

WHY MEN BECOME PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND HOW THEY PERSIST: CROSS-NATIONAL INSIGHTS FOR STRENGTHENING MALAYSIA'S PRESCHOOL WORKFORCE**MENGAPA LELAKI MENJADI GURU PRASEKOLAH DAN BAGAIMANA MEREKA TERUS KEKAL: PENEMUAN RENTAS NEGARA UNTUK MEMPERKUKUH TENAGA KERJA PRASEKOLAH MALAYSIA**Ahmad Hazman bin Ali^{1*}¹Fakulti Pengurusan dan Pembangunan Insan, Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS), Peti Surat 68, Km 12, Jalan Kuala Krai, Nilam Puri, 15730 Kota Bharu, Kelantan

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Abstract

Across the world, men remain significantly underrepresented in early childhood education (ECE), a field still perceived as feminine and closely linked to nurturing roles. This gender imbalance not only reinforces stereotypes but also limits children's exposure to diverse role models during their formative years. Drawing insights from two international studies, one conducted in Croatia and another in Türkiye, this paper explores why men enter preschool teaching and how they sustain their careers in a female-dominated environment. The Croatian study highlights intrinsic motivations such as passion, compassion, and a desire to contribute to society, while the Turkish study reveals coping strategies that help male teachers navigate parental skepticism and cultural conservatism, including trust-building and professional competence. When related to Malaysia's context, where male preschool teachers exist in small but growing numbers and parents tend to prioritize quality over gender, the findings signal room for meaningful progress. This paper argues that Malaysia can strengthen gender diversity in ECE by framing teaching as a shared vocation, preparing male educators to manage cultural perceptions, and embedding inclusivity in national policy, thereby redefining preschool education as a balanced, respected profession for both men and women.

Keywords: male teachers; early childhood education; gender diversity; motivation; Malaysia; inclusivity

Abstrak

Di seluruh dunia, lelaki masih kekal sebagai golongan minoriti dalam bidang pendidikan awal kanak-kanak (PAKK), yang sering dianggap sebagai bidang feminin dan berkait rapat dengan peranan asuhan serta penjagaan. Ketidakseimbangan jantina ini bukan sahaja mengukuhkan stereotaip sedia ada, malah menghadkan peluang kanak-kanak untuk berinteraksi dengan pelbagai model peranan semasa tempoh pembentukan mereka. Berdasarkan dapatan daripada dua kajian antarabangsa, satu di Croatia dan satu lagi di Türkiye, kertas ini meneliti sebab mengapa lelaki memilih kerjaya sebagai guru prasekolah serta bagaimana mereka mengekalkan peranan tersebut dalam persekitaran yang dikuasai oleh wanita. Kajian di Croatia menonjolkan motivasi intrinsik seperti minat, belas ihsan dan keinginan untuk memberi sumbangan kepada masyarakat, manakala kajian di Türkiye menyoroti strategi daya tindak yang digunakan oleh guru lelaki bagi menghadapi keraguan ibu bapa dan nilai budaya konservatif, termasuk membina kepercayaan serta menunjukkan kecekapan profesional. Dalam konteks Malaysia, di mana guru lelaki prasekolah wujud dalam jumlah kecil tetapi semakin meningkat dan ibu bapa lebih menitikberatkan kualiti berbanding jantina, hasil kajian ini menunjukkan potensi perkembangan positif. Kertas ini berhujah bahawa Malaysia boleh memperkukuh kepelbagaian jantina dalam PAKK dengan menzahirkan profesion guru sebagai satu panggilan bersama, mempersiapkan guru lelaki menghadapi persepsi budaya, serta mengintegrasikan dasar inklusif bagi mentakrif semula pendidikan prasekolah sebagai profesion seimbang dan dihormati untuk lelaki serta wanita.

Kata kunci: guru lelaki; pendidikan awal kanak-kanak; kepelbagaian jantina; motivasi; Malaysia; inklusiviti

INTRODUCTION

The absence of men in early childhood education (ECE) remains a striking global concern that has persisted for decades. In many countries, men make up less than five percent of preschool educators, a pattern that reflects how society continues to associate care, patience, and emotional sensitivity with women. Teaching and nurturing young children are often seen as “feminine” pursuits, while men who enter the field are viewed as exceptions rather than equals. This imbalance is more than a statistical issue; it reinforces gender stereotypes and deprives children of diverse figures of care and guidance during their formative years.

