



GREEK ADULT LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ON GENDER ROLES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAY

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the perceptions of adult students in the third grade of the "Infant and Toddler Care Assistant" specialization regarding the gender dimension of children's play. Adult learners represent a distinct category of students, as one of their defining characteristics compared to minors is that they approach learning already possessing established perceptions, values, and beliefs (Kapur, 2015; Kokkos, 2005). The study presented was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year with the aim of designing an appropriate educational intervention within the course "Infant and Toddler Education (Theory & Laboratory)", targeting the elimination of educators' gender stereotypes in children's play. The sample consisted of eleven female students and one male student, aged 35–50, attending an evening vocational high school (EPAL) in Eastern Thessaloniki. Data were collected through two "diagnostic teaching" activities (Stylianou-Georgiou & Chatzianastasi, 2022), combined with the "focus group" research method (Vrasidas, 2014). Gender roles are often highlighted in ECEC research as the persistence of stereotypes (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Lynch, 2015). The influence of teachers and educational staff in shaping gendered stereotypes within children's play (Carlson & Meyer, 2014; Chapman, 2016; Mikkola, 2008, 2022) is emphasised in research. Freeman's (2007, p. 357) findings describe how young children construct gender perceptions in the early years of life, how they reframe play activities based on gender by the age of three, and how they can anticipate parental views regarding gender-based and cross-gender play. Adults tend to transfer gender stereotypes into different types of toys and activities (Cannizzaro, 2019; Freeman, 2007). Girls are often encouraged to play with dolls, kitchen toys, makeup, and beauty accessories, while boys are more frequently offered construction tools, weapons, superhero, and explorer toys (Cannizzaro, 2019). The

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findings indicated that the majority of participants held prejudices and stereotypical beliefs concerning gender in young children's play. The findings of the study underline the necessity of targeted educational interventions to raise awareness and reduce gender bias among future early childhood educators as well as early childhood educator assistants.

Keywords: gender, early childhood play, adult student perspectives

1. Introduction

The significance and value of play in children's development have been extensively supported by numerous studies and theoretical frameworks. Play serves a crucial role in children's physical, cognitive, social, linguistic, and emotional growth. A child's need for play is as fundamental as the need for food, love, and care. Research indicates that children's toy preferences and play styles both influence and are influenced by gender stereotypes during early childhood (Spinner *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon occurs because toys, as cultural artifacts, can embody and transmit ideological messages concerning gender (Kogkidou, 2015). Such ideological messages, when combined with the differentiated educational content of children's toys, may affect children's academic performance, their selection of specific academic fields, and their future career aspirations (Kogkidou, 2015). Awareness of gender stereotypes among children has been observed as early as three years of age, with adherence to such stereotypes peaking around five or six years (Spinner *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, examining early childhood educators' perceptions—and simultaneously raising their awareness of gender-related stereotypes in children's play—is essential. Building on these considerations, the present study investigates the views of adult learners enrolled in the Infant and Toddler Care Assistant specialization, who are prospective early childhood professionals. The primary aim is to design an appropriate educational intervention to promote awareness and reduce gender stereotypes in young children's play.

2. Literature Review

Play in early childhood is not merely a physical activity or a form of entertainment; rather, it constitutes a fundamental means of learning, socialization, and identity formation. Within the play environment, children explore social roles, test hypotheses about the world, experiment with power relations, and reproduce cultural experiences (Carlson & Meyer, 2014). Gender, as a social and cultural construct, enters this process from an early age, shaping children's play choices, interactions, and the identities they construct (Mikkola, 2008, 2022). Thus, play cannot be regarded as a "neutral" activity but rather as a field in which social stereotypes and expectations intersect and are reproduced. Research has shown that even during the preschool years, children develop perceptions about which toys "belong" to boys and which to girls (Freeman, 2007). Toys such as dolls or kitchen sets are often associated with "feminine" roles, whereas building

