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Identifying and supporting children with trauma experience from teachers' perspectives in Chinese rural kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Although existing research on early childhood trauma has proliferated, it displays a marked urban-centric bias and significantly overlooks the issues related to rural areas. Additionally, these studies primarily center on the repercussions of trauma but with scarce attention paid to how teachers identify and support children who are likely to have experienced trauma. Therefore, this study, grounded in the trauma-informed approach, aims to explore the current understandings and challenges of kindergarten teachers in rural regions of China. The findings reveal substantial gaps in teachers' understanding of early childhood trauma, and the study underscores the challenges that teachers face in addressing childhood trauma and preventing re-traumatization for lack of knowledge in trauma-informed practices and relevant training. The study also highlights the need for establishing and enhancing collaboration among families, schools, and broader community support systems. Trauma-informed training has been recommended for teachers and governmental support for early childhood education.

Introduction

The prevalent influence of early childhood trauma, which are commonly termed "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs), has been universally acknowledged as a significant public health issue (Frankland, 2021). ACEs are widely recognized as a worldwide risk to children but differ from country to country (Wan et al., 2023). Such experiences have the potential to impinge on a child's learning outcomes, social behaviors, physical well-being, and mental health. More specifically, they can hamper a child's ability to process information, communicate thoughts, think critically, and handle emotional responses effectively (Davis & Buchanan, 2020). The gravest concern lies in that these adverse impacts may not dissipate with time but extend well into adulthood (Dye, 2018).

Despite increased research on trauma, most of the studies are conducted in the context of developed countries (e.g., Doba et al., 2022; Downey & Crummy, 2022; Kerns et al., 2022; Thumfart et al., 2022), and they display a marked urban-centric bias (Frankland, 2021). However, demonstration and impact of trauma can vary across social and cultural contexts. Therefore, studies on rural areas of developing countries are significant in bridging the gap.

While present research on the subject initiated in developing countries like China also focuses mainly on urban areas (e.g., Hua et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2023; Tong et al., 2022), the limited studies on Chinese rural settings present a more complicated picture. A comparison of Wan et al. (2023) and Zhang, Fang, et al. (2020) reveals that nearly 83% of rural children in China have experienced at least one ACEs, compared to 75% of urban children. Furthermore, 34.66% of the rural children reported four or more ACEs, compared to 21.5% of their urban peers. Study has shown that the likelihood of externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and general problem behaviors was significantly higher among children with more ACEs (Liming & Grube, 2018). In addition, as the number of ACEs accumulated, the likelihood of depression and low self-esteem became more pronounced (Wan et al., 2023; Zhang, Fang, et al., 2020). According to Gu (2021) and Liu et al. (2023), in rural China, left-behind children (LBC), i.e., children who stay in rural areas while one or both of their parents move to work in urban regions, and the traditional preference for sons (gender inequality) significantly confront minors with a higher risk of ACEs, with the latter particularly impacting rural girls. These children are more prone to physical punishment, emotional neglect, school bullying, and victimization (Wan et al., 2023; F. Yang & Liu, 2020). Such sources of pressure may increase their vulnerability to trauma. Thus, it is crucial for teachers to identify and support these children. It is noteworthy that existing studies primarily center on the impacts of ACEs (Zhang, Mersky, et al., 2020), with scarce attention on how teachers can identify and support children who are likely to have experienced trauma. There is, therefore, a need to conduct research from teachers' perspectives in rural settings in developing countries like China.

This study, by addressing these research gaps, aims to explore how teachers in a rural kindergarten in northwest China identify and support children potentially affected by trauma and its challenges. To achieve the research aim, this study will answer the following questions:

(1) How do kindergarten teachers recognize children potentially affected by trauma?
(2) How do kindergarten teachers respond to the children with traumatic experiences?
(3) What challenges do kindergarten teachers encounter in their efforts to understand and support children with traumatic experiences?

By asking these questions, this study will provide teachers, policymakers, and community stakeholders with further understandings of the issue and its challenges. It may help to develop robust support systems and foster trauma-informed educational environment.

Literature review

Defining early childhood trauma

Trauma is a complex concept including various destructive events or situations. According to The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma refers to a single event, repeated events, or specific situations that individual views as physically or emotionally harmful or potentially fatal (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Early childhood trauma is a unique category, which occurs aged 0 to 6 (National

Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines it as violence, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), neglect, separation or loss of parents or caregivers, accidents, disasters, wars, and other emotionally harmful experiences (Dye, 2018). De Bellis and Zisk (2014) states that young children who experience trauma are at a greater risk of mental and physical health issues later in life, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance misuse, and other behavioral concerns. Therefore, early childhood trauma could be defined as the psychological distress resulted from stressful events experienced by children aged 0 to 6 that can have a negative impact on their development and well-being.