Despite these challenges, a growing body of research has shown that men play an equally meaningful role in children’s learning and development. Male educators often bring unique strengths, fresh perspectives on play, discipline, and empathy, that enrich classroom dynamics. Their presence also encourages children to see care,

responsibility, and emotional expression as human qualities rather than gendered ones. However, the decision to enter a female-dominated profession requires both courage and conviction, and many male teachers face doubt, scrutiny, and cultural barriers as they build their careers in early education.

Two international studies provide illuminating perspectives on this issue. In Croatia, Tokić (2018) explored what motivates male students who aspire to become preschool teachers. His research found that their motivations were deeply internal, driven by a passion for working with children, a sense of calling, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to society. Meanwhile, Akyol et al. (2023) examined the experiences of practicing male preschool teachers in Türkiye, focusing on how they handle skepticism from parents and navigate conservative cultural attitudes. Their findings revealed a need for male teachers to constantly prove their professionalism and credibility, often by building trust and demonstrating high levels of care and competence.

These two contexts, Croatia and Türkiye, highlight both ends of the same journey: the initial motivation that brings men into preschool education and the endurance required to remain in it. The contrast also raises an important question for Malaysia: how do men who teach at the preschool level experience their professional roles in a culture that values family, faith, and education, yet still sees early childhood teaching as a “woman’s job”?

Although Malaysia’s preschool sector has grown rapidly under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, it continues to be dominated by women. Men are present, approximately 11.8 percent of the preschool workforce (Ismail, Ahmad, & Yusof, 2018), but they remain a small minority. Interestingly, research suggests that Malaysian parents are less concerned with the gender of teachers and more focused on program quality and learning outcomes (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022). This creates a uniquely balanced landscape, one where skepticism exists but is not deeply rooted.

Drawing from the lessons of Croatia and Türkiye, Malaysia stands at a valuable crossroads. The country has the potential to attract and retain more men in preschool education by redefining teaching as a noble vocation rather than a gendered role. By aligning recruitment and training with cultural and spiritual values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *tarbiyah* (nurturing), and by equipping male teachers with strategies to build parental trust, Malaysia can develop a more balanced and inclusive preschool workforce. Such a shift would not only benefit teachers but also enrich the learning environment for children, affirming that care and education are universal responsibilities shared by both men and women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Male Teachers in Early Childhood Education: A Global Perspective

Across the world, men remain noticeably underrepresented in early childhood education (ECE). In most countries, they make up less than five percent of the preschool workforce (Peeters, 2007). This gender imbalance is not coincidental, it stems from long-standing beliefs that nurturing, caregiving, and teaching young children are women's natural roles. Such perceptions have positioned men as outsiders in spaces of care and emotional labor (Sargent, 2000). Consequently, male educators often find themselves battling stereotypes, societal doubts, and sometimes even suspicion about their intentions or capabilities (Warin, 2018).

Yet, the presence of men in ECE brings significant benefits that go beyond the question of representation. Scholars argue that when male and female teachers share educational spaces, children gain exposure to a wider range of role models and interpersonal styles. Male teachers, in particular, can help broaden children's understanding of what care, play, and authority look like when expressed through different personalities (Cameron, 2011). They also help challenge the outdated notion that empathy and patience belong exclusively to women. In this sense, gender diversity in ECE is not about numbers alone, it is about creating a more balanced and realistic social environment for young learners.

2. Motivations Behind Men's Entry into Preschool Teaching

Studies have consistently shown that men who choose to teach in preschools are usually driven by internal, value-based motivations rather than material incentives. Many describe their decision as a calling, an act of service, or an expression of genuine love for working with children (Peeters, 2007; Cameron, 2011). In Croatia, for example, Tokić (2018) found that male teacher trainees often viewed early education not as a backup career, but as a purposeful life choice. They were drawn to the profession because it allowed them to nurture children's growth while contributing to their communities in meaningful ways.

Such motivations are powerful because they counter the perception that male preschool teachers are anomalies or temporary participants in a "female" field. Instead, they reveal that men can bring deep dedication and emotional investment into their teaching roles. Warin (2018) further noted that men who persist in ECE often frame their work as a contribution to social development rather than an individual pursuit of success. This sense of purpose and service-oriented mindset is crucial in sustaining male educators' engagement despite the gendered challenges that accompany the profession.