blocks, vehicles, and superheroes are linked to “masculine” activities (Lynch, 2015). These attitudes are reinforced by the family, the school, and the media, as well as by educators themselves who—often unintentionally—reproduce gender-based distinctions (Chapman, 2016). MacNaughton (2000), emphasizes that pedagogical practice frequently serves as a vehicle for “invisible” gendered orientations, manifested through the organization of classroom space, the language used, and the selective reinforcement of activities. Similarly, Davies (2003), argues that children, through everyday play scenarios, do not merely reproduce gendered identities but also negotiate, perform, and transform them, always in interaction with adults’ attitudes. This suggests that educators are not neutral observers but active participants in the construction of gendered meanings.

Cannizzaro (2019), in research with preschool teachers, highlights that although educators often claim not to interfere in children’s play choices, in practice they tend to reinforce stereotypes by guiding preferences through comments or by structuring activities in gendered ways. Lynch (2015) reaches similar conclusions, showing how educators’ perceptions of “boys’ and girls’ toys” indirectly shape children’s choices. Consequently, the notion that children “freely choose” their play is often misleading, as the context in which these choices occur is already socially charged. Queer theory offers an alternative analytical lens for understanding gendered play. According to Blaise and Taylor (2012), gender is not a fixed category but a fluid social construction that children continuously renegotiate. Thus, play is not merely a reflection of gender norms but a space for creating new forms of identity and experimentation. A girl who assumes the role of a “superhero” or a boy who plays “parent” with a doll does more than challenge stereotypes—such actions contribute to the formation of alternative gender narratives. The pedagogical challenge, therefore, lies in encouraging these practices and preventing the reproduction of rigid binaries. Wohlwend (2012), demonstrates that play operates as a “negotiation space” where children both internalize and subvert societal expectations regarding gender. Through pretend play, children can assume powerful roles regardless of their gender or experiment with identities that diverge from normative expectations. The pedagogical and educational responsibility of professionals lies in supporting this creative space to cultivate equality and respect for diversity. In practice, dismantling gender stereotypes requires conscious pedagogical strategies. Arranging the classroom with diverse, non-gendered materials; using gender-neutral language; encouraging all children to participate in every activity; and engaging in critical discussions about stereotypes in stories and media are all practices that promote gender equality (Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000).

Family also plays an equally significant role. Freeman (2007), argues that parents often send contradictory messages: while they may encourage children to explore different activities, they also express concern when such activities challenge traditional norms. In this regard, school–family collaboration is essential to avoid contradictions and promote a coherent message of equality. The theoretical discussion on the social construction of gender, as presented by Mikkola (2008, 2022), reminds us that gender identities are socially and culturally produced rather than biologically determined. This understanding carries direct pedagogical implications: if gender stereotypes are social

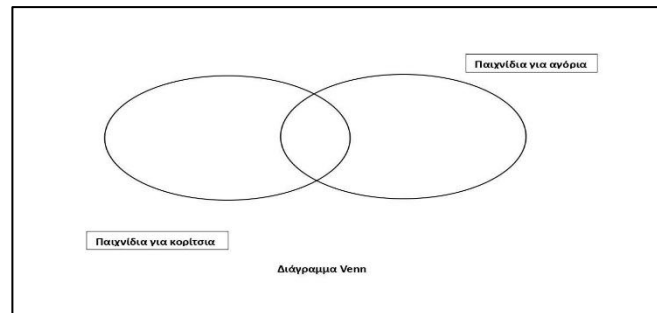
constructs, then education can play a key role in dismantling them. Consequently, early childhood education, as the first institutional context of socialization, can function as a catalyst for promoting freedom of expression and the equal participation of all children in all forms of play. In summary, investigating gender stereotypes in children's play holds dual significance. Theoretically, it contributes to understanding gender as a fluid and socially produced phenomenon. Pedagogically, it provides practical tools for creating learning environments that do not confine children to gendered roles but instead encourage them to experiment, question, and construct new forms of identity. The mission of early childhood educators and preschool teachers is to transform play spaces into environments of freedom, respect, and equality, thereby laying the foundation for inclusive and equitable education.

