



## INTEGRATING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH AN ART PROGRAM FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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### Abstract:

Early childhood education is a foundational period for children. The early years are crucial for the development of social values, and teaching democratic principles can have a significant impact on young children's social and emotional growth. Using art as a medium of expression and as an educational tool provides young learners with a touching and engaging experience to explore democratic principles. By integrating artistic activities with educational objectives, educators can address deeply rooted societal norms and foster a sense of equity, empathy, and inclusivity in young minds. All in all, through an exploration of theoretical frameworks and having art as a tool, this paper proposes a program which has been designed and implemented in pre-primary education to promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender norms, fostering an inclusive, democratic environment in the classroom. The implementation of the program shows that in the beginning, children discern the conventional roles of their parents within the familial structure, and by the conclusion of the program, a transformation in their viewpoints is evident through drawing, demonstrating a profound comprehension.

**Keywords:** kindergarten, democracy, gender disparities, gender roles, art program

### 1. Introduction

By the conclusion of the 20th century, numerous societies had formally repudiated gender inequality within legal frameworks, at least in the context of fundamental human rights. It is now asserted that human rights are universally applicable to women, with the

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principle of equal legal protection being recognized as relevant to both men and women (United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979). Since then, innumerable related official documents have been logged into international and national contexts. However, gender inequalities are apparent all around, and we are witnesses to them every day.

According to the Council of Europe (n.d) schools and their educators can tackle discrimination and inequalities by promoting democracy, respect for human rights and citizenship. All of them are strongly connected with democratic principles, the foundational values and practices that underpin democratic societies, and encompass a range of ideals, including equality, liberty, justice, and the rule of law. These principles are essential for fostering informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. In the context of early childhood education, the cultivation of democratic principles with an emphasis on combating inequalities, especially gender inequalities, is crucial for developing the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary for active participation in real life. Based on the above, this paper illustrates the potential of art to shape young children's understanding of both democratic principles and gender equality through an educational program that has been implemented in early childhood education.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Democratic Principles in Early Childhood Education through Art

Early childhood education is a critical stage in children's development, during which they begin to form ideas about democratic principles such as fairness, equality, participation, and respect for others. These principles are foundational for democratic citizenship and social justice. In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, it is essential for educators to prepare children not only for academic success but also for active, responsible participation in society. Early childhood is a crucial time to instill principles of inclusion, equity, and fairness, as these concepts are foundational to a functioning democratic society (Berk, 2013).

Democratic principles are the foundational values and structures that underpin a democratic system, ensuring that power is exercised by the people either directly or through elected representatives. These principles include *popular sovereignty*, and *political equality*. Central to democracy is the *rule of law*. Additionally, democracies uphold respect for individuals and their right to make their own choices, *tolerance of differences* and opposing ideas, *equity*-valuing all people and supporting them to reach their full potential, *equality*- everyone should have the same opportunity to influence the decisions that affect people in society, *freedom of expression, association, and press* and robust *system of checks and balances* (Dahl, 2000; Sen, 1999). Democratic principles apply equally to all individuals and institutions, including those in power and collectively aim to promote justice, fairness, and the protection of human rights, ensuring an inclusive and participatory political system (Beetham, 1999).

In addition to teaching democratic principles, early childhood education is a key setting for addressing gender inequality and challenging traditional gender norms (Yulianti *et al.*, 2023). Children are exposed to gender roles from a very early age, and these roles often limit their aspirations, behaviors, and interactions with others. By the time children enter pre-primary education, they are already aware of gender distinctions and may internalize gender stereotypes that dictate what is "appropriate" for boys and girls (Blakemore & Hill, 2008; Kien, 2024). Children need to be educated about gender and gender equality even before they fully understand these concepts (Kien, 2024). Promoting gender equality in the early years helps children understand that all people, regardless of gender, have equal rights and opportunities.

