

# What do Early Childhood Education and Care Pre-Service Educators in Greece Think of the Gendered Dimensions of Play? A Mixed Method Approach

Maria Stamatoglou (Corresponding author)

Early Childhood Care and Education Department,

International Hellenic University

PO BOX 141, Sindos, Thessaloniki, Greece

Tel: 306-977-085-625 E-mail: mstamatog@ihu.gr

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## Abstract

Gender stereotypes continue to subtly shape children's experiences in early childhood education, particularly through play—an essential medium for learning and development in preschool settings. This study explores the findings of a larger scale ongoing study on the perceptions of 45 first-year Early Childhood Education pre-service educators regarding the gender dimensions of play in Greece. Pre-service educators were invited to respond to an online questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions. Initial analysis of the findings indicates that while many pre-service educators promote inclusive and open-ended play, implicit biases can still guide toy selection, activity suggestions, and responses to children's choices. Boys are often encouraged toward physical, competitive, or construction-based play, while girls are more frequently steered toward nurturing, domestic, or artistic activities. These patterns may limit children's social and cognitive growth by constraining their exploration of diverse roles and skills. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for critical reflection in pedagogical practices and suggests strategies for fostering gender-equitable play environments that support all children's development free from limiting stereotypes. The pedagogical role is critical in cultivating inclusive practices that respect diversity and enhance children's autonomy. Suggestions for future practices of pre-service ECEC educators in supporting their pedagogical role is considered of high importance.

**Keywords:** Early childhood, Pre-service educators, Pedagogical practice, Gender stereotypes, Play

## 1. Introduction

Play is the main activity in early childhood, where, among other things, the first perceptions of children's gender are formed. Gender dimensions are thought to be contributing to the development of identity and social skills. However, as stated by Kongidou (2010), gender-related stereotypes influence play choices, limiting children's creativity and self-expression. The purpose of this study is to explore the views of pre-service Early Childhood Education and Care educators in relation to the gender dimensions of play and the pedagogical role they believe they should adopt in managing these issues. This is considered important so that pre-service educators will be empowered during their studies and practicum, in order to be able to support play practices that deconstruct social and gender stereotypes.

### *1.1 Theoretical Framework*

Play is a fundamental element in the all-round development of infants and toddlers that reflects, reproduces and challenges social norms, especially with regard to gender dimensions. In every social environment, perceptions of “boyish” and “girlish” games shape the attitudes, roles and self-perception of children from a young age (Kogidou, 2010). At the same time, international and Greek literature, according to Chapman (2015), Saramourtsi, Zafeiri, and Plioggou (2020) highlights that the pedagogical role of adults and especially ECEC pre-service educators, is of strategic importance either for the perpetuation or for the deconstruction of these stereotypes.

Theoretical and empirical research acknowledges that pedagogical practice and the educational process play a crucial role in breaking down stereotypes and promoting an environment of equality (Chapman, 2015; Saramourtsi et al., 2020; Kongidou, 2015). Gender-neutral design of educational materials and freedom of choice of play constitute important pillars that contribute to the holistic development of children, while collaboration with parents and the community promotes consistency and support at all levels, starting from early childhood education and in particular baby and infant day care centres.

Recent studies (see Saramourtsi et al., 2020; Chapman, 2015; Utami et al., 2021) converge on the conclusion that the perceptions and practices of ECEC educators are the most critical factor in either reinforcing or weakening gender stereotypes. Particularly emphatic is the intervention of theatrical pedagogy and the critical approach to STEM models in school (Wang, 2024), where the encouragement of alternative roles and skills leads children to new, equal paths of learning and interaction. Based on the above it follows that 'the use of play as a pedagogical tool in modern education is based on numerous theoretical approaches and pedagogical practices that highlight its importance for the development of children', with 'play having acquired a central position in the educational process, constituting a crucial factor for the development of students' cognitive, social and emotional skills' (Karaoulas, 2024, p. 82).

