implications

For kindergartens, the results show that interpersonal relationships impact MKTs' satisfaction and commitment. The managers can organise colourful collective activities to enhance the sense of being a team and a collective so MKTs can better integrate into group life and feel the help and warmth from school. Managers can also form the mainstream consciousness and core values of kindergartens to help teachers form common goals in the internal culture and promote their sense of identity and feeling of belonging to the kindergarten. Besides, managers should pay attention to the training of teaching skills and professional development of MKTs and establish a working system with clear responsibilities and unified rights.

As for MKTs, it is crucial that they recognise and utilise their unique strengths, such as physical abilities and an adventurous spirit, to enhance children's education and gain acceptance from both parents and children. Prioritising lifelong learning to improve teaching skills and confidence is essential, especially in areas of expertise. By embracing their strengths and committing to continuous learning, MKTs can excel in their roles and positively impact ECE.

For policymakers and the Chinese educational department, it is equally crucial that they use a variety of communication channels to promote the importance and necessity of MKTs working extensively and meaningfully in kindergartens, in order to encourage a shift in traditional thinking and deepen public understanding. The department can also encourage colleges and universities to optimise the teaching mode and curriculum of ECE majors so that all teachers can make full use of their strengths and avoid their weaknesses in the learning process, better combine theoretical knowledge with practice, and realise the optimal connection between learners and workers. Finally, a sound salary guarantee system needs to be implemented for MKTs by introducing some welfare programs, such as providing corresponding tuition preferential policies.

Due to limited research on MKTs and commitment, this study faced challenges in designing interview questions in this regard. Therefore, future research can address these limitations by exploring more demographic characteristics so that the work experience of MKTs can be more comprehensible. Also, more and more profound questions of organisational commitment should be addressed to explore more detailed information about the relationship between MKTs' satisfaction and commitment.

5. Conclusion

The experiences shared by 13 MKTs in China shed light on the dynamics of working in a predominantly female profession. Their narratives highlight the aspects related to their satisfaction with work and commitment to kindergarten and the challenges and difficulties they encounter in ECE due to societal gender norms. They complained about traditional gender roles limiting their work but also expressed their love for ECE. This paradox presents a dilemma for men seeking to challenge existing norms while navigating their roles.

Through their work experience, this study answers two research questions on their job satisfaction and organisational commitment. In their work, six aspects that affect the work experience and evaluation of MKTs are explored, including public attitude towards MKTs, interpersonal relationships, pay satisfaction, promotion and professional development opportunities, work pressure, and physical work environment. Additionally, their job satisfaction and evaluation can significantly influence their organisational commitment to kindergartens. Corresponding suggestions were provided in the previous section. Encouraging more men to join ECE will require deliberate efforts within teacher education

programmes and schools to dismantle gender stereotypes, fostering fair, inclusive, and welcoming environments for all.

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