Gender inequalities are still. Inequality refers to the uneven or unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, or outcomes among individuals or groups within a society. It often manifests in various dimensions, and can result from structural, systemic, or individual factors and is a central focus of social, economic, and political analysis (Therborn, 2013). Gender constitutes a construct that is entirely shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors, regulated by power dynamics that delineate the context in which gendered identities are formed. Additionally, biological attributes are similarly influenced by social constructions. The agency of individuals in the formation of their gendered identities is not merely passive; nonetheless, it is limited by the prevailing power structures themselves (Cameron, 2020). Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment and opportunities experienced by individuals based on their gender. It is a pervasive form of inequality that affects societies worldwide, and it intersects with other forms of inequality, such as class, race, and sexual orientation. Gender inequality is rooted in power dynamics and social relationships, where women historically have been dominated by men in various spheres of life (Nikita *et al.*, 2023). Gender subjectivities are constructed within sociocultural frameworks, such as educational systems, where gender disparities converge with various other modes of social inequity. The agents functioning within these frameworks contribute to both the perpetuation and sustenance of inequalities, as well as engage in efforts to contest and dismantle them (Samartzis & Pitsou, 2024).

A kind of agent is the school educator and, in our case, the teachers at pre-primary school, the teachers of early childhood education. Early childhood educators can foster a classroom environment that values every child's input and perspective, which is a cornerstone of democratic participation. Also, they can integrate democratic principles and gender equality in their teaching practices by incorporating participatory art projects related to gender equality. These projects help students challenge traditional stereotypes and create more inclusive, accepting spaces for all children, regardless of their gender.

Gender equality in early childhood education involves recognizing and addressing the societal norms and expectations that shape children's perceptions of gender roles. Gender inequality can manifest in subtle and overt ways, such as the expectation that girls should engage in domestic play while boys should play with trucks and tools. These gendered expectations can limit children's interests, self-expression, and

social interactions. By promoting gender equality through art, educators can challenge these restrictive stereotypes and create a more inclusive environment that encourages all children to explore a variety of roles and identities (Gallerani, 2017; Tobin, 2014).

One of the main challenges in promoting gender equality in early childhood education is overcoming the deeply ingrained societal norms that shape children's ideas about gender. These norms can be difficult to challenge, especially when they are reinforced at home, in media, and within the broader community. Teachers must be prepared to address these issues sensitively, acknowledging that some children may have internalized traditional gender roles. Providing a supportive and inclusive classroom environment is key to helping children feel comfortable expressing themselves and exploring new ideas about gender (Fagot, 2017).

Art is a particularly powerful tool for addressing gender inequality because it encourages children to explore diverse gender identities, challenge stereotypes, and express themselves beyond the confines of traditional gender roles (Kemalasari, 2024). Art has a unique capacity to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, making it an effective tool for addressing complex social issues like gender equality with young learners. According to Eisner (2002), artistic experiences stimulate imagination and foster critical thinking, which are essential for questioning stereotypes. Art can be utilized to enhance political awareness regarding gender roles among young learners (Yulianti *et al.*, 2023). Also, art can be a powerful medium to challenge patriarchal beliefs and promote democratic principles (Smith *et al.*, 2017)

All in all, according to Smith (2019), the importance of integrating gender into early childhood education is of utmost significance as this involves creating an environment where all the children can express themselves freely and develop their identities without the constraints of traditional gender roles. However, one of the significant implications is the need for educators to listen to children's views and opinions and help them develop healthy relationships. This includes teaching social and emotional skills that enable children to navigate biases and build resilience. Educators should incorporate activities that foster cooperation, empathy, and respect among children of all people. This means that training and support for educators is necessary. Educators may require additional training and resources so as to effectively implement gendered programs. Professional development programs by the state and educational organizations should focus on gender issues, equity, and inclusive teaching strategies. This support can empower educators to create activist classrooms that prioritize gender equity (Smith, 2019).

### **3. Educational Framework of Art Program**

This paper, as mentioned, outlines a program that uses art to foster gender equality in early childhood settings while simultaneously promoting democratic principles. For the implementation of this program for pre-primary students, we employ the methodology "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience" (Kokkos & Coworkers, 2011),

which is subsequently delineated and scrutinized in a stepwise manner (six stages). The aforementioned methodology advocates for a systematic analysis of artistic works with high aesthetic value, with the objective of fostering critical reflection concerning a specific topic. It broadens thought across multiple dimensions—social, political, historical, and personal—while simultaneously encouraging the recollection of significant personal experiences. This recollection supports the reinterpretation of these experiences by stimulating reflective thinking, which ultimately fosters metacognition (Kokkos & Coworkers, 2011). Specifically, incorporating artworks into educational discourse contributes to establishing conditions for effective learning by engaging educators and learners in the systematic observation of artworks, raising awareness among educators and learners about the necessity of integrating culture and its artifacts into everyday educational practices, rather than treating them as external to the learning process; nurturing a reflective mindset in both educators and learners; and advancing the development of holistic and systemic thinking within the educational experience, encompassing all participants in the learning process.