#### 1.1.1 Gendered Aspects of Play and Stereotypical Categorizations

The gender dimension of play is formed early in a child's life, as pointed out by Kongidou (2010, 2015) and international studies (Chapman, 2015), since social norms lead young children to adopt specific preferences and roles. Girls are typically encouraged to engage in caregiving games, such as dolls, while boys are encouraged to engage in action, construction, and movement games. These practices reinforce perceptions of separation that remain strong and repeated in both the school and family environments (Saramourtsi, Zafeiri, & Plioggou, 2020).

Through a literature review and empirical records presented in recent studies, it is found that

pre-service ECEC educators identify the need for free choice of play, without gender restrictions. They believe it is important to encourage all children to use any toy they wish, regardless of social stereotypes, thus strengthening self-esteem and self-sufficiency (Utami et al., 2021). The existence of an abundance of play props, such as corners for construction, experiments, imaginary play, libraries and objects of various roles (traditionally “female” or “male”) gives children the opportunity to experiment, explore and realize the wide range of their choices (Kogkidou, 2015). Furthermore, David (2018) in her research with preschool and early childhood participants sought to investigate whether apparent gender stereotypes are still recognizable in young children or whether they are blurred in the light of technology, with the results showing that stereotypes are found in both 5–6-year-olds and 10–11-year-olds, with only minor differences. Also, the gender of the respondents is not a significant criterion for differentiating the frequencies of stereotypes, which makes the need for careful pedagogical approaches on behalf of educators essential.

### 1.1.2 Role of the Teacher and Pedagogical Approaches

Deconstructing stereotypes is a key responsibility of the modern educator. As researchers have noted recently (Wang, 2024), undergraduate students—as future educators—recognize that their active role includes (a) creating safe and free choices for all children and (b) providing educational guidance, with the aim of effectively eliminating gender-related discrimination. On the other hand, Kongidou (2010, 2020) argues that in order to achieve real equality, the use of neutral toys (blocks, puzzles, role-playing games) must be encouraged and the reproduction of social stereotypes must be actively challenged, both by children and adults. At the same time, students recognize that the persistent existence of stereotypical patterns poses obstacles to the application of these principles. Relevant Greek research indicates that continuous training of teachers, as well as cooperation with parents and the community, are essential for changing existing prejudices. Continuous discussion with children, in language and examples appropriate to their age, helps to consciously challenge stereotypes: “Toys are for all children”. The use of educational materials developed by Kongidou (2010) and other experts offers ready-made examples of good practices.

### 1.1.3 Cooperation between Parents, Community and School

The importance of creating a collaborative culture where parents, teachers and community actors work together to decriminalize play and raise children free from gender boundaries also emerges according to Segura-Nebot et al. (2025). The organization of non-discriminatory cooperative games, as well as the institutionalization of mixed groups, have proven valuable in reducing differences and reinforcing equality (Wang, 2024).

## 1.2 Scope of the Study

This paper examines findings from an ongoing larger scale study on the views of 45 pre-service Early Childhood Education and Care educators regarding gendered play, with an emphasis on how they perceive their role in shaping an inclusive and equal environment for all infants and toddlers. The students drew on their experiences and perceptions of how gender influences play in ECEC settings from infancy to toddlerhood.

## 2. Methodology

As previously mentioned, this paper examines findings of an ongoing larger scale study on the views of pre-service Early Childhood Education and Care educators regarding gendered play, with an emphasis on how they perceive their role in shaping an inclusive and equal environment for all children. The analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative data from 45 undergraduate students, who responded to eleven closed questions and 2 open-ended

questions regarding the role of the educator in nursery play, the management of gender stereotypes, and the pedagogical practices they consider effective.

Quantitative data, is considered that in educational research can be analyzed through a range of statistical techniques depending on the research questions and data type. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies are often used to summarize and present patterns in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Inferential statistics—including t-tests, ANOVA, and chi-square tests—are employed to determine whether observed differences or relationships are statistically significant, allowing researchers to generalize findings from a sample to a population (Field, 2018). More advanced analyses, such as regression models or factor analysis, can explore predictive relationships or underlying constructs within datasets (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Choosing the appropriate statistical test requires careful consideration of the measurement level of variables, the distribution of data, and sample size. Software such as SPSS, R, or Excel is commonly used to facilitate these analyses. However, due to the small sample size of this study descriptive statistics was seen as more relevant to apply for the analysis of the data.