3. Methodology

The present study was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year with the aim of designing an appropriate educational intervention within the course *Infant and Toddler Education (Theory & Laboratory)*. The intervention sought to deconstruct gender stereotypes held by *Infant and Toddler Care Assistant* students regarding children's play. The primary objective was to investigate the perceptions of adult students enrolled in the third grade of a Vocational High School (EPAL), specializing in *Infant and Toddler Care Assistance*, concerning the gender dimension of children's play. The sample consisted of eleven female and one male student, aged 35–50, attending an evening EPAL in Eastern Thessaloniki.

Data collection involved two “diagnostic teaching” activities (Stylianou-Georgiou & Chatzianastasi, 2022), combined with the “focus group” research method (Vrasidas, 2014), for a total duration of two teaching hours (80 minutes). The diagnostic teaching method was selected because it contributes to the development of a student-centered learning environment by identifying learners' beliefs and misconceptions and creating situations that encourage critical thinking and reflection (Stylianou-Georgiou & Chatzianastasi, 2022). Similarly, focus groups, as described by Vrasidas (2014), facilitate an in-depth understanding of participants' personal beliefs and attitudes through the development of open or structured dialogue on the subject under investigation.

Regarding the diagnostic evaluation activities, the first involved each student presenting one or more images of their childhood toys to the class. All images were then displayed on the classroom bulletin board. Subsequently, the second activity involved completing a worksheet containing a Venn diagram (see Figure 1). In this activity, participants were instructed to list in the left circle of the diagram the toys from the displayed images that they considered suitable for girls and, in the right circle, those they believed were appropriate for boys. Finally, in the overlapping area of the two circles, they were asked to record the toys they regarded as gender neutral.



Picture 1: Venn Diagram

Regarding data collection within the focus group, a semi-structured interview format was employed. The interview questions were as follows:

- Are there toys that you believe are more suitable for boys? Which ones are more suitable for girls? Why?
- Have you ever heard someone say, "That is a toy for girls/boys"? How did that make you feel?
- If a boy wanted to play with dolls or a girl wanted to play with toy cars, what would you say?
- How would it be if everyone could play with any toy they wanted, without receiving comments?
- What toys would you like to try, but have never played with?

4. Results

The results of the diagnostic evaluation activities indicated that the majority of students presented and classified their childhood toys according to their belief that certain toys correspond to their own gender. Specifically, female students presented items such as dolls, stuffed animals, kitchen sets, painting kits, and puzzles, while the male student referred to transportation toys, Playmobil figures, building blocks, balls, and bicycles.

Similarly, data from the focus group revealed that 10 out of 12 participants—including the male student—expressed stereotypical responses concerning gendered perceptions of toys. Two female participants demonstrated non-stereotypical perspectives regarding the gender dimension of children's play. Indicative responses are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Focus group responses

