# REPRESENTATIONS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS ON CHILDREN'S GENDER AS A FACTOR IN DIFFERENTIATING THEIR FREE PLAY IN THE SCHOOLYARD

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**Abstract:**
Gendered subjectivities are shaped within social structures, such as education, where gender inequalities intersect with other forms of social disparity. The individuals who operate within these structures play a role in both reproducing and maintaining inequalities, as well as in actively challenging them. However, as active agents, they can challenge gender order and inequalities, but their capacity to do so is subject to the constraints imposed by the framework in which they operate. The interaction between teachers and children in the schoolyard is a given, with the schoolyard serving as a space of socialization and interaction, thus becoming a field for the formation and negotiation of children's subjectivities. Teachers, through their presence in the schoolyard and their representations of children's gender characteristics, are expected to influence the formation of gendered subjectivities. The representations of preschool teachers regarding children's gender as a factor in differentiating their free play in the schoolyard were the subject of this qualitative study, conducted through interviews. Twelve kindergarten teachers working in public and private schools in the Thessaloniki area participated. The thematic analysis of the data revealed that while the sample of teachers expressed opposition to gender segregation and inequalities, they adopted a neutral stance toward what occurs in the schoolyard. Moreover, many justified the differences they observed in boys' and girls' play in biological terms, among other reasons.

**Keywords:** representations, gender, free play in the playground, gender disparity, gender segregation, kindergarten teachers

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, gender violence and the oppression of women have been at the forefront of public debate, sometimes tragically and at other times through the public sharing of personal experiences by influential women, which caused a stir. However, these actions alone are not enough to overturn the status quo; gender inequality and patriarchy are constructed and reproduced at the level of social structures and do not depend on the personal ethics of individuals (Cameron, 2020). The school, as a social institution, and teachers, as products and integral parts of the institution (Bourdieu & Passeron 2014), significantly contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of these inequalities through their daily practices.

These practices are based on theoretical approaches that promote gender distinctions by attributing distinct behaviors and personality traits to girls and boys, often linking these characteristics to play (Pasterski *et al.*, 2014; Schneider, 2016; Schneider *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, in the schoolyard during free play, gender segregation is often encouraged through the promotion of stereotypical activities and games and the discouragement of mixed-gender play (Chapman 2016; Granger *et al.*, 2017).

The arguments used to justify gender segregation in the schoolyard have been sufficiently challenged (Bhana, 2008; Clark & Paechter, 2007; Goodwin, 2006; Karlsson *et al.*, 2017; Mayeza, 2017; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011). Research has also highlighted the complexity of the construction of gendered subjectivities and the importance of the context in which they are formed, as well as the role of children as active agents (Goodwin, 2006; Thorne, 1993). Empirical studies, however, from the field of preschool education (Chapman, 2016; Granger *et al.*, 2017) have shown that kindergarten teachers, through their daily practices in the schoolyard, continue to reproduce and maintain gender distinctions. This study focused on preschool teachers' representations of gender segregation during free play in the schoolyard.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Gender Inequalities and Gender Segregation in Education
Gender is exclusively a socio-cultural and historically determined construct, governed by power relations that shape the framework within which gendered subjects are constituted. Even biological characteristics are socially constructed (Butler, 2009). The role of individuals in shaping their gendered subjectivity is not passive; however, it is constrained by the power structures themselves (Cameron, 2020).

Two main theoretical approaches attempt to explain gender segregation by identifying differences between the sexes. The first approach interprets these differences in biological terms, justifying them with natural causes and considering them inevitable. This view is presented with the simplicity of fixed, predetermined rules of nature and is often used to justify gender inequalities (Cameron, 2020; Connell, 2006). The second approach, known as the "two-worlds" hypothesis, attributes gender segregation to both

biological differences and social factors. This perspective allows for the possibility that individuals may seek to self-determine but places biology in the role of an absolute regulator, within which gendered subjectivities can develop according to its constraints (Connell, 2006). Cameron (2020) argues that scientific inquiries and research into gender differences serve to maintain male dominance.