Through the analysis of artistic works, the participants cultivate critical reflection, which empowers them to reassess their convictions pertaining to a particular subject matter they are tasked with instructing. So, an eight-hour program was designed, aimed at 13 pre-primary children attending an All-Day Kindergarten public school in a rural area in Western Greece. The subject of the program is *“The Role of the Father and Mother in the Family”*. Its aim was to highlight and foster understanding of the issue of gender equality within the family.

### **Stage 1:** Identifying the Need for Critical Examination of a Topic

The students involved in this study come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. A review of the students' family data revealed that most mothers do not participate in the workforce. Additionally, observations from parent-teacher meetings and school events highlighted minimal involvement of fathers. This situation prompted us to address this topic to broaden the students' perceptions of gender roles.

### **Stage 2:** Learners Express Their Views on the Topic

In this stage, we asked the students to draw their parents' daily activities and then describe their drawings verbally. Drawing was chosen as the most suitable method for this age group.

The students produced the following depictions:

- *“Daddy watches the news—Mommy cooks.”* – Girl 1
- *“Daddy is at work—Mommy is at home washing the dishes.”* – Girl 2
- *“Daddy drinks coffee—Mommy and I make bracelets.”* – Girl 3
- *“Daddy is at the coffeehouse—Mommy cleans and cooks.”* – Girl 6
- *“My dad works—My mom makes the fireplace and the food.”* – Boy 1
- *“Daddy goes to work—Mommy and I go to the playground, and then she gives me a bath.”*  
– Boy 2

- “Daddy goes to work—Mommy cooks.” – Boy 3
- “Daddy chops wood and goes to work—Mommy washes the dishes and cooks.” – Girl 4
- “Daddy doesn’t take us out—Mommy is tired.” – Girl 5
- “Daddy works outside—Mommy does all the chores.” – Boy 4

### Stage 3: Identifying Subtopics and Critical Questions

In the third stage, an analysis of the students' responses revealed the following subtopics for our study:

- 1) The mother assumes a greater role in managing the household and caring for the children.
- 2) The father dedicates limited time to shared activities with the family.

Based on these subtopics, the following critical questions were formulated:

- A. In what ways can an equitable distribution of responsibilities within the family be achieved?
- B. What are the benefits of both parents' active involvement in shared activities?

### Stage 4: Selecting Works of Art and Connecting Them to Critical Questions

In this stage of the method, the educator selects artworks that provide a foundation for reflection and serve as a stimulus for critically addressing the formulated questions. The selection criteria for the artworks are summarized as follows:

- The works should possess aesthetic value.
- They should predominantly have a representational character.
- They should relate to the lived experiences of the learners.
- They should provoke critical thinking about the issues under examination.
- Their content should clearly align with the critical questions being addressed by the group.

For this program, three specific artworks were selected (Table 1), each chosen to inspire thoughtful engagement and dialogue surrounding the identified subtopics and critical questions.

**Table 1:** The artworks

1<sup>st</sup> artwork: Museo Del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Murillo, Bartolomé Esteban, 1650, *The Holy family with a little bird*, Painting, Oil on canvas.



<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-holy-family-with-a-little-bird/8008380e-fef5-48b4-8caf-d78b810fb62c>

2<sup>nd</sup> artwork: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Edouard Manet, 1874, *The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil*, Painting, Oil on canvas.



<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436965>

3<sup>rd</sup> artwork: Ethnikí Pinakothíki, Athens, Greece. Kaprálos Chrístos, 1978, *Sýnthesi (Oikogéneia)*, Bronze.