3. Navigating Challenges and Building Resilience

While motivation explains why men enter preschool teaching, maintaining a long-term career in such a feminized profession presents different challenges. Male teachers often have to navigate social discomfort, parental doubts, and, at times, direct prejudice. The Turkish study by Akyol et al. (2023) highlights how cultural conservatism shapes these experiences, mothers, in particular, were more likely to question men's ability to nurture or care for young children. Despite children's positive responses to male teachers, societal expectations about gendered caregiving persisted.

To survive and thrive in this environment, male teachers have developed various coping strategies. Many emphasize professionalism, projecting competence, emotional stability, and accountability to gain parents' trust (Sargent, 2000). Others intentionally avoid behaviors that could be misinterpreted, such as excessive physical

contact with children (Peeters, 2007). These strategies demonstrate both resilience and caution. On one hand, they help men preserve their legitimacy within the classroom; on the other, they expose the emotional labor and self-regulation male teachers must constantly perform to be accepted.

4. The Malaysian Landscape

In Malaysia, the issue of gender imbalance in preschool teaching exists, but the situation appears less rigid compared to many other countries. According to Ismail, Ahmad, and Yusof (2018), about 11.8 percent of Malaysia's preschool educators are men, a small yet noteworthy proportion that suggests some degree of acceptance. Unlike in Türkiye, where skepticism is deeply rooted, Malaysian parents seem to prioritize the quality of programs and learning outcomes over the gender of the teacher (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022).

This subtle but meaningful difference positions Malaysia in an interesting middle ground. While early childhood education remains a female-dominated field, the absence of strong cultural resistance indicates that perceptions are shifting. This creates an opportunity for deliberate reform. If gender diversity is integrated into teacher education, recruitment, and public awareness initiatives, Malaysia could strengthen the professional image of preschool teaching as a vocation open to all. Such inclusivity would not only enhance children's exposure to balanced role models but also align with national aspirations for equity, family values, and holistic education under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025.

METHODOLOGY CRITIQUE

1. The Croatian Study: Exploring Motivation Among Pre-Service Teachers

The Croatian study by Tokić (2018) offers a valuable window into the motivations of male students preparing to become preschool teachers. Conducted using a qualitative approach, the study relied on interviews and thematic analysis to explore how men make sense of their decision to enter a profession traditionally dominated by women. Its major contribution lies in capturing voices that are often

overlooked, those of pre-service teachers who are still at the threshold of their professional journey.

Through the participants' narratives, Tokić identified intrinsic motivations such as a love for children, a desire to serve the community, and a strong sense of vocation. These insights reflect the deeply personal reasons that shape men's choices in early childhood education. The study also aligns with broader European findings suggesting that men's entry into ECE is rarely driven by financial or pragmatic considerations (Peeters, 2007; Cameron, 2011).

However, the research also presents certain methodological limitations. The study's small, localized sample restricts its generalizability. By focusing solely on pre-service teachers, it does not explore whether these early motivations are sustained once individuals begin teaching in real settings. In addition, the absence of perspectives from practicing educators, parents, or policymakers narrows the contextual scope. As a result, while the study successfully explains *why* men choose preschool teaching, it provides limited understanding of *how* they manage the challenges that arise after entering the workforce.

2. The Turkish Study: Understanding Coping Strategies in Practice

Akyol et al. (2023) approached the issue from a different standpoint, focusing on practicing male preschool teachers in Türkiye. Using a phenomenological design, the researchers examined the lived experiences of male teachers and triangulated their findings with the perspectives of mothers and children. This design choice is a significant methodological strength, it situates men's experiences within the broader social ecosystem of early education, acknowledging that teachers' identities are shaped not only by their own motivations but also by societal expectations and relationships.

The findings reveal that while children generally responded positively to male teachers, mothers often expressed uncertainty and skepticism. This reaction reflects

deep-rooted cultural beliefs that caregiving is primarily a woman's domain. To navigate this skepticism, male teachers emphasized professionalism, consistency, and trust-building, strategies that allowed them to sustain legitimacy and confidence within their classrooms and communities.

Nevertheless, the Turkish study has its own limitations. Its participant pool, though diverse, was relatively small, making it difficult to generalize across regions or cultural subgroups. Furthermore, while it included parents and children, it excluded institutional and policy-level voices. This omission leaves a gap in understanding how systemic factors, such as school leadership, curriculum policies, or teacher training programs, either support or constrain male teachers. In short, Akyol et al. provided rich micro-level insights into coping, but a broader structural analysis remains missing.