In schools, teachers often reproduce and sustain gender distinctions through their practices. These practices are based on teachers' representations of gender, where they differentiate between the sexes according to biological traits, a perspective supported by segments of the scientific community (Cameron, 2020). The theory of social representations offers a dynamic approach to understanding how cultural knowledge is shaped and transmitted, emphasizing the content and context of transmission. It also provides insight into how one group's representations can influence the formation of another group's characteristics (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clémence, 2001). The socio-cultural characteristics of representations and their formation in group contexts make them an ideal subject for educational research (Chaib *et al.*, 2011).

## 2.2 Gender Segregation and Free Play

As discussed in the previous section, two theoretical approaches are used to explain gender segregation. The first focuses on biological differences, while the second seeks to combine biological and social factors (Connell, 2006). Here, emphasis is placed on the two-worlds hypothesis, which highlights differences in children's behavior during play. Moreover, research findings from the biological approach are also used to support this hypothesis (Pasterski *et al.*, 2014).

For instance, the choice of playmates is interpreted as an inherent need for preschool and school-aged children to interact with individuals of the same gender due to the similarities in their behaviors (Pasterski *et al.*, 2014). According to Eleanor Maccoby (1990; 2000), this tendency is not formed on a personal level but within peer groups, stemming from the fact that individuals of the same gender display similar behavior patterns in their interactions. For example, it has been observed that girls, due to their cooperative nature and corresponding communication style, find it difficult to engage with boys, who use more competitive forms of communication, leading girls to avoid such interactions (Pasterski *et al.*, 2014).

We see that gender dualism is often justified by assigning distinct behaviors and personality traits to boys and girls and associating these characteristics with play. Specifically, boys are described as being more competitive in their friendships and play (Pasterski *et al.*, 2014; Schneider *et al.*, 2014), while girls are seen as less able to manage conflicts during play, often avoiding them or adopting strategies to mitigate their effects (Maccoby, 1990). These behaviors, such as conflict avoidance and cooperation as personality traits, as well as their choice of interactions, are linked to social skills considered useful by theorists of difference (Campbell, 2004; Lever, 1978; Maccoby, 1990) for the roles they will take on in the future.

Moreover, it is argued that developing the ability to resolve conflicts successfully and engaging in certain forms of competition positively impacts children's social development (Schneider, 2016). Particularly regarding competition, research supporting this view (Schneider *et al.*, 2005; Tassi & Schneider, 1997) suggests that only boys can benefit from competitive activities, associating girls' involvement in such activities with failure in interpersonal relationships and deficits in social development.

The arguments used to justify gender segregation in the schoolyard, as mentioned earlier, have been sufficiently challenged. Research has highlighted the active role girls play in shaping the rules and social context of play, as well as their ability to function competitively, assert themselves, and manage conflicts effectively without avoiding them. Specifically, through many years of ethnographic research, Marjorie Goodwin (1985; 2002; 2006; Goodwin *et al.*, 2002) analyzed how girls from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and ethnic origins negotiate their relationships and identities through play. She focused on how they play, shape the framework and rules of play, express themselves using language and body language, and employ strategies to claim and set boundaries in their relationships, including exclusionary practices. She demonstrated that girls can effectively navigate the competitive environment of the schoolyard and manage difficult situations. Later research has reached similar conclusions regarding resistance to male dominance in schools, particularly in the schoolyard, and how girls challenge gender dualism (Bhana, 2008; Clark & Paechter, 2007; Mayeza, 2017), as well as in terms of negotiating the rules and framework of play and their relationships with others (Karlsson *et al.*, 2017; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011), where they exhibit competitive behavior when circumstances demand it.

Additionally, the complexity of the formation of gendered subjectivities and the importance of the context in which they are shaped have been highlighted, as has the role of children as active agents (Goodwin, 2006; Thorne, 1993). The active role of children in the schoolyard was first emphasized by Barrie Thorne (1993). Although this study was conducted several decades ago, it remains relevant today and continues to influence contemporary research on free play in the schoolyard (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010; Granger *et al.*, 2017; Mayeza, 2017). It illustrates how boys and girls appropriate gendered norms through play, but they do not act as passive receivers; rather, they are active agents who set their own terms in the process. The study also describes the processes and practices through which some children transition into play of the other sex, thereby challenging the gender norms of the schoolyard (Thorne, 1993). Similar transitioning processes have been reported in more recent research (Mayeza, 2017).

