

## VOICES OF MALE KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THEIR ROLES AND CHALLENGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

In Baybay City, Leyte, Philippines, male kindergarten teachers are markedly underrepresented, mirroring a broader national and international trend of gender imbalance in early childhood education (ECE). This narrative inquiry explores the roles, challenges, and contributions of three male kindergarten teachers working in the Schools Division of Baybay City. Through two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant and reflexive field notes, the study examines how these teachers navigate professional life in a female-dominated environment and how gender shapes their experiences. Thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts, supported by member checking, generated three central themes: (1) the struggle for acceptance, (2) acting as role models and expanding conceptions of masculinity, and (3) institutional and societal biases that affect practice and wellbeing. Findings indicate that, despite experiences of scrutiny and isolation, participants cultivate inclusive learning environments, serve as visible male role models for young learners, and actively negotiate their professional identities. The study argues for gender-responsive supports—such as mentorship, targeted professional development, and community engagement—that are sensitive to local cultural norms in Baybay City. It also highlights the need for further Philippine research that situates male ECE teachers within broader Filipino gender studies and education policy debates.

**Keywords:** *Baybay City, gender diversity, narrative inquiry, professional identity, early childhood education*

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a foundational role in children's development. Internationally and in the Philippines, the ECE workforce is overwhelmingly female, and men remain a small minority within kindergarten and preschool teaching ranks. In Baybay City, Leyte, male kindergarten teachers are particularly rare, with local human resources records indicating only a handful of men among the division's kindergarten staff (Schools Division of Baybay City HR Records, SY 2024–2025). This pronounced gender imbalance raises questions about how male teachers experience professional life in contexts where caregiving is widely coded as feminine.

Existing international literature documents that men in ECE often face suspicion, professional isolation, and barriers that reflect stereotyped views of masculinity and caregiving (Brody, 2021; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2021). Philippine research on men in teaching tends to focus on higher education or is limited in scope; studies centered on male kindergarten teachers—particularly in provincial or rural settings—are scarce. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of male kindergarten teachers in Baybay City, asking how they entered the profession, how they negotiate identity and practice in female-dominated settings, what challenges they face, and what supports might promote their recruitment and retention.

Framing the study is a recognition that gender is socially constructed and enacted through everyday practices (Connell, 2005). In particular, concepts such as hegemonic masculinity and emotional labor help illuminate how male teachers' experiences of authority, care, and public scrutiny intersect in ways that influence their professional trajectories and the children they teach.

### Research Questions

This study aimed to capture the narratives of male kindergarten teachers in the Schools Division of Baybay City, focusing on how their individual stories shed light on their roles and challenges in early childhood education. Through these narratives, the study sought to understand the personal meanings and insights these teachers derived from their experiences. This research addresses the following questions:

1. What were the participants' lives and trajectories before becoming kindergarten teachers?
2. How do the participants navigate their roles as kindergarten teachers?
3. What challenges do the participants encounter, and how do they respond?
4. What factors sustain the participants' commitment to kindergarten teaching?
5. How do participants' narratives inform existing theories and practice in ECE?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study used narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2022) to elicit and analyze the life-stories of male kindergarten teachers in Baybay City. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it centers lived experience and the meanings individuals assign to their professional lives.

## The Sample and Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Schools Division of Baybay City, Leyte. Purposive sampling identified three male kindergarten teachers who met inclusion criteria: self-identified as male, at least one year of kindergarten teaching experience, currently teaching, and willing to participate. The small, purposive sample aligns with narrative inquiry's emphasis on depth.

## Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age range	Years of kindergarten experience	School type (urban/rural)	Marital/parental status
Jack	30–39	3 years	Rural	Single
John	40–49	15 years	Urban	Married, 3 children
Jim	25–34	2 years	Rural	Single

## Data Collection

Data consisted of two semi-structured interviews per participant (each 45–90 minutes), audio-recorded with consent, and detailed field notes capturing nonverbal cues and contextual observations. Transcripts were produced verbatim and returned to participants for member checking and minor corrections.

## Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As the primary researcher, I (J. B. De La Cerna) disclose my positionality: male, a graduate student at Franciscan College of the Immaculate Conception, and a member of the local Baybay City community. My background as a local educator and gender-aware researcher may have influenced rapport and the framing of questions. I maintained reflexive memos throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions, emotional responses, and potential influences on interpretation. These memos were used during analysis to triangulate interpretations and to enhance trustworthiness.

## Ethical Considerations

Institutional approvals were granted by the Graduate School and the Schools Division Superintendent. Participants provided informed consent, were assigned pseudonyms, and were reminded of voluntary participation and their right to withdraw. Data were stored securely.

## Data Analysis

To increase transparency and methodological rigor, the analytic pathway is described here. Analysis combined narrative sensibilities with systematic thematic coding, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis (adapted for narrative data):

1. Familiarization: I read transcripts and reflexive memos multiple times to become immersed in each teacher's story.
2. Initial coding: Using the transcripts, I generated initial codes that captured meaningful units of narrative content (e.g., "parental suspicion," "play-based leadership," "isolation at work"). Coding was conducted manually and tracked in a codebook.

3. Searching for themes: Codes were examined and clustered into candidate themes reflecting patterned meanings across and within narratives (e.g., “struggle for acceptance,” “role modeling”).
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed against the data at both the coded extract level and the full data set level; some codes were merged, others split, and some re-labeled.
5. Defining and naming themes: Themes were refined and given clear names and descriptions, noting subthemes where relevant.
6. Writing and verifying: Themes were presented in narrative form with illustrative quotations. Member checking with participants confirmed the resonance of themes with their intended meanings.

Trustworthiness procedures included member checking, reflexive memos, and transparent documentation of coding decisions. Quotations presented below are taken from verified transcripts or labeled as paraphrases where participants suggested wording alterations during member checking.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Overview

Analysis generated three interrelated themes: (1) struggle for acceptance, (2) role modeling and reconfiguring masculinity, and (3) institutional and societal biases that shape practice and wellbeing. Below, each theme is presented with illustrative quotations and discussion that situates the findings within existing literature and theoretical constructs.

### Theme 1 — Struggle for Acceptance

Participants frequently described needing to justify their presence in kindergarten classrooms. This struggle involved parental suspicion, heightened scrutiny of physical interactions with children, and an ongoing need to demonstrate professional competence.

Jack (pseudonym) described the feeling succinctly: “Sometimes it felt like I was walking on a tightrope — every touch, every smile could be read the wrong way.” (Jack, Interview 1). Similarly, John recalled parents requesting that he avoid certain caregiving tasks: “Parents would say, ‘Please, can you have the female teacher tie shoelaces? We’re more comfortable.’ It’s like I am not trusted with ordinary care.” (John, Interview 2).

### Discussion

The struggle for acceptance resonates with literature showing that men in ECE are often subject to suspicion and boundary policing (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2021; Smith, 2020). These experiences can be understood through the lens of moral panic around male caregivers and the policing of gendered spaces. The heightened vigilance around physical contact reflects wider societal anxieties that often conflate men’s presence with risk. The result is additional emotional labor and the necessity for continual self-presentational work, which may discourage men from entering or remaining in ECE roles.

### Theme 2 — Role Modeling and Reconfiguring Masculinity



All participants articulated a strong sense of responsibility to model caring, emotionally literate masculinity. This role extended beyond classroom management to mentoring and community engagement.

Jim explained: “When I play with the kids, I show that boys can be gentle too. I want them to know strength is not just muscles; it is kindness.” (Jim, Interview 1). John reflected on his impact on boys without male role models: “A boy told me, ‘You teach me how to sit and listen. You show me how a father should be.’ That stayed with me.” (John, Interview 2).