3. Comparative Reflections for Malaysia

When considered collectively, the Croatian and Turkish studies offer a balanced lens through which to understand men's participation in preschool teaching: one emphasizes *motivation* at the point of entry, while the other highlights *resilience* required for continuity. This comparative perspective holds particular relevance for Malaysia, where male teachers are visible yet underrepresented.

At present, there remains limited empirical research that explores the lived experiences of Malaysian male preschool teachers in depth. Most available studies focus on general workforce statistics or policy perspectives rather than personal narratives (Ismail et al., 2018). To advance the field, future Malaysian research should consider mixed-method or longitudinal designs that examine both entry motivations and professional retention over time. Including multiple stakeholders, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers, would also create a more holistic understanding of how gender dynamics play out in real preschool settings.

Methodologically, such studies would provide a richer evidence base for reform. By integrating the personal voices of educators with institutional insights, Malaysia could move beyond descriptive statistics toward a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of male participation in ECE. This approach would not only strengthen academic discourse but also inform recruitment, training, and policy strategies that promote genuine gender inclusivity in the preschool sector.

To strengthen future discussions with more robust evidence, Malaysia would benefit from the inclusion of national-level empirical data. Mixed-method approaches, combining large-scale quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews, could provide both statistical validity and contextual understanding. Such data would help validate the theoretical propositions emerging from cross-national studies and ensure that international insights are meaningfully adapted to Malaysia's sociocultural and policy environment.

FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

1. Motivational Drivers: Why Men Choose Preschool Teaching

The Croatian study by Tokić (2018) offers a close look at what inspires men to pursue a career in preschool education. The study found that male students often entered the field not because of financial incentives, but because of deep personal convictions. Many described their decision as being guided by passion, purpose, and a sense of social contribution. For them, teaching young children was less of an occupation and more of a calling, a way to serve society by nurturing future generations.

These findings are consistent with broader European literature that frames men's participation in early education as an act of moral and emotional commitment (Peeters, 2007; Cameron, 2011). In this view, teaching is seen as a reflection of one's

values rather than a path to material gain. The Croatian participants' sincerity in choosing this profession underscores how intrinsic motivation can overcome external stereotypes. In fact, their narratives remind us that passion remains a powerful antidote to social bias, men who are genuinely inspired to teach can challenge entrenched norms simply by doing what they love.

2 Coping Mechanisms: How Men Overcome Professional Barriers

The Turkish study by Akyol et al. (2023) paints a more complex picture, one that deals with persistence rather than entry. It examines the lived experiences of male teachers who already serve in preschools, showing how they navigate parental doubt and societal expectations. The study found that while children were generally open and affectionate toward male teachers, mothers often carried cultural reservations, questioning men's capacity to provide emotional care.

In response, male teachers in Türkiye learned to negotiate trust through professionalism. They focused on demonstrating competence, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and communicating openly with parents. These behaviors became survival strategies in an environment where male teachers felt they were constantly under observation. Such coping mechanisms reveal both strength and vulnerability: strength in their determination to prove themselves, and vulnerability in having to continually justify their role in ways female teachers seldom need to.

This study highlights a subtle truth, that persistence in a feminized profession often requires emotional endurance. The teachers' ability to stay despite doubt and scrutiny speaks to a deeper resilience, one that blends self-belief with adaptive professionalism.

3 Comparative Synthesis: Connecting Motivation and Resilience

When considered together, the Croatian and Turkish studies tell two sides of the same story. The Croatian research explains *why* men step into preschool education, guided by intrinsic motivation, personal calling, and social conscience. The Turkish research,

on the other hand, shows *how* they stay, through strategies of professionalism, trust-building, and resilience.

These two elements, motivation and endurance, cannot be separated. Motivation brings men into the profession, but coping skills determine whether they remain. A man may enter teaching with idealism, yet without support or strategies for dealing with bias, his enthusiasm may fade over time. Conversely, strong coping mechanisms without passion could lead to emotional detachment. The real success, therefore, lies at the intersection of the two: where purpose meets perseverance.