<https://www.nationalgallery.gr/artwork/synthesi-oikogeneia/>

Table 2 below shows the connection between the works of art and the critical questions:

**Table 2:** Works of art and critical questions

Works of art	Critical questions	
	A	B
1. <i>The Holy Family with a little bird</i>	X	X
2. <i>The Monet Family in their Garden at Argenteuil</i>	X	X
3. <i>Composition (Family)_ Sýnthesi (Oikogéneia)</i>		X

### Stage 5: Analysis of Artworks and Their Connection to Critical Questions

The technique used to analyze the artworks follows D. Perkins' method (Kokkos & Coworkers, 2011), which consists of four interconnected phases. According to Perkins, the approach to artworks is structured to enable the observer to: identify key actions that stimulate reflective thinking, formulate potential questions that provoke reflective action and implement instructional actions that foster reflection. These elements form a comprehensive methodology for reflective observation of artworks.

### **Phase 1: Time for Observation**

In this initial phase, learners observe an artwork carefully without interpreting or judging it. They experience a first aesthetic connection with the piece. During this stage, learners refrain from drawing conclusions and instead engage in "objective observation," using their prior experiences to make initial assessments. Questions guiding this phase include:

- *What is this?*
- *What do you see?*
- *What catches your attention?*
- *What emotions does this evoke?*
- *What makes you curious?*

For instance, upon observing the painting *"The Holy Family with a Little Bird,"* students were impressed by the depiction of the father playing with the baby and expressed their appreciation for the portrayal of the family together. When studying *"The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil,"* they enjoyed the depiction of an outing in nature, noting the father gathering flowers and the happiness of the child and mother. Finally, in examining the third artwork, a sculpture, students were struck by how the parents were tightly embracing each other while both holding their child.

### **Phase 2: Open and Adventurous Observation**

In this phase, learners observe the artwork with an open and creative mindset, guided by the question: *"What might the artist want us to notice?"* Here, open-ended thinking is activated, not for interpreting the artwork but to enhance its observation. Learners engage with the piece more creatively, posing questions such as:

- *Is there something you'd like to discuss further?*
- *Are there symbols or meanings the artist might be conveying?*
- *Do you notice any surprises?*
- *Is there any movement depicted in the artwork?*

With the three selected artworks displayed on the board, a discussion was initiated. The students shared what the works made them feel and what surprised them. The majority emphasized that the joy of seeing families together and seemingly happy was a prominent emotional response across all the artworks.

This reflective and exploratory analysis allowed the learners to engage deeply with the themes of family roles and relationships, building connections to the critical questions and fostering meaningful discussions.

### **Phase 3: Analytical and Deeper Observation**

In this phase, learners delve into interpreting the artworks using the insights gathered in the previous phases. They attempt to answer the questions that arose earlier, justify their views, and draw conclusions. Analytical observation at this level serves as an in-depth approach to understanding reality, stimulating the learners' reflective disposition.

Guiding questions for this phase include:

- *What do you find most interesting?*



- *What else catches your attention?*
- *Why do you think the artist created this? Is there a message?*
- *Which elements provide intensity and strength?*
- *What is the role of colors, shapes, lines, or symbols?*
- *Imagine changes and respond to "What if..." questions.*

During this phase, the students engaged in dramatizations of the artworks, simulating the emotions of the depicted individuals. They role-played scenarios of a "family" at home, a "family" on an excursion, and a "family" embracing. Their favorite aspect was feeling as though they were sharing time with all members of the family.

Next, the students were encouraged to recreate the paintings themselves. They were given black-and-white photocopies of the two visual artworks. Most used vibrant colors, remarking that the people in the first painting seemed very happy. Additionally, they tried to recreate the sculpture using clay, again opting for vivid colors to express their interpretation.

#### **Phase 4: Process Review**

In the final phase, after removing the artworks for a brief period, they were reintroduced to the group. The students were asked to recall what they remembered, what they liked, and to share their overall thoughts about their engagement with the artworks.

The students offered several intriguing reflections, including:

- *"I want my family to be united too."* – Boy 2
- *"I want Dad to make Mom happy and not have her doing all the chores."* – Boy 1
- *"I want my dad to give my mom flowers."* – Girl 6
- *"I like it when we all hug each other at home."* – Girl 2
- *"I don't want Dad to work all the time. I want him to take us on trips."* – Boy 2
- *"I want to show these paintings to my parents so they can understand!"* – Girl 5

These reflections highlight the impact of the activity on students' perceptions of family dynamics, fostering awareness and opening pathways for deeper discussions with their families.