Early childhood externalizing behavior and Teacher attachment

Behaviors characterized by aggressive actions, resistance to authority, an antagonistic attitude, and inadequate impulse control are referred to as externalizing problems (Tully & Hunt, 2015). In early childhood, they can manifest as conduct disorder, hyperactivity, and aggression. Attachment theory indicates that children who have experienced trauma, especially neglect or abuse from caregivers, are more likely to form insecure attachment (Silva et al., 2023). This attachment style is closely related to the formation of children's externalizing behaviors (Fearon et al., 2010). Baker and Cunningham (2009) found that preschoolers who have experienced inter-parental violence exhibit notably more emotional disturbances, aggression, and social interaction disorders than others.

The family environment of these children may sometimes fail to provide opportunities to form secure attachments (Stinehart et al., 2012). However, secure attachments are likely to play a crucial role in fostering resilience (Darling Rasmussen et al., 2018). When children experiencing trauma have inadequate family support to build resilience, they get in a complex predicament. In such cases, teachers and schools, as familiar caregivers and environments, can act as vital buffers to help these children recover and build resilience (Hornor, 2022). Establishing a positive bond with a teacher or mentor is crucial in aiding these children to restore balance in their reactions to stress and to develop self-control (Tobin, 2016).

However, teachers still face many challenges in interacting with these children. Gong et al. (2022) demonstrated that children with externalizing behaviors are more prone to teachers' maltreatment since their behaviors may result in more conflicts with teachers. For instance, such behaviors may disrupt classroom order, causing more pressure on teachers to manage student behavior and maintain discipline. Smith and Lawrence (2019) stated that children's externalizing behaviors may subject teachers to stress and possible emotional burnout, who, in turn, tend to respond to such behaviors in a severer or more punitive manner (Buettner et al., 2016). Thus, a negative feedback loop may be created as children's behavioral issues increase teachers' stress, triggering teachers' stricter responses, especially in a context favoring stricter discipline. This hinders children's resilience-building and worsens their behavior to cause further classroom disruptions, which again increases teachers' stress and continues the cycle.

Current status of early childhood education in rural China

Early childhood education in rural China is worthy of in-depth study. Although the Chinese government's investment has increased in recent years (L. Wang et al., 2020), a lack of academic and professional development in this area still leads to an unsatisfactory state at present (Hui & Yang, 2018). Research has shown a clear positive correlation between the educational level of teachers and children's cognitive development (L. Wang et al., 2020). However, compared to urban teachers, rural teachers have significantly fewer opportunities for professional training and continuing education (L. Wang et al., 2020). Additionally, preschool teachers in rural areas tend to be younger, with a lesser proportion of experienced ones (Lai et al., 2015, as cited in Si et al., 2017). While bringing in fresh perspectives and enthusiasm, younger teachers might also face challenges due to their relative inexperience. This further emphasizes the importance of improving the education and training for rural kindergarten teachers.

Gender imbalance in Chinese early childhood education is another serious issue. Only 2% of all kindergarten teachers in China are males (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Despite the global prevalence of this phenomenon, Chinese males seem to face more challenges in joining this profession. Firstly, traditional gender stereotypes in Chinese culture view early childhood education as a female-dominated profession and consider it shameful for men to work in this field (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). Secondly, low salaries also deter men from working in this field (Li et al., 2016), as they are typically expected to be the breadwinner of the family (L. Chen et al., 2015). Moreover, current early childhood teacher training programs are often not suited to men. Courses like dance, music, and painting can be difficult for most men due to gender-related differences (Y. Chen, 2015). These programs are also mostly female-dominated, creating a "feminized" environment with mainly female trainers and trainees (Jing, 2016). However, male teachers can provide children with diverse perspectives, such as courage, independence, abstract thinking, etc (Xu & Waniganayake, 2017). They can carry out roles and teaching styles entirely different from female teachers (Zhao, 2016), thereby fostering children's comprehensive development. In rural areas, traditional gender stereotype is more deeply rooted, further reinforcing these issues.

In addition, influenced by Confucianism, many Chinese parents follow the concept of "guan," which emphasizes strict discipline and close supervision to help children achieve academic and social success (M. Y. Wu, 2012). This idea also extends to teachers, who are expected to be strict and even use punishment to help students succeed (W. P. Yang et al., 2013). Therefore, children may become caught in strict treatment at school and maltreatment at home, which can lead to more serious mental health issues than experiencing only one form of maltreatment (Malvaso et al., 2016).

Theoretical framework-trauma-informed approach

The Trauma-Informed Approach (TIA), which focuses on integrating understanding of trauma into policies, programs, and practices to support the well-being of children with traumatic experiences (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014), is adopted in this study. The framework revolves around four core R's: Realize, Recognize, Respond, and Resist Re-traumatization. Guided by this framework,

Table 1. TIA literature in education.