From a conceptual standpoint, this synthesis reinforces the idea that gender diversity in education is not just about access, it's about *sustainability*. The presence of men in ECE must be accompanied by conditions that allow them to thrive without being constantly scrutinized or isolated.

4. Lessons and Reflections for Malaysia

For Malaysia, these insights provide a roadmap for rethinking gender diversity in preschool teaching. Although men represent only about 11.8 percent of the workforce (Ismail, Ahmad, & Yusof, 2018), their presence signals a quiet but meaningful shift. Unlike in Türkiye, skepticism toward male preschool teachers here tends to be moderate. Studies indicate that most Malaysian parents prioritize program quality, child safety, and curriculum outcomes rather than the teacher's gender (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022).

This situation places Malaysia in a promising position; neither overly resistant nor fully open. Drawing from the Croatian findings, recruitment campaigns should focus on the intrinsic meaning of teaching, presenting it as a noble vocation aligned with Islamic values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *tarbiyah* (nurturing), and *amanah* (trust). Men who view teaching as a purposeful act of service, rather than simply employment, are more likely to enter and stay in the field.

At the same time, the Turkish experience offers practical lessons for retention. Male teachers in Malaysia must be prepared to handle subtle skepticism and gendered expectations. Teacher training programs can include modules on parental engagement, communication ethics, and reflective professionalism, tools that help build trust and legitimacy.

By blending both perspectives, Croatia's intrinsic motivation and Türkiye's coping strategies, Malaysia can craft a balanced approach. Inspire men to enter preschool teaching with heart, and then empower them to remain with confidence. Over time, such efforts would not only normalize male participation but also strengthen the overall quality, diversity, and warmth of Malaysia's early education system.

5. Implications for Malaysia

The comparative insights drawn from the Croatian and Turkish studies shed important light on how Malaysia can strengthen the participation of men in early childhood education (ECE). While men remain a minority in Malaysian preschools, their presence, approximately 11.8 percent of the workforce (Ismail, Ahmad, & Yusof, 2018), indicates that teaching young children is not culturally rejected, but rather underexplored. Unlike Türkiye, where skepticism towards male teachers is often rooted in cultural conservatism, Malaysia shows a more balanced landscape: reservations exist, but they are not deeply entrenched. This creates fertile ground for reform if the issue is approached through policy, education, and social awareness.

i- Recruitment Through Purpose and Vocation

The Croatian findings (Tokić, 2018) remind us that motivation is the seed of persistence. Men who view preschool teaching as a meaningful vocation, rather than merely a job, tend to bring sincerity, care, and patience to their practice. Malaysia can adopt this perspective by framing preschool teaching as a calling consistent with Islamic principles of rahmah (compassion), tarbiyah (nurturing), and amanah

(responsibility). These values resonate deeply within Malaysian society and can help redefine teaching as a shared human duty rather than a gendered task.

To encourage this mindset, recruitment campaigns could highlight the noble and community-centered aspects of early education. Public narratives, through social media, teacher profiles, or ministry-led initiatives, should portray male preschool teachers as compassionate educators and moral role models. Such visibility helps normalize their presence while inspiring young men to consider ECE as a career path that reflects both intellect and heart.

ii- Training for Professional Resilience and Trust-Building

The Turkish study by Akyol et al. (2023) emphasizes that entering the profession is only the first step; staying in it requires resilience. Male teachers must often navigate subtle skepticism from parents or colleagues. For Malaysia, this suggests that teacher education programs should include targeted preparation not only in pedagogy but also in interpersonal and emotional competencies.

Training modules could focus on communication with parents, ethical conduct, child protection protocols, and community engagement. These components would equip male teachers with the confidence to address potential misunderstandings and to build trust with families through professionalism and transparency. Moreover, mentorship systems, pairing new male teachers with experienced educators of both genders, can create a sense of belonging and reduce isolation. Over time, such support would encourage persistence and career satisfaction.

iii- Strengthening Parental and Public Engagement

Parental acceptance remains a decisive factor in normalizing male participation in preschools. While studies suggest that Malaysian parents generally prioritize program quality over teacher gender (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022), continued awareness efforts are essential. Preschools can organize family engagement activities, such as

open days, parenting workshops, or classroom visits, that allow parents to interact with male teachers in natural, positive settings.