#### **Stage 6: Critical Reflection**

In this final stage, learners, working in their initial groups, were once again asked to draw the activities of the father and mother in their family. The aim was to compare the initial drawings with the final ones to assess whether there had been any progress in the students' creative and critical thinking regarding the topic. Given the students' young age and the complexity of the topic- particularly as their parents' activities at home had not changed- they were asked to depict or describe what they would do if they were the father or mother in their family. This approach was designed to reveal whether stereotypical perceptions about gender roles persisted. The results were highly encouraging. Nearly all the students drew fathers cooking, cleaning, or playing with the children, while mothers were depicted as well-dressed, happy, going on outings with the

family, and sharing hugs. Only one child created a drawing identical to their initial depiction.

From these activities, the following insights were drawn:

- The students began to realize that everyone in the family has responsibilities and can contribute without tasks being divided strictly along gender lines.
- They started to understand that when both parents actively participate and share experiences with their children, it brings joy and a sense of fulfillment within the family.

This stage demonstrated significant growth in the students' awareness of gender equality and their ability to think critically about traditional roles, fostering a more inclusive perspective on family dynamics.

### 3.1 Time Allocation Table

The total duration of the teaching program is eight hours, distributed as follows (Table 3):

**Table 3:** Time Allocation

Stage	Duration
Stage 1: Identifying the Need for Critical Examination of a Topic	1 hour
Stage 2: Learners Express Their Views on the Topic	1 hour
Stages 3 & 4: Identifying Subtopics, Critical Questions, and Artworks	2 hours
Stage 5: Analysis of Artworks and Their Connection to Critical Questions	3 hours
Stage 6: Critical Reflection	1 hour

This allocation ensures a balanced approach to exploring and engaging with the subject matter while allowing sufficient time for critical and creative activities.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper highlights the significance of introducing gender matters at an early age in education and explores how artworks can serve as effective tools for fostering democratic values and promoting gender equality among pre-primary-aged children. Teaching democratic principles such as gender equality through art in early childhood education is both a practical and transformative approach. Art fosters creativity, empathy, and critical thinking, making it an effective medium for young children to explore and challenge societal norms. By designing inclusive and reflective art-based projects/programs, educators can lay the groundwork for a more equitable society, ensuring that children grow up with a deep respect for equality and diversity.

From the students' responses during the implementation of the program, it became evident that they recognize the roles of their parents within the family, as they accurately describe their parents' activities in the familial context. The activities mentioned align with the gender roles assigned by a society that perpetuates gender inequalities. However, it is noteworthy that by the end of the program, the children's

drawings no longer adhere to the traditional gender roles they initially attributed to their parents during the early stages of the program. A shift in perspective is observed as the children depict their parents engaging in tasks different from those typically associated with their everyday family life.

The implementation of this program ensures that such programs encourage collaboration and decision-making, allowing children to understand fairness, equality, and respect and experience democratic principles in action by cooperating, discussing and negotiating ideas, listening to others, valuing different opinions, sharing materials and contributing their unique perspectives to the project (Phelan, 2020).

In summary, the practical implications of this paper suggest that art can be a medium to express and explore democratic principles of gender equality, fostering awareness and challenging stereotypes among young children (Zeng, 2023). By integrating diverse literature and art, educators can challenge traditional gender norms, fostering a more equitable understanding of democratic principles among young children, promoting diversity and positive values through quality education, urging themselves to update content to align with modern views on gender equality (Kakkai & Dave, 2024). Early childhood educators play a crucial role in fostering gender equity, listening to children's voices, promoting healthy relationships, preventing violence, and seeking ongoing professional development. These actions can lead to a more equitable and supportive educational environment for all children (Smith, 2019). The paper highlights the necessity for more research in this area to develop effective strategies and resources for integrating democratic principles and gender matters into the pre-primary school context as there is a risk that exposing children to complex social issues at a young age could be overwhelming or, if not approached carefully, might unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes. This ongoing research is vital for overcoming the current limitations and challenges educators may face.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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