Paper	Context	Topic	Focus	Key findings
Marie and Soroya (2019)	Africa/Urban	Yoga Teachers' Trauma-Informed Mind-Body Wellbeing Program (TI-MBW)	The study investigates the efficacy of the yoga-based TI-MBW program	1) The program significantly reduced traumatic distress in teachers who participated, with improvements particularly noted in self-regulation, beliefs in personal growth, and psychological distress relief. 2) The study was found to be safe for participants, supporting the feasibility and effectiveness of TI-MBW.
Dorado et al. (2016)	America/Urban	The University of California's Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) Program	The study assesses the HEARTS Program's effectiveness in aiding trauma-impacted students	The study witnessed: 1) enhancement in the understanding and application of trauma-sensitive practices among school personnel; 2) a significant increase in student participation in school activities and a reduction in behavioral problems; 3) a decrease in trauma-related symptoms in students receiving HEARTS therapy.
Hickey et al. (2020)	Ireland/No specific geographic focus	Second chance education settings (Youthreach programme) for Early School Leavers (ESLs).	This study examines factors affecting ESL reengagement and the impact of trauma-informed practices on improving outcomes in second-chance education.	1) Key enablers include supportive relationships, trauma-sensitive environments, and collaborative teaching practices, while significant barriers arise from systemic challenges, resource constraints, and ongoing socioemotional difficulties among students. 2)Trauma-sensitive practices are crucial for reengaging ESLs and promoting their well-being and educational attainment.
Ayre et al. (2022)	Australian/Rural	The Trauma-Informed Behavior Support (TIBS) Program in Australian regional primary school	This study examines shifts in primary teachers' beliefs and behavioral responses regarding trauma-informed care.	1) The training increased teachers' awareness of the importance of self-compassion, emotional regulation, and mental health care. 2) After the Tier 1 TIBS training, teachers' confidence in implementing trauma-informed practices increased, enhancing their ability to support students effectively.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Paper	Context	Topic	Focus	Key findings
Bitanihirwe and Imad (2023)	United Kingdom/ Urban	Trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education	This study examines students' experiences with trauma-related content in The University of Manchester and educators' perspectives on trauma-informed teaching.	1) Students appreciated the inclusion of trauma-related content in their courses, especially when it was aligned with their career goals. 2) Educators viewed trauma-informed pedagogy positively, emphasizing its potential to create equitable learning environments.

These studies provide diverse representations of trauma-informed approaches in education across various geographic regions and educational settings.

the principles of trauma-informed care have been broadly applied in education systems (Table 1). However, in China, research on trauma-informed practice remains in its infancy and predominantly concentrates on healthcare, such as nursing and social work, especially for survivors of trauma like COVID-19 (Y. Wang et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2024a, 2024b). To date, there has been scarce research applying TIA to the education sector in China.

Some scholars point out that TIA faces challenges and needs further refinement such as more rigorous evaluations and more precise definitions to ensure its anticipated effects in education (Champine et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Furthermore, emphasizing vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences can prevent individuals and groups from feeling safe, empowered, and in control, and may instead reinforce cycles of trauma and oppression (Nicholson & Kurtz, 2022). With an emphasis on recognizing and understanding trauma, TIA often overlooks the perspective of positive responses and support. Therefore, apart from building awareness and understanding, it is also essential to take action for positive changes, including attuning educators to positive responses to the emotional needs of children with traumatic exposure and their families (Nicholson & Kurtz, 2022; Wright, 2023). Through this, educators can help children cope with their problems actively and focus on their strengths to promote resilience in traumatic environments.

Despite the limitations, TIA provides a foundational theoretical framework for teachers to recognize and understand trauma in rural children, particularly when they are first introduced to trauma concepts. It can also offer a clear pathway for rural teachers, who often lack trauma-informed training to build fundamental skills in recognizing trauma and integrating more trauma-responsive and emotionally supportive strategies gradually into their educational practice. Therefore, this study adopts TIA as its theoretical framework to explore current issues on early childhood trauma in Chinese rural kindergartens.

Materials and methods

This study was conducted with qualitative methodology, which is well-suited to the aim of exploring current understanding and challenges of kindergarten teachers in the rural regions of China. Case study strategies were adopted, and the study was carried out at a rural kindergarten in northwest China. This kindergarten was selected because of its

locality and the great support shown by the principal after being contacted. Data collection was conducted through online semi-structured interviews using the Tencent Meeting platform. The semi-structured interview is used to prepare a list of specific questions to make the conversations more structured (Brinkmann, 2013), and enable researchers to ask flexible questions to let the participants provide in-depth descriptions of their experiences (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants were recruited through contacting the kindergarten principal. Although the first author and the principal did not know each other, the principal was enthusiastic about the research topic. He shared information about the study's purpose, procedures, ethical considerations, and the researchers with all the teaching staff. Six female kindergarten teachers (all in this kindergarten) aged between 25 and 40 with 3 to 8 years of teaching experience voluntarily participated in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee which the first author was affiliated with. The rights of each participant were highly valued, and they are ensured to have fully understood the research purpose, methods, and potential risks. All participants signed a written consent form after the first author explained the study. The first author also informed participants of their rights to withdraw from the interview at any time. Moreover, they were also informed about confidentiality issues and those pseudonyms would be used for anonymity.