## 2.3 The Role of Teachers

Teachers, as a professional group responsible for reproducing the conditions of the educational system through their pedagogical practices — of which they themselves are products (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014) — play a prominent role in the reproduction of social and gender inequalities. Teachers attribute specific personality traits and behavior patterns (e.g., competitiveness vs. cooperation, activity vs. passivity, etc.) to boys and

girls. In doing so, they perpetuate gender inequalities in school, legitimizing the differential treatment of boys and girls and naturalizing gender segregation. However, teachers, as active agents, have the capacity to challenge gender distinctions in practice. This does not imply that they are entirely free from the constraints imposed by the prevailing social, economic, and cultural conditions (Dillabough, 2004).

Gender segregation by teachers in the schoolyard is reinforced by encouraging children to participate in stereotypical activities and games, while discouraging mixed-gender play. A study that combined observation and interviews with preschool teachers (Chapman, 2016) revealed that the teachers encouraged children to engage in stereotypical activities and games, while discouraging mixed-gender play. In some cases, these practices were intentional and explained in terms of biological differences. Other researchers (Granger *et al.*, 2017) have reached similar conclusions, emphasizing that such practices limit children's opportunities to develop additional interests and skills. However, some researchers have found opposite results. For example, in a study conducted in Finland, preschool and primary school teachers reported that they did not differentiate between genders in their daily practices. They also stated that they believed that competitive and dynamic playground games were suitable for both girls and boys, and that mixed-gender participation was acceptable (Hyvönen, 2008). It should be noted, however, that although teachers often declare themselves opposed to gender inequalities and express a willingness to challenge them, their practices may contradict their claims (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010). This trend has also been documented in Greek literature (Deligianni-Kouimtzi, 2008).

Research in Swedish schools showed that in some of them, teachers did not segregate children by gender, encouraged mixed-gender play, and created an environment that did not limit children's choices (Hjelmér, 2020). All this is in the context of an educational system that encourages these choices. However, within the same system, there were also teachers and schools that followed an opposite orientation. From the above, it can be concluded that the introduction of goals promoting equality in the school curriculum is not sufficient. It is necessary for teachers to combine reflection on the content of school knowledge and pedagogical practices with an understanding of the cultural capital that children bring and the power relations that shape school reality.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore preschool teachers' representations of children's gender as a factor in differentiating their free play in the schoolyard. Based on this purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

**1st research question:** How do the participants in the study describe the joint play of boys and girls and their participation in activities that are not typically associated with their gender?

**2nd research question:** Observing the play of boys and girls, do participants in the study find that boys exhibit more competitive behavior and greater activity, while girls are more cooperative and less active?

**3rd research question:** Observing the play of boys and girls, do participants in the study find that girls struggle to manage conflicts that arise during play, often choosing to withdraw?

## 3.2 Research Approach: Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research was conducted to answer the above research questions and capture the representations of the educators. We prefer the term 'representation' over other similar terms, such as 'opinions' or 'perceptions,' as 'representations' refer to the idea of their socio-cultural formation in relation to micro-contexts, unlike the other two terms, which are based on psychological theories (Chaib, *et al.*, 2011). Specifically, the study adopted a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews as the primary research tool. An interview guide was developed, consisting of questions organized into thematic categories based on the research questions. The guide was initially reviewed and revised by the supervising professors, as this was part of a postgraduate thesis at the Hellenic Open University, and then it was piloted (Bryman, 2017). Survey participants were given the option of how they preferred to conduct the interview, with all but one opting for online interviews, while one preschool teacher chose a face-to-face interview. Online interviews have become increasingly common in qualitative research in recent years, offering two main advantages: time efficiency and flexibility in scheduling (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), without hindering the development of trust between the interviewer and interviewee (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Seitz, 2016). Ethical standards were adhered to throughout the research process. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Recurring patterns in the participants' narratives were identified and organized into themes that addressed the research questions.