These encounters help dismantle stereotypes by showing male teachers as approachable, caring, and competent. At a national level, awareness campaigns could be developed to showcase successful male educators, aligning with broader gender equity goals in education. Such initiatives would not only promote acceptance but also enhance the image of preschool teaching as a respected and professional field for all.

iv- Embedding Gender Diversity in Policy Reform

Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 has set strong directions for access, quality, and teacher professionalism, but it remains largely silent on gender diversity within the ECE workforce (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This gap presents an opportunity for strategic improvement. By integrating gender inclusivity into national education policy, Malaysia can move from passive tolerance to proactive encouragement.

Specific measures could include scholarships and incentives for male preschool education students, recognition awards for outstanding male teachers, and structured career advancement pathways that highlight ECE as a viable long-term profession for both men and women. Internationally, the World Bank's Shaping First Steps report (2023) underscores the importance of investing in the preschool workforce as a foundation for quality education. Malaysia could take this a step further by positioning gender balance as part of its quality improvement agenda.

v- Toward a More Balanced Future

By uniting these strands, motivation, training, engagement, and policy, Malaysia has the potential to lead regional progress in reimagining preschool teaching as an inclusive, gender-balanced profession. Encouraging more men into the field is not about replacing women but about enriching the system with diversity of thought, empathy, and example.

When children encounter both male and female teachers during their early years, they learn that care, leadership, and emotional expression are universal human traits. This lesson, learned young, can help reshape societal attitudes for generations. Through strategic recruitment, professional support, and cultural awareness, Malaysia can cultivate a preschool education system that truly reflects the values of *rahmah*, *tarbiyah*, and *amanah*, a system where every teacher, regardless of gender, contributes to the moral and intellectual growth of the nation's youngest learners.

DISCUSSION

The comparative critique of the Croatian and Turkish studies reveals two deeply interconnected themes in understanding men's participation in early childhood education (ECE): the motivations that draw them into the field, and the coping strategies that allow them to stay. Both dimensions must be understood as parts of a single journey rather than separate phenomena.

The Croatian study (Tokić, 2018) highlights the importance of *why* men choose to teach young children. The participants in that study viewed their profession as a form of service, shaped by passion and purpose. They entered preschool education not for status or salary but because they saw value in shaping lives from the earliest years. This perspective mirrors the core Islamic philosophy of *tarbiyah*, nurturing with love and responsibility, which is also central to Malaysia's educational philosophy. When men approach preschool teaching as an act of meaningful contribution, their commitment naturally transcends stereotypes. Motivation grounded in purpose becomes a source of resilience.

However, passion alone does not guarantee longevity in the field. The Turkish study (Akyol et al., 2023) adds a second, necessary layer to the discussion: *how* men sustain themselves amid skepticism. Male teachers in Türkiye were found to frequently negotiate their place in a profession viewed as "feminine." Despite the positive responses they received from children, they often had to prove their professionalism repeatedly to parents, especially mothers. Their coping strategies,

maintaining professional distance, communicating openly, and consistently demonstrating competence, reflect emotional intelligence and adaptability. Yet, these same strategies also expose the subtle pressures faced by men who must constantly justify their legitimacy in a caring profession.

For Malaysia, these findings carry powerful implications. Unlike Türkiye, where parental doubt is deeply rooted, Malaysian parents generally emphasize program quality and child outcomes over teacher gender (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022). This suggests that the cultural barriers facing male teachers in Malaysia may be less rigid. Nevertheless, the potential for misunderstanding still exists, especially in conservative or rural contexts. Thus, while intrinsic motivation may attract men to the profession, professional training and institutional support must ensure that they remain confident, respected, and valued.

What distinguishes Malaysia is its position of balance. The country stands between optimism and hesitation, open enough to allow men into the preschool workforce, yet cautious due to social traditions. This position is both a challenge and an opportunity. It allows Malaysia to design reforms that do not merely copy Western gender frameworks but instead integrate local values, faith, and cultural sensitivity. Encouraging men to join ECE should therefore not be framed as a Westernized gender equality campaign but as a reaffirmation of shared responsibility in nurturing the next generation.

At a theoretical level, this discussion also underscores the need to view gender diversity in preschool education through a *holistic lens*. Male teachers' experiences cannot be understood only in terms of their entry motivations or the challenges they face. It is the intersection of purpose, perception, and professional culture that defines their journey. For policymakers and researchers, this means designing interventions that simultaneously address recruitment, support, and retention.