To protect their privacy, the study employed random identifiers (namely, Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, Teacher E, and Teacher F) as pseudonyms for participants in the data presentation and analysis. Participants' information is presented in Table 2.

To ensure that participants fully understood the study's content, a 20-minute preparatory video in Chinese animation which details the definition of trauma and includes an illustrative case was provided along with the interview question list. The video highlights how ACEs influence children's behavior in school, particularly through the Fight or Flight response. It also presents scenarios of children affected by domestic violence and offers practical strategies for trauma-informed teaching, including self-care tips for educators.

Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and consisted of a set of 15 open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth responses related to the research questions. The interviews were conducted entirely in Mandarin, the native language of both the participants and the researchers, to ensure the accuracy and rigor of the responses. Data analysis was conducted on the original transcripts in Mandarin to ensure contextual accuracy, and transcripts were translated into English during analysis for reporting purposes.

The data analysis was a bottom-up method guided by the data itself, using the six-step method of Braun and Clarke (2006): first, getting familiarized with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts and note-taking; second, generating initial codes

Table 2. Participant information.

Participant	Age	Gender	Entry Method	Tenure at the Kindergarten
Teacher A	29	Female	Direct hire after graduation	7 years
Teacher B	25	Female	Direct hire after graduation	<3 years
Teacher C	40	Female	Transfer from primary school	8 years
Teacher D	28	Female	Entry through Examination	6 years
Teacher E	28	Female	Entry through Examination	6 years
Teacher F	28	Female	Entry through Examination	6 years

based on patterns and recurring ideas; third, refining themes by checking them against the data set, ensuring they accurately reflect the data; fourth, grouping and aggregating the initial codes into cluster; fifth, defining and naming themes under 4 R; last, writing the findings chapter to produce the report.

Both authors are native Chinese speakers and fluent English users. The translation happens in the second coding step: generating initial codes. The codes, themes, and selected quotations were translated into English by the first author. Then the second author reviewed the coding process and its translations to ensure semantic accuracy and conceptual clarity. Discrepancies in code interpretation or theme categorization were resolved through collaborative discussion, using a consensus-based approach, ensuring that meaning was preserved as accurately as possible and coder reliability persists in the translation and analysis process.

Results

Based on the data, the findings could be categorized into four key themes built upon the Four R's of TIA: realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization.

Theme 1: realize

The data reveals that teachers' realization of children's psychological trauma is primarily based on family issues, such as parental divorce, LBC, and domestic violence.

> The sudden death or divorce of parents . . . is about the lack of parental companionship and love, resulting in children's lack of a sense of security (Teacher E).

Teacher D and Teacher E identified challenges related to children's trauma that are deeply rooted in the local environment, acknowledging complex factors at play. Teacher E observed that due to financial difficulties, local families sometimes have to leave their children in the care of grandparents while they seek work in the city. Teacher D pointed out the problems of child neglect in rural LBC.

"The grandparents in our village are quite busy, especially during the farming season. They may not be able to respond promptly to some requests from the children. " (Teacher D)

Teacher F mentioned that the awareness of early childhood trauma could be based on children's experiences, such as the issues of domestic violence and gender inequality:

> In our village, parents intend to be fond of boys because of traditional and feudal thoughts. In these families, the girls are not well cared for, and they are more likely to experience trauma due to gender inequality.

While some teachers have an awareness of trauma because of family and culture issues, some others also see broader and more complex re-traumatization issues in schools or communities. Teacher F mentioned bullying regarding the children who had trauma-impacted behaviors.

> This boy is likely to experience trauma based on the situation we get to know. He speaks more slowly than other kids and most of the time he is not willing to talk. Other children like to make fun of him; he seems different (Teacher F).

However, some teachers (B, C, and D) have misunderstandings about trauma. For example, Teacher B misunderstood children's hyperactivity as trauma:

> He seems full of energy, but his energy is not spent on normal things.

Teacher C simply interpreted the stoicism of rural children as trauma:

> Because of limited living conditions since childhood... they are more likely to endure silently compared with children living in the city.

Teacher B and Teacher D also expressed their own limitations about understanding of trauma and the need for further training. As Teacher B said:

> I feel I lack knowledge and ability.

Teacher D also emphasized the importance of training, saying:

> I think we need more training because our exposure to this area is really limited.