On the other hand, qualitative data analysis involves systematically identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, or open-ended survey responses. A common approach is thematic analysis, where data are coded and categorized to reveal recurring themes across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process often begins with familiarization, followed by generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing them, and finally defining and naming them. Grounded theory offers a more inductive approach, allowing themes and theoretical insights to emerge directly from the data through constant comparison and iterative coding (Charmaz, 2014). Content analysis, on the other hand, allows for both quantitative and qualitative interpretation by counting occurrences of certain words or ideas within textual data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Regardless of the method, trustworthiness in qualitative analysis is enhanced through practices such as triangulation, member checking, and reflexive journaling. Tools like NVivo, ATLAS.ti, and MAXQDA can aid in organizing and managing large volumes of qualitative data. Thus, for the purposes of this study, thematic analysis was used to highlight the views of the participant involved.

### **3. Results**

The results presented in this paper are part of an ongoing study that is based on a questionnaire that was made available electronically to undergraduate students of a Department of Early Childhood Education and Care, with the participants' responses requiring both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

#### *3.1 Analysis of Quantitative Data*

Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data. The statistical analysis of the following questions revealed that questions with low mean and median (e.g. “typically girly”) indicate a concentration on the first choices — for example, dolls. On the other hand, questions with higher mean (e.g. “stereotype factor”) indicate that most students chose the last category (parents/teachers). Finally, the low standard deviations (0.54–1.09) indicate a clear trend in the responses (i.e. without much dispersion).

Table 1. Responses of participants (percentages)

Question	Responses			
Girls usually prefer care toys (dolls, kitchenware) because	Biological difference s 15.6%	The influence of genes 2.2%	Their physical ability 17.8%	Cultural and social influences 64.4%
Which factor most reinforces gender stereotypes in play?	The child's gender 13.3%	Intelligence 4.4%	Television 8.9%	Parents and teachers 73.3%
As an educator, what do you consider to be a typically boyish toy?	Dolls 2.2%	LEGO constructions 64.2%	Kitchenware 2.2%	Animal toys 31.1%
What do you consider a typical girl's toy?	Dolls 87.6%	LEGO constructions 2.2%	Kitchenware 11.1%	Animal toys 0%
At what age do you think gender preferences begin to emerge in play?	From 2 years old 53.3%	From 5 years old 44.4%	From 8 years old 2.2%	From 10 years old 0%
Acceptance of diversity in play is reinforced through	Strict rules 2.3%	Educational interventions 84.1%	Limiting the game 0%	Avoiding discussion about gender 13.6%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of quantitative data

Question	Average	Median	Standard Deviation
Girls usually prefer care toys (dolls, kitchenware) because	3.31	4.0	1.09
Which factor most reinforces gender stereotypes in play?	3.42	4.0	1.06
As an educator, what do you consider to be a typically boyish toy?	2.62	2.0	0.95
What do you consider a typical girl's toy?	1.24	1.0	0.64
At what age do you think gender preferences begin to emerge in play?	1.49	1.0	0.54
Acceptance of diversity in play is reinforced through	2.25	2.0	0.71

Following the statistical analysis of the questions which were designed on the Likert scale, their statistical analysis shows that all answers have an average of  $> 4$ , which indicates a strong positive trend. The low standard deviations indicate a relative uniformity in the students' responses. The third question seems to have the highest mean value and the lowest dispersion, indicating a very strong and stable positive intention in the students' answers.