In practice, Malaysia can begin by strengthening teacher education programs to include reflective training that helps both male and female teachers understand gender dynamics in classrooms. Encouraging collaborative teaching models, where male and female teachers co-facilitate, can also normalize gender diversity in early education settings. Beyond institutions, public campaigns and community programs should continue to highlight stories of male educators who have made a difference in children's lives. Visibility builds trust, and trust opens the door for inclusion.

Ultimately, the goal is not merely to increase the number of men in preschools but to build a culture where gender diversity is seen as a strength. When children see both male and female teachers working together harmoniously, they grow up understanding that care, patience, and responsibility are not bound by gender, they are human virtues. For Malaysia, fostering this understanding could mark an important step in shaping a more compassionate, equitable, and forward-looking education system.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEACRH

Like most comparative and conceptual analyses, this paper has its own boundaries that must be acknowledged. While it draws meaningful insights from the Croatian and Turkish studies, its conclusions are based largely on secondary data rather than original empirical research within the Malaysian context. Both of the reviewed studies provide valuable international perspectives, yet their findings cannot be directly applied to Malaysia without careful contextualization. Cultural norms, religious values, and policy priorities in Malaysia differ significantly from those in Europe or the Middle East, meaning that local dynamics must still be explored through grounded research.

Another limitation lies in the methodological design of the two reviewed studies. Both employed qualitative approaches with small, purposive samples, which are ideal for exploring lived experiences but limited in their generalizability. The Croatian study captured pre-service teachers' motivations but did not track whether

those motivations persisted once participants entered the workforce. The Turkish study, while offering richer ecological perspectives by involving mothers and children, lacked policy-level or institutional viewpoints. As a result, the broader structural enablers or constraints affecting male teachers remain underexplored.

Furthermore, there is a notable absence of Malaysian empirical work on this topic. Existing literature tends to focus on descriptive statistics or teacher education frameworks, leaving a significant gap in understanding the personal, social, and cultural realities of men teaching at the preschool level. To move forward, Malaysian researchers need to engage directly with male preschool teachers through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory methods that allow them to express their experiences in their own voices.

Future studies could also benefit from adopting mixed-method or longitudinal approaches. Quantitative data could help map the actual distribution and retention patterns of male teachers across different regions and types of preschools, while qualitative narratives would reveal the motivations, challenges, and coping strategies behind those numbers. Such comprehensive data could guide national policy and teacher education reform in more evidence-based ways.

Beyond teachers themselves, future research should also examine parental and community perceptions. Since earlier findings suggest that Malaysian parents are generally more concerned with quality than gender (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022), it would be useful to explore how these perceptions vary across social classes, urban and rural settings, or differing religious interpretations. Understanding these nuances could help design targeted awareness campaigns that address specific concerns rather than assuming a uniform public attitude.

Finally, policy-oriented studies are crucial to determine how institutional systems, such as recruitment practices, accreditation standards, and career progression models, either encourage or inadvertently discourage men from joining the ECE profession. Exploring how existing frameworks like the Malaysia Education

Blueprint 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) could integrate gender balance indicators would provide practical direction for reform.

Future research should therefore move beyond conceptual comparison to generate empirical evidence from within Malaysia. Large-scale surveys could map the actual distribution, attitudes, and retention patterns of male preschool teachers across regions, while qualitative interviews and focus groups could capture their lived experiences, coping strategies, and cultural realities. This mixed-method design would provide both numerical depth and narrative richness, addressing the current lack of empirical and quantitative data noted by reviewers. Ultimately, such evidence would bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a more grounded foundation for policy development and teacher education reform in the Malaysian preschool context.