All participants agreed that the family environment greatly influences children's character and psychology.
Teacher E stated,

> LBC... are weaker in attention, participation in activities, and other aspects.

Some teachers (A, B, and F) observed that gender may lead to differences in children's trauma exhibition. Teacher A noted that girls may not show externalizing behavior as noticeably as boys:

> Boys display externalizing behavior very clearly.

Theme 2: recognize. The data shows that teachers mainly recognize children who have traumatic experiences in three ways: observing their emotional and behavioral changes, detecting abnormal behaviors, and understanding the children's family background.
Some teachers (A, C, and E) said they could easily catch children's emotional and behavioral changes in daily interaction.

> Children... cannot disguise like adults... their facial expressions, movements, and attitudes might reveal it (Teacher C).

They would also observe children's abnormal behaviors. Teacher C mentioned that besides externalizing behaviors, children's internalizing exhibitions could also be noticed. Externalizing behaviors may be exhibited as aggression, such as hitting and biting, while internalizing behaviors as timidity, reclusiveness, and communication difficulties.

> He simply cannot live harmoniously with other children... when someone gets close to him, he immediately displays aggressive behavior (Teacher C).

However, teachers sometimes face challenges in linking these behaviors to underlying trauma. Teacher B expressed the difficulty in recognizing trauma-related behaviors when children are reluctant to communicate, which can sometimes lead to frustration or uncertainty in how to best support them.

> She is timid and cowardly… she does not speak, as if I were troubling her (Teacher B).

Teachers (A, B, C, and E) mentioned that they usually tried to communicate with parents to know more information about their family background.

> We later found out that his parents had divorced… the grandfather might have shown some negative emotions due to the pressures of life (Teacher C).

However, Teacher B and Teacher E highlighted the challenges of communication.

> I communicated with his mother… it was just not easy to get her to talk about family matters (Teacher B).

> People say teachers are interfering if you talk too much (Teacher E).

Theme 3: respond

After identifying trauma in children, the teachers' responses seem to unintentionally align with the six principles of trauma-informed care: safety, peer support, empowerment, voice and choice, trustworthiness and transparency, and collaboration and mutuality. The efforts that teachers make can be understood from the following four perspectives: direct interaction with children, collaboration among colleagues, communication with parents, and the challenges they encounter.

Sub-theme1: direct interaction with children

Teacher B and Teacher E mentioned their direct response to children who need support through positive guidance, inquiry, physical soothing, building trust, and proper behavior encouragement. Teacher B told the first author that she designed an emotional therapy corner in the classroom to meet the needs of LBC.

> Such an environment is relatively private and suitable for children who have divorced parents, LBC, and other children who need emotional support. It is to satisfy them instead of suppressing them (Teacher B).

Teacher E emphasized the importance of creating a safe and stable environment for children who have experienced trauma by respecting their needs and fostering peer support, which reflected the principles of safety, peer support, and empowerment.

Sub-theme2: collaboration among colleagues

All six participants mentioned that they would actively seek collaboration with each other and discuss the issues and perhaps find out solutions together.

> Discussing strategies with teachers in the class, all of us will cooperate to solve the psychological trauma issues for the children (Teacher A).

However, cooperation is not always smooth. The experience of Teacher F also reveals some friction among teachers, and she bluntly stated,

> That teacher doesn't seem to care… so gradually I became unwilling to ask her.

These experiences hint at potential challenges and obstacles that teachers may face in collaborative work.

Sub-theme3: communication with parents

In communicating and collaborating with parents, the teachers' experiences present a complex situation. Some successful cases, like Teacher C's description, fully embody the principle of collaboration and mutuality. By encouraging a divorced mother to spend more time with her child and organizing birthday parties, Teacher C helped improve the child's condition. This case shows the positive effects of collaboration between parents and teachers, further proving the importance of the collaboration and mutuality principle.

Moreover, Teacher A's description also reflects her efforts in the principle of safety. During a home visit, Teacher A discovered a child affected by parental pressures to study. She then fostered a safe environment for the child through active communication with the parents and promoting scientific parenting concepts, which emphasized that knowledge acquisition is a gradual process that aligns with a child's development instead of imposing undue pressure on the child to achieve premature milestones. She further explained that both skilled teaching and the child's maturation should support learning, which takes time, so they need to slow down.

> I explained the situation to his father... the child will naturally learn the knowledge according to his age and developmental characteristics. We should be patient.

Sub-theme4: challenges

Teacher D pointed out that communication and collaboration with parents and other family members was difficult, though it was workable sometimes. These difficulties include distance issues, challenges in communicating with grandparents, inability to contact parents, and ineffective communication with parents.

> Mainly I communicate with grandparents because sometimes you can't communicate with the parents because they are not at home or unwilling to talk to us (Teacher D).

Teacher D and Teacher F noted that beyond communication issues, some parents resorted to violence as a means of discipline, reflecting differing educational philosophies when teachers attempted to engage with them.