Question	Stereotypical Responses	Non-Stereotypical Responses
<i>Are there toys that you believe are more suitable for boys or girls? Why?</i>	- Boys: active toys (building blocks, cars, balls). - Girls: dolls, kitchen sets, painting. - Boys have more energy and are more dynamic; girls are more nurturing and sensitive.	- I don't believe toys have a gender; children choose according to their interests. - All toys should be available to all children; stereotypes limit development.
<i>Have you ever heard someone say, "That is a toy for girls/boys"? How did you feel?</i>	- Yes, I have heard it often. - I was not bothered; it is normal. - That's how we were raised; we know which toys correspond to each gender.	- I have heard it and feel the need to intervene because it limits children. - I feel uncomfortable because it reproduces social roles and inequalities that should not exist today.
<i>If a boy wanted to play with dolls or a girl with toy cars, what would you say?</i>	- I wouldn't forbid it, but I would guide them toward toys more "appropriate" for their gender. - Boys: building blocks, balls. - Girls: painting, kitchen sets. - It's better not to confuse them with toys of the other gender.	- I would encourage it; all toys develop skills for all children. - I would say they can play with whatever they want; there is no wrong toy.
<i>How would it be if everyone could play with any toy they wanted without comments?</i>	- Theoretically nice, but in practice it would create confusion. - Children need clear boundaries. - If everything were for everyone, they wouldn't learn to distinguish gender roles.	- We would feel freer and learn more. - It would boost self-confidence and reduce discrimination.
<i>What toys would you like to try, but have never played with?</i>	- I wouldn't try toys of the opposite gender. - I would never play with dolls because they are for girls. - Each gender has its own toys.	- Construction toys I didn't play with as a child. - Cranes and cement mixers.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal that the majority of adult learners maintain stereotypical perceptions regarding the gender dimension of children's play. This tendency is not unexpected, as international literature emphasizes that adults—and particularly educational staff—often reproduce dominant social gender norms, even unconsciously (Cannizzaro, 2019; Chapman, 2016). The participants' views, as expressed through the diagnostic activities and the focus group, appear to align with the broader tendencies described in the theoretical framework of this study. More specifically, the selection and classification of children's toys based on gender, as presented by the adult learners, reflect the findings of Freeman (2007) and Lynch (2015), who argue that both children and adults attribute gendered characteristics to toys. The female learners' categorization of dolls, kitchen sets, painting kits, and stuffed animals as "girls' toys,"

and the male learner's classification of toy cars, Playmobil figures, balls, and bicycles as "boys' toys," underscore the extent to which socially established gender expectations continue to shape adults' understanding of the world of play. This classification directly echoes Kogkidou's (2015), argument that toys function as cultural carriers that embody and transmit ideological messages. Additionally, the repeated references to characteristics such as "boys have more energy" or "girls are more caring and sensitive" confirm that participants adopt biological conceptions of gender. These beliefs have been extensively analyzed by Mikkola (2008, 2022), who emphasizes that such stereotypes do not reflect actual gender differences, but rather social constructions systematically reproduced in both public and private life. The fact that several participants regarded stereotypical statements as "normal," as recorded in the focus group, further supports the notion that these perceptions are deeply internalized and rarely questioned.

Furthermore, the view that "free choice of play" might "confuse" children suggests the presence of a cognitive framework that perceives gender as an innate category rather than a social construct. This perspective contradicts queer theory, as articulated by Blaise and Taylor (2012), who maintain that gender is a fluid and continuously negotiated identity. The belief that toys may cause confusion among children highlights a fear of deviation from norms and reflects a normative model of gender socialization. A particularly noteworthy finding is that only two out of twelve participants explicitly rejected gender stereotypes. These female learners expressed views consistent with contemporary pedagogical models that advocate equal access for all children to all types of play without restriction. Their perspectives align with Wohlwend's (2012) approach, which conceptualizes play as a space for negotiating and reconstructing gender identities. The limited presence of such non-stereotypical views within the sample confirms the necessity of systematic awareness-raising interventions. The data also underscore the pedagogical practice's role in perpetuating stereotypes. Participants' beliefs that "children need boundaries" or that "they should know the roles of the sexes" correspond to MacNaughton's (2000) findings, which indicate that educators often act as unconscious agents of gendered guidance. This tendency was reinforced by several learners' admission that they would "direct" a child toward a more "appropriate" toy. Such attitudes reflect a traditional pedagogical stance in which the educator functions as a regulator of behavior rather than a supporter of children's free choices.