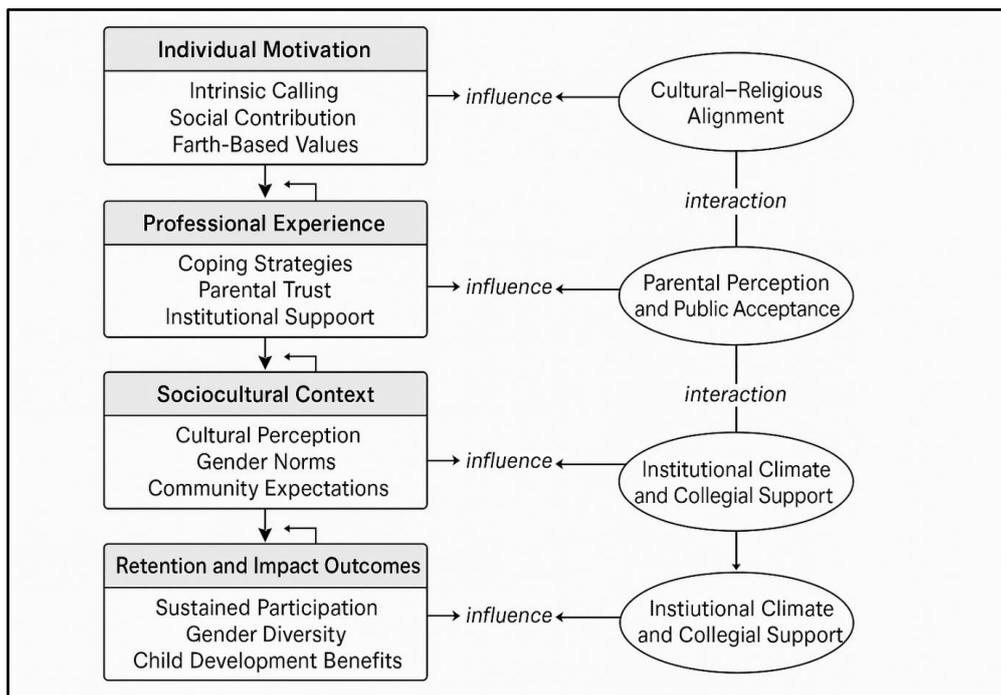


Figure 1: Potential Variables and Relationships for Future Empirical Investigation on Male Preschool Teachers in Malaysia.

Figure 1 is the conceptual pathway, illustrating potential variables and relationships for future empirical investigation on male preschool teachers in Malaysia. The model integrates motivational, sociocultural, and systemic dimensions drawn from

international evidence (Croatia and Türkiye) and contextualizes them within Malaysia's early childhood education landscape. It proposes a dynamic relationship where intrinsic motivation and cultural alignment interact with professional experiences and institutional factors to influence retention, gender balance, and educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined men's participation in early childhood education (ECE) through a comparative analysis of two international studies, one from Croatia, which explored intrinsic motivation, and another from Türkiye, which examined persistence and coping strategies. Together, these studies illuminate both the emotional and professional dimensions that shape men's engagement in a field still largely viewed as feminine.

The Croatian findings revealed that male teachers are often guided by a deep sense of vocation, compassion, and social responsibility. In contrast, the Turkish study exposed the perseverance and professional discipline required to sustain these ideals amid cultural skepticism and gendered expectations. Viewed collectively, these insights suggest that increasing male participation in preschool teaching requires more than recruitment efforts; it demands long-term structural and cultural support that allows men to thrive with confidence and respect.

Within Malaysia's context, this discussion takes on a unique character. While men remain a minority in the preschool workforce, about 11.8 percent (Ismail, Ahmad, & Yusof, 2018), their presence indicates that the profession is not culturally rejected but underdeveloped. Malaysian parents' emphasis on educational quality rather than teacher gender (Tang, Sulaiman, & Rahman, 2022) further reflects an environment open to progress. By drawing from Croatia's lessons on purposeful motivation and Türkiye's emphasis on professional resilience, Malaysia is well positioned to cultivate a more balanced and inclusive preschool workforce. Recruitment initiatives should therefore frame teaching as a noble calling rooted in values such as rahmah (compassion), tarbiyah (nurturing), and amanah (trust), while teacher preparation

programs should equip male educators with communication, ethical, and reflective competencies to build parental trust and professional legitimacy.

Future empirical studies in Malaysia are expected to build upon this conceptual foundation by testing the proposed pathway through large-scale and context-sensitive data collection. Such research will be crucial in validating the conceptual model introduced in this paper and in identifying how cultural, institutional, and motivational factors interact to sustain men's engagement in early education.

Ultimately, promoting gender diversity in ECE is not about redefining roles but reaffirming that care, guidance, and teaching are shared human responsibilities. When young children encounter both male and female teachers working together, they internalize that empathy, leadership, and responsibility transcend gender. If nurtured thoughtfully, Malaysia can become a regional exemplar of inclusive and value-based early education, where diversity is seen not as difference, but as strength, and where every teacher contributes meaningfully to the moral and intellectual growth of the nation's youngest learners.

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