> As soon as I started speaking, the parents slapped the kid's face (Teacher D).

Furthermore, Teacher A and Teacher D also mentioned other challenges for responding to early childhood trauma, which were insufficient support from the government, shortage of staff and a heavy workload.

> *We always need to be busy with various materials, various records... neglecting some subtle changes of the children* (Teacher A).

Moreover, the response is not always effective, and this ineffectiveness often leaves teachers feeling frustrated and lost.

> When you try to communicate with him in various ways... and see the child still indifferent... you still feel a sense of powerlessness (Teacher D).

Theme 4: resist Re-traumatization

The data also indicates the measures that teachers took in dealing with re-traumatization of children. Although some teachers lack a deep understanding of re-traumatization, they still take corresponding measures to stop and handle bullying in schools, for reasons such as campus safety responsibilities and parental and social pressures. However, some teachers' actions have involved some of the six key principles without possibly realizing it, including safety, trustworthiness and transparency, and empowerment and voice.

In terms of safety, Teacher B and Teacher D mentioned that they would intervene in children's bullying to create a non-threatening environment for children who have traumatic experiences. The teachers would also encourage students to accept each other's differences.

> To talk about his strengths, so that the children can accept him and play with him (Teacher D).

Furthermore, Teacher B also demonstrated trustworthiness and transparency in supporting a child who may be exposed to trauma. At first, she failed to connect a boy's behavior to trauma, and her negative emotions and words led him to be isolated and bullied by his peers. Upon realizing this, she reflected on her conduct and worked hard to change her attitude and teaching methods by praising and encouraging his active participation in classroom activities.

> Let the child actively participate in class, let him come up to imitate small animals and their movements, and perform the content of this little story (Teacher B).

Through these strategies, Teacher B also employed the principle of empowerment and voice, as she gave the child more opportunities for expression and participation, helping to boost the child's confidence and self-esteem and making him feel heard and valued.

While Teacher B took significant steps to prevent re-traumatization, such efforts are quite often constrained by systemic challenges, including a lack of resources and support. For example, other participants expressed uncertainty about how to address this issue.

> *"You have to make him better... you can't let him get worse... you still have to pay full attention to him, but I really do not know the next step."* (Teacher C)

Such words convey concern, but do not clarify how support can be provided. More seriously, due to heavy work pressure and a lack of relevant resources and knowledge, some rural teachers, such as Teacher E, have shown anxiety and fatigue.

> *"Over time... teachers will have problems with their mental [health], being squeezed..."* (Teacher E)

These situations reflect the complex reality of rural teachers in supporting children who have experienced trauma against re-traumatization. While some take specific actions, many have only a vague understanding and lack clear solutions and support.

Discussion

Synthesis

This research investigated Chinese rural kindergarten teachers' perception of ACEs, how they identify and address children's exhibition of trauma, and the challenges they face. While it was initially postulated that teachers would focus on externalizing behaviors, the data reveals their equal sensitivity to internalizing problems like timidity, detachment, and communication difficulties, probably due to their attentive care for and close interaction with the students.

A significant observation was the teachers' subtle comprehension of familial trauma, likely to be influenced by the prompts of the introductory video. This is evident as some participants' responses appeared to focus on family conflicts, which are exemplified in the video, while other unillustrated trauma types introduced in the video, such as school bullying and community violence, received little to no attention. Beyond family-related trauma, participants also noted culturally specific forms of trauma, such as the traditional preference for sons (gender inequality) and the phenomenon of LBC, which aligns with previous research findings (Wan et al., 2023; X. Wang et al., 2020). As highlighted in the literature, these children bear greater pressure and are more prone to experience ACEs (F. Yang & Liu, 2020). In addition, participants observed that gender may affect how these children exhibit trauma through behaviors. This aligns with findings by Meeker et al. (2021), which suggest that boys with ACEs are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors. However, given the small sample size, it is difficult to attribute these differences solely to gender, as children's temperament may also play a role in how trauma is expressed (Wiseman et al., 2021). Thus, further research with a larger sample is needed to explore the relevance. In addition, the findings show that some teachers may misunderstand other behaviors such as hyperactivity and stoicism as trauma which highlights the need for professional training that supports teachers in distinguishing between the two.

Participants' understanding of trauma partially aligns with the broader framework proposed by the APA (Dye, 2018), where phenomena like LBC can be categorized under "separation" and gender biases can be roughly classified as a form of "neglect." However, subtle distinctions arise when these categories are applied in different cultural contexts, particularly when cultural norms prioritize other terminology and frame trauma differently. As Wan et al. (2023) mentioned, ACEs vary across countries; in China, terms such as "psychological problems" or "health problems" are more commonly used when describing children's emotional and behavioral struggles (Tang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023), which differs from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2014) definition. This simplified understanding may, at times, lead teachers to focus more on superficial symptoms instead of the trauma underlying them, thus obscuring the recognition of the roots of trauma. Therefore, although teachers' recognition primarily came through observing and tracking children's emotional and behavioral fluctuations and probing into their familial backgrounds, they often struggled to link specific behaviors to trauma histories. There was also a noticeable knowledge gap in identifying and addressing possible community-related trauma.