Moreover, participants' references to phrases encountered in their family environments—such as "that's how we were raised"—highlight the family's role in shaping stereotypes, as noted by Freeman (2007). The pervasive presence of such messages across social contexts reinforces their reproduction and complicates efforts toward their deconstruction. Finally, the finding that adult trainee childcare assistants tend to perceive gender categorization as functional rather than problematic reflects a deeply ingrained social logic that regards the maintenance of "normality" as essential to child-rearing. This very logic constitutes the core of gender stereotypes and, according to Davies (2003), it is the educator's responsibility to challenge rather than reinforce it. Overall, the discussion of the findings demonstrates that adults preparing to work in

early childhood care and education settings require systematic professional development concerning the gender dimension of play. The presence of stereotypical perceptions already at the stage of initial training underscores the necessity of educational interventions designed to foster reflection, redefinition of beliefs, and the adoption of inclusive pedagogical attitudes.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that most adult trainee childcare assistants maintain stereotypical beliefs regarding the gender dimension of children's play. This finding confirms existing literature and highlights the need for systematic pedagogical intervention. The results indicate that these perceptions are not isolated but form part of a broader social construction of gender that permeates everyday practices—often beyond the awareness of early childhood professionals themselves. Recognizing this phenomenon constitutes the first essential step toward addressing it.

The observation that only two of the twelve participants adopted a non-stereotypical perspective suggests that the educational environment preparing future early childhood professionals requires critical re-examination. As adult learners, the participants already possess established beliefs and experiences that often hinder the adoption of new pedagogical approaches. This aligns with adult learning theory (Kokkos, 2005; Kapur, 2015), which posits that adults learn most effectively when prompted to reflect upon and reinterpret their pre-existing ideas and experiences.

Based on these findings, the implementation of targeted pedagogical interventions during the education and training of childcare assistants is deemed essential to enhance critical thinking and understanding of social gender. The following recommendations emerge from this study:

- 1) **Integration of reflective learning activities within structured teaching interventions:** Adult learners can benefit from experiential learning activities that prompt them to reconsider their perceptions of toys and gender roles. Such activities may include commenting on audiovisual and digital materials or engaging in role-playing exercises, encouraging self-awareness of unconscious biases.
- 2) **Redesign of the learning environment in laboratory courses:** To cultivate an inclusive culture, the educational environment should serve as a model. This can be achieved by enriching classrooms with a variety of non-gendered toys, presenting exemplary inclusive activities for early childhood, and adopting gender-neutral language during instruction. These practices model the inclusive behaviors that future childcare assistants are expected to develop.
- 3) **Critical engagement with gender stereotypes promoted by the media, particularly in relation to toys:** Incorporating analytical discussions on gender representation in advertisements, children's programs, and toy catalogues can enhance understanding of the mechanisms that produce and reproduce

stereotypes. Examining real-world examples may strengthen learners' critical thinking and their ability to recognize social expectations.

- 4) **Training in the principles of inclusive pedagogy:** Empowering learners with knowledge of social gender theory and contemporary perspectives on identity can provide the theoretical foundation for attitudinal change. The integration of theory and practice may foster professional identity development and contribute to the creation of equitable learning environments for all children.
- 5) **Emphasis on collaboration with families:** Literature indicates that contradictory messages from home and school environments reinforce confusion and stereotype maintenance (Freeman, 2007). It is therefore essential to train future childcare assistants in communication strategies with parents to promote a shared stance toward unrestricted play.
- 6) **Enhancement of learners' self-efficacy:** Adult students need encouragement to adopt new practices. Education and training programs should include structured feedback, staff support, and opportunities for ongoing professional development.

In sum, integrating educational interventions aimed at deconstructing gender stereotypes in children's play is not merely a pedagogical necessity but also an ethical imperative. Future childcare assistants—and early childhood educators more broadly—must be equipped to create environments where all children can express themselves freely, without gender-based constraints. Awareness and reflection constitute critical processes for achieving this transformation. The present study supports the view that the deconstruction of gender stereotypes in adult education is both feasible and necessary. Through targeted pedagogical approaches, adult learners can cultivate critical consciousness and actively contribute to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive context for young children's education and care.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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