## 3.3 Research Tool

A semi-structured interview guide was created for data collection, containing open-ended questions organized into thematic categories derived from the research questions.

The thematic categories are listed below:
- Stereotypical and joint play.
- Competition and cooperation, activity and passivity in boys' and girls' play.
- Concern for maintaining harmonious relationships and avoiding conflicts in girls' play.

## 3.4 Survey Participants

The target population consisted of twelve preschool teachers, ten women and two men, all working in kindergartens in Thessaloniki, seven in private and five in public schools. Their professional experience ranged from four to twenty-five years, with half of them

having worked for over ten years. A purposeful sampling strategy, specifically the snow-ball sampling technique, was employed to gather the sample (Bryman, 2017).

## 3.5 Survey Reliability and Validity

To ensure the validity of the qualitative research process, it is essential to minimize researcher bias (Cohen *et al.*, 2008). To achieve this, interviews were recorded and then meticulously transcribed. The research steps and the reasoning behind the conclusions were also thoroughly described and justified (Bryman, 2017). The validity of the research tool was achieved by ensuring the questions addressed the research questions (Bryman, 2017) and by evaluating the guide with the supervising professor (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). The supervising professor also acted as an external evaluator of the research process and outcomes, contributing to the reliability of the study, which was further strengthened by the researcher maintaining a reflective journal (Isari & Pourkos, 2015) that documented activities throughout the research process. A pilot interview with one teacher who met the participation criteria was conducted to ensure the reliability of the research tool. This process led to revisions and the rephrasing of some questions in the interview guide.

## 4. Research Findings

**Figure 1:** Thematic map
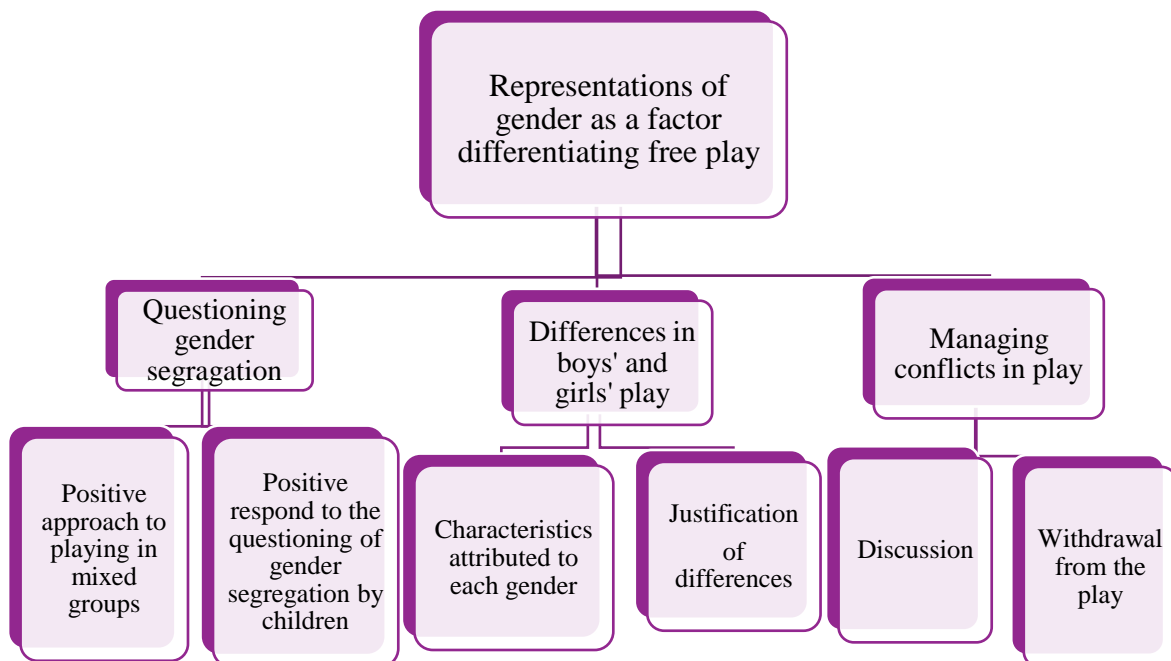


Three key themes emerged from the data analysis. The first concerns the questioning of gender segregation in the schoolyard, the second involves the differences teachers observe in the play of boys and girls, and the third addresses how conflicts that arise during play are managed. Above is the thematic map of the analysis.