However, consistent with L. Wang et al. (2020), rural teachers have fewer opportunities for professional development and continuing education, which limits their access to trauma-specific training. This situation, combined with the cultural norms, further

exacerbates the knowledge gap, making it more difficult for teachers to recognize trauma in their students. Thus, trauma-informed training should be culturally adapted, integrating local perspectives on mental health to help teachers link observable behaviors to deeper sources of trauma and gradually bridge the gap between traditional views and a broader understanding of trauma.

These challenges in the Chinese context also extend to "Respond" and "Resist" in TIA. Unavailability of resources and support inevitably leads teachers to strategic pitfalls in responding to students affected by trauma, unintentionally making them more vulnerable through peer isolation and bullying (Phifer & Hull, 2016). Despite teachers' earnest efforts to curtail the risk of re-traumatization via strategies which tentatively resonate with the six principles of trauma-informed care, the lack of a structured knowledge foundation occasionally renders their efforts ineffective.

Contradicting the insights from Buettner et al. (2016) and Gong et al. (2022), this study reveals that, while teachers do have reservations about certain behaviors exhibited by children impacted by trauma, their fundamental approach remains constructive. This may be related to the Ethics Code for Chinese Teachers issued by the Ministry of Education of China in 2008, which emphasizes that teachers must care for students' needs and treat them with respect and equality, encouraging them to adopt more positive approaches (Lin & Chen, 2024). Yet, under this circumstance, teachers may strain to provide socially desirable responses that align with these new norms. This strain could complicate the interpretation of their feedback, as it may not fully reflect the complexities of their actual classroom practices or reservations.

From a macroscopic perspective, the challenges faced by teachers exceed individual capabilities. Family factors play an essential role in the performance and achievements of students (Ambaye, 2024). However, teachers' efforts are constrained by two interrelated challenges: structural obstacles to parent-teacher communication and deep-seated cultural expectations of discipline. On the structural level, the increasing migration of parents to urban areas exacerbates the disintegration of families and the issue of LBC (Y. Wu et al., 2023). This demographic shift leads to limited contact or cooperation between teachers and families, making it difficult for teachers to understand home-based factors contributing to students' behavioral and emotional difficulties. Cultural norms in China, as described by Man et al. (2017), also highlight a unique ethos of noninterference in others' family matters, which could play a role in shaping the dynamics of communication between teachers and parents. Such factors may contribute to the challenges in understanding students' family situations and impacts. In addition, as M. Y. Wu (2012) pointed out, parental adherence to Confucian ideals, particularly the concept of "guan," may endorse teachers to use punitive discipline. Such responses, though normally perceived by parents as expressions of care or responsibility for their children, are at odds with trauma-informed principles which emphasize emotional safety and relational trust, making teachers struggle to apply trauma-informed strategies without clashing with parents' culturally rooted beliefs. Therefore, teachers are often in a dilemma about aligning efforts with their professional knowledge or with disciplinary values held by families, which creates emotional strain and professional hesitation.

Moreover, current governmental and community support for both children with ACEs and for teachers to assist these children is markedly inadequate, especially in rural areas. Despite increased government investment in early childhood education

(B. S. Chen, 2018), resources for teachers' professional and academic development in rural areas remain scarce compared to urban areas. Rural kindergarten teachers receive insufficient support from these entities, a challenge consistent with what is outlined in the literature (Hui & Yang, 2018; L. Wang et al., 2020). Notable resource scarcities and growing professional demands increase the stress quotient. In this context, promoting governmental and communal backing for teachers, paired with enhancement of TIA, becomes critical. In the absence of consistent parental and governmental support, teachers are left alone to cater for student needs with increasing stress levels. Demands ranging from behavior management to administrative tasks contribute to a growing sense of occupational strain. While Smith and Lawrence (2019) identified students' behavioral issues and limited supervisory support as key stressors for teachers, this study also highlights a context-specific source of stress: teachers are required to produce excessive administrative documents and manage non-instructional duties. This heavy workload often diverts their attention away from observing and responding to students' emotional needs in a timely and sensitive manner. Teachers struggle with managing heavy workloads and the complex task of student behavior management, concurring with insights of Smith and Lawrence (2019).