Table 3. ECEC pre-service educators' responses (percentages)

Question	Responses				
	I completely agree.	Agree	I neither agree nor disagree.	Disagree	I completely disagree.
Exposure to "gender-neutral" games helps reduce stereotypes	48.9%	24.4%	20%	2.2%	4.4%
As an educator, I will allow children to choose toys solely based on their interests.	66.7%	17.8%	8.9%	0%	6.7%

As an educator, I aim to foster acceptance of diversity in play.	77.8%	8.9%	6.7%	2.2%	4.4%
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Table 4. Descriptive statistics of quantitative data

Question	Average	Median	Standard Deviation
Exposure to "gender-neutral" games helps reduce stereotypes	4.11	5	≈ 1.05
As an educator, I will allow children to choose toys solely based on their interests.	4.38	5	≈ 0.97
As an educator, I aim to foster acceptance of diversity in play.	4.54	5	≈ 0.84

### 3.1.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data

After having presented the analysis of the quantitative data, the analysis of the qualitative data is in line. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) presented 7 main thematic categories as shown in Table 5. The responses to the open-ended questions reflect a strong trend towards pedagogical practices that encourage equality, acceptance and freedom of choice of play without gender restrictions. Pre-service ECEC educators recognize social influences and stereotypical pressures but feel responsible to contribute to change through pedagogical sensitivity, variety of materials and collaboration with family and community.

The majority of pre-service ECEC educators emphasize the role of the educator as important in accepting diversity.

*"I believe that if we let children express themselves with whatever makes them happy ... they will choose all toys without discrimination."*  
*"Let's give equal opportunities to choose toys based on their interests and preferences."*

Young children's freedom of expression and choice of toys according to their personal interests, regardless of gender, are recognized as central to personal and social development. On the other hand, pre-service ECEC educators believe that freedom in play helps to create healthy relationships and enhance self-esteem.

A strong collective message concerns the refusal to categorize toys as boyish or girlish:

*"A variety of toys that are not separated into boys' or girls'."*

*"Let's not pay attention to society's stereotypes."*

The role of pre-service ECEC educators is to support young children in the view that "no toy is gender specific" and to encourage the use of all toys by all children in nursery settings. There is also a belief for gender-neutral educational materials and toys that foster collaboration and creativity regardless of gender.

Many pre-service ECEC educators point out the importance of having a wide variety of toys in the classroom so that all children can find something that suits them.

*"Variety of toys that offer equal access to all children."*

*"Creating corners with different materials (kitchen, tools, constructions) to get acquainted with various roles."*

Collaboration and interaction through group games is considered essential for developing a sense of teamwork and equality.



The responses emphasize the pedagogical role as supportive and guiding without arbitrary intervention or imposition of choices.

*"Guidance, not intervention during the game."*

*"The educator as researcher and respecter of children's choices."*

Pre-service ECEC educators recognize the critical importance of allowing young children to choose freely and reinforcing positive behaviours through discussion and awareness-raising in young children's free play. It also emphasizes the role of pre-service ECEC to actively participate in supporting non-gender play practices. Many point out that collaboration with the family and parents is essential, in order to ensure a common pedagogical view and open channel of communication that enhances the holistic development of young children.

*"To build relationships of trust and security with parents and children."*

*"Discussion with parents about the child and his interests."*

On the other hand, it is recognized that changing stereotypes requires a joint effort by all stakeholders.

Pre-service ECEC educators understand that their role is crucial in the deconstruction or reproduction of gender stereotypes, with the majority stating that they are willing as a positive role model, while at the same time, the importance of patience and respect for the uniqueness of each child is highlighted.

*"My role will be active in deconstructing stereotypes."*

*"I will not steer the children in a direction but will let them find their own interests."*

Summary Table 1. Thematic categories with description and examples

Thematic Category	Description	Examples
Acceptance and Respect for Diversity	Support for free expression and equal opportunities	<i>"Letting children express themselves in whatever makes them happy", "equal opportunities"</i>
Rejection of Gender Stereotypes	Refusal to categorize games based on gender	<i>"No game is intended for a specific gender", "Let's not pay attention to stereotypes"</i>
Variety of Games and Materials	Offering a variety of games and creating themed corners	<i>"Kitchen, tool, construction corners", "Variety in the classroom"</i>
Promoting Collaboration and Teamwork	Team games with mixed teams	<i>"Team games with everyone as equals", "Enhancing cooperation and interaction"</i>
Role of the Educator: Guidance and Non-Interventionism	Support for free choice without coercion	<i>"Guidance, not intervention", "Respecting children's choices"</i>
Collaboration with Parents and Community	Strengthening communication with parents and the wider community	<i>"Building trusting relationships with parents", "Collaborating with the community"</i>
Educator Self-Conception as Intervention	Educator's responsibility for deconstructing stereotypes	<i>"Active role", "I let the children find their interests"</i>

The table outlines seven thematic categories reflecting pre-service ECEC educators' beliefs and practices that promote gender equity and inclusivity in play.