## **Discussion**

These narratives suggest that male teachers can provide alternative masculinities that combine care with leadership. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) helps explain how traditional masculine ideals make caregiving counter-hegemonic; yet participants actively reconstruct masculinity in practice by demonstrating emotionally engaged and nurturing behaviors. The findings align with international studies showing that men in ECE can expand children’s understanding of gender roles and offer important same-gender mentorship (Brody, 2021).

### **Theme 3 – Institutional and Societal Biases**

Participants reported workplace cultures and policies that were not always inclusive of male staff. Examples included lack of male mentors, jokes and microaggressions from colleagues, and absence of gender-sensitive professional development.

Jack recounted exclusion from informal staff networks: “After meetings, the staff would have coffee and chat—about family, recipes. I felt like an outsider because topics assumed women’s lives. I wanted to join, but it was different.” (Jack, Interview 2). Participants also noted a lack of formal supports: “There’s no mentorship for male teachers. You learn alone.” (Jim, Interview 2).

## **Discussion**

Workplace culture matters for retention. The absence of male mentors and gender-aware training can exacerbate isolation. These structural shortcomings reflect institutional inertia where policies and professional development assume a female majority. Addressing such gaps requires systemic responses that go beyond individual resilience to create environments that intentionally include and support male educators.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

Taken together, the findings reveal a complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. Male kindergarten teachers in Baybay City enact alternative masculinities and create inclusive classrooms, while simultaneously navigating social suspicion and institutional practices that render them marginal. This tension underscores the need for policy and practice that simultaneously addresses community attitudes and school-level supports.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Theoretically, the study contributes to Filipino gender scholarship by documenting how hegemonic norms operate in provincial ECE contexts and how men negotiate counter-

hegemonic roles through everyday pedagogy. The participants' emphasis on emotional labor highlights that caregiving work involves affective labor traditionally coded as feminine; reframing emotional labor as a professional competency accessible to all genders is essential.

Practically, the findings suggest actionable directions, grounded in the narratives:

- Develop gender-responsive professional development that addresses stereotypes, boundary management, and inclusive pedagogy.
- Create local mentorship programs pairing experienced male educators (or allies) with early-career male teachers to reduce isolation.
- Design community engagement campaigns that showcase male educators' roles in child development through storytelling, school events, and parent workshops—prioritizing narrative formats that foreground local voices and successes.
- Review school policies and daily practices (e.g., staff meeting formats, professional learning communities) to ensure they do not inadvertently exclude men and that they explicitly promote inclusive staff cultures.
- Encourage research and documentation of male teachers' practices in diverse Philippine settings to build an evidence base for context-appropriate interventions.

By reframing recommendations as context-sensitive and narrative-grounded interventions (rather than prescriptive numerical targets), policy and school leaders can design supports that are realistic for small, qualitative studies to inform.

## **Conclusion**

This narrative inquiry of three male kindergarten teachers in Baybay City demonstrates that male educators contribute meaningfully to early childhood education by modeling alternative masculinities, providing important role modeling for children, and cultivating inclusive classroom environments. They do this while navigating social suspicion, workplace exclusion, and the emotional labor of constantly demonstrating their professional suitability. The study contributes to theory by situating male ECE teachers within conversations on hegemonic masculinity and emotional labor and contributes to practice by outlining locally grounded, narrative-derived strategies for support.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The study's small, purposive sample limits generalizability; instead, the research offers depth and contextualized insights transferable to similar provincial settings. Future studies should incorporate larger samples, multiple sites across the Philippines, and mixed methods that can both deepen narrative understanding and provide broader system-level evidence.

## **Final Remarks**

Amplifying the voices of male kindergarten teachers in Baybay City affirms that gender diversity in ECE enriches children's learning environments and challenges restrictive gender norms. Supporting men to enter and remain in early childhood education requires interventions that are culturally sensitive, institutionally embedded, and informed by the lived experiences of teachers themselves.



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