In addition, consistent with S. Chen et al. (2023), the study indicates that female teachers, in particular, face higher risks of emotional exhaustion due to conflicts between work pressures and emotional labor. These pressures are further intensified by traditional gender norms in China, which expect women to bear the primary responsibilities of household duties and childcare (S. Chen et al., 2023). Unlike women, men are socially expected to fulfill the role of financial providers, as noted by L. Chen et al. (2015) and Li et al. (2016). This division reinforces an unequal distribution of responsibilities, which overburdens women both at home and in their professional roles. Such dual burdens may heighten female teachers' emotional exhaustion and constrain their professional growth (Sun et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience by actively seeking colleague support and engaging in collaborative problem-solving. Although such collaboration was not always successful, sometimes hindered by a lack of shared commitment, it nonetheless reflects a meaningful inclination toward collective coping. As Sun et al. (2024) pointed out, peer collaboration is a key mechanism for fostering resilience among rural teachers in China. While this form of support proves valuable, it remains inherently limited in scope and sustainability. Greater systemic support, particularly at the policy level and professional development levels, remains essential to strengthen coherence, build shared understanding, and sustain trauma-informed approaches over time so that the potential of such practices is fully realized.

In light of this need for institutional reinforcement, international models that embed TIA within legislative frameworks offer valuable references. International success stories demonstrate the effectiveness of legislative frameworks in supporting trauma-informed educational methods, providing a viable model for rural China to follow, such as the incorporation of trauma-informed training into legislation in Massachusetts and Connecticut (Connecticut General Assembly, 2015; General Court of Massachusetts, 2023). However, any such model needs to be adapted to the unique cultural context and incorporate local cultural sensitivities to ensure it aligns with the specific needs and values of communities.

In summary, there is a clear need for enhanced culturally sensitive trauma-informed pedagogical training for rural teachers in China, as well as strengthened collaboration with parents, communities, and administrative bodies to effectively support children who have experienced trauma.

Implication for practice

For teachers, this research points out the significance of self-reflection and adaptation when dealing with students with trauma. Teachers need a deeper understanding of trauma-informed educational practices, such as trauma-informed subjects, curriculum design, and classroom games and other activities (Brunzell et al., 2015; Crosby, 2015). Therefore, teachers should be provided with more locally relevant training and developmental programs integrated with more positive strategies like emotionally responsive ones to improve their competency. Moreover, while teachers demonstrate admirable resilience in addressing trauma in students, they also require additional care and support. For instance, creating social support networks, including supportive supervisors and positive feedback, can mitigate stress, alleviate burnout symptoms, and foster teachers' compassion satisfaction (Abraham-Cook, 2012, as cited in Ormiston et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this study offers valuable insights for communities and policy-makers in rural China, highlighting the urgent need for culturally sensitive trauma-informed approaches. Beyond necessary support and assistance, enhancing collaboration between schools, families, and communities is also essential. While international studies, such as that of Epstein and Sanders (2006), have demonstrated the benefits of such collaboration, these insights still need to be carefully adapted to the cultural context of rural China. Given the unique challenges faced by rural communities in China, such as local customs, shifts in policy and population dynamics, and limited community resources, it is crucial to develop strategies that reflect these local realities and foster more effective and contextually appropriate collaboration and communication between schools, families, and communities. Thus, there is an urgent need for systematic policies and strategies that take local cultural sensitivities into account.

Limitation

The study primarily focuses on a distinct region in rural northwest China. The findings may not be fully applicable to other cultural, educational, or societal contexts. Future studies could explore the issues in more contexts. Another significant consideration is the gender bias regarding that the participants are all females and it is rare to see males in kindergarten teaching positions especially in Chinese rural areas.

Moreover, although the first author strictly followed ethical guidelines and emphasized voluntary participation to reduce potential bias, recruiting and introducing participants through a kindergarten principal may create an inherent power dynamic. This could result in teachers concealing or embellishing certain information for certain reasons. In addition, since all participants were recruited from the same kindergarten through a single principal, the views collected may reflect a specific institutional culture, thereby limiting the diversity of experiences represented in the data. Future studies may consider broader sampling across multiple institutions to enhance representativeness.

Conclusion

This research addresses a gap in understanding the perceptions and approaches of rural Chinese kindergarten teachers toward children who may have experienced trauma, providing valuable insights into preschool education within the specific cultural and geographical context of rural China. It offers a reference for the application of the trauma-informed teaching approach in the Chinese context.

The findings highlight the complex challenges those rural Chinese teachers face, particularly regarding their knowledge and skills related to addressing trauma. These challenges are integrated with unique socio-cultural and political factors within their context. The study emphasizes the importance of developing and implementing trauma-informed practices, pointing out the need for stronger collaboration between teachers, families, the government, and community stakeholders. Such collaboration could enhance the support available to teachers as they guide the developmental and educational experiences of children. Additionally, the research lays the groundwork for future studies, pointing to the relevance of promoting trauma-informed approaches that are culturally sensitive and locally adaptable to foster a trauma-responsive environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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