To begin with, pre-service ECEC educators emphasize that they should create an environment

where young children can freely express themselves and have equal opportunities, regardless of gender or personal identity. Secondly, there is a conscious effort to avoid assigning games or toys to specific genders, with pre-service ECEC educators promoting a non-gender specific approach to play. Thirdly, nursery classrooms are equipped with a wide range of play options, including themed corners (e.g., kitchen, tools, construction), allowing children to explore diverse interests.

In addition, play activities are designed to encourage mixed-gender collaboration, fostering teamwork, social cohesion, and mutual respect. Similarly, pre-service ECEC educators aim to support and guide rather than direct play, allowing young children the autonomy in their choices while creating an inclusive environment. Also, strengthening ties with families and the broader community is seen as essential for reinforcing inclusive values and supporting children's development holistically.

Finally, pre-service ECEC educators view themselves as agents of change, actively working to challenge and deconstruct gender stereotypes through reflective practices and conscious pedagogy. This showcases a progressive and reflective stance among pre-service ECEC educators, focused on inclusivity, child autonomy, and active resistance to gender norms in preschool play environments.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present research shows the results of an ongoing larger scale mixed-method study. Pre-service ECEC educators seem to be sensitive to issues on gender and play in the early years and wish to contribute positively to pedagogical practice. The analysis of the opinions of undergraduate ECEC students, combined with theory and research findings, demonstrates the need for educational practices that promote the acceptance of diversity and the removal of all kinds of stereotypical perceptions and boundaries. Pre-service ECEC educators recognize the importance of equal access and respect for diversity, confirming findings from international studies (Wang, 2024). They advocate the acceptance and rejection of gender classifications, expanding pedagogical practice with non-gender specific toys and inclusive play activities (Chapman, 2015).

The pedagogical role is considered crucial, especially through collaboration with parents, in enhancing the cultivation of equal opportunities (Kogidou, 2020). The self-perception of undergraduate ECEC students as those creating positive change in non-gender specific play opportunities is promising and reinforces the need for continuous education and awareness. Promoting equality through play in early childhood requires pedagogical practices that respect and highlight diversity, break down stereotypes, offer a variety of play incidents and materials, and strengthen partnerships with parents and society. The role of the educator as a role model and supporter is crucial for the implementation of these goals. According to Kalemis and Kallini (2024, p. 12), *“as educators, we need to know how gender role stereotypes influence the way students see the world and what images are presented to them in the classroom. We need to teach babies and young children how visual images influence their attitudes and prejudices. We need to discuss and dismantle stereotypes that appear in popular culture and visual media,”* and it is strongly believed that this can be done from preschool age.

Change cannot occur only within the nursery classroom, but requires collaboration with the entire community and continuous professional development of teachers. Greek and international bibliography emphasizes the importance of pedagogical intervention from preschool age, as well as equal access to all forms of play, as a prerequisite for the formation of a society that respects and enhances diversity for babies and toddlers alike.



Nevertheless, several limitations of this study should be noted. The sample size was limited to undergraduate ECEC students, which may not fully represent the perspectives of students at different stages of their studies or practicum. In addition, as it is reflected in the data the results should be viewed as preliminary. The reliance on self-reported opinions may also introduce bias, and the absence of longitudinal data prevents observation of how perceptions evolve over time. Future research should expand to more diverse data collection methods, and integrate longitudinal approaches to provide a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of how pre-service ECEC educators can promote diversity and equality through non-gender specific play practices in early childhood education.

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