The first theme is shaped by two codes. The first code relates to the positive representation held by most teachers regarding mixed-gender playgroups, and the second concerns their positive reception of children who challenge gender segregation in the schoolyard.

**Figure 2:** Questioning gender segregation
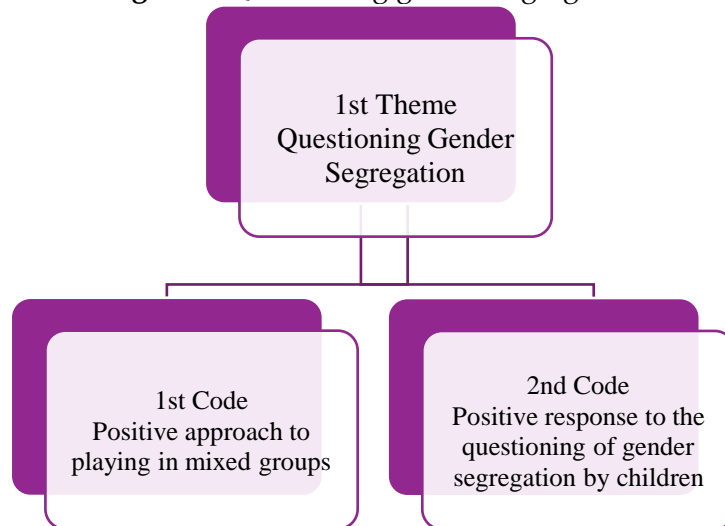


The teachers who participated in the study stated that they do not separate children based on their gender (Int1, Int3, and Int4), recognizing the positive effects that mixed-gender play has on the interpersonal relationships of children (Int5, Int7, Int9, and Int10). They also noted that mixed play between boys and girls tends to be more creative (Int8 and Int10).

- Int 1: "*No, personally, I don't restrict them, meaning that boys have to play with boys or girls with girls…*"
- Int 4: "*All groups are for everyone.*"
- Int 7: "*I think, yes, because when they got to know each other better, the groups became mixed… we also did a sociogram and ensured that the groups were mixed and not based on their preferences, etc. So, the children started working together with those they didn't initially want to, and it helped, bringing them closer, and I think we also see that outside in the schoolyard.*"
- Int 9: "*Now, this year, I don't know if it's representative, but the boys play a lot of role-playing games, and they have formed good friendships with the girls. They're all one group, and this plays a role; there are no cliques. Of course, there are some pairs, but they also play as a team, and all nine of them play together for a large portion of the break, which is difficult.*"
- Int 10: "*I think that when they play in mixed groups, the games are more creative, and they can come up with new games, especially role-playing games. It's not the usual standard, like with my boys who always play tag or build houses. When they interact with each other, I notice a sense of creativity, and they come up with new games. For example, they've created a game with hula hoops and a ball, like basketball, and they've also made paths with*"

*bricks where they have to balance and avoid touching the ground. I've noticed this happens when the older boys and girls play together…"*

The second code relates to the positive reception of children who actively challenge gender segregation in the schoolyard. The teachers recognized the existence of these divisions but stated that they allow freedom of choice in the children's play, and they viewed positively the efforts of some children to question these gender divisions.

- Int 12: *"For me, no, and I try very hard to convey that because it's very strong in my class. Boys will say, 'That's for girls,' and girls will say, 'That's for boys.' But I think, no, there aren't any divisions. I've seen girls enjoy what you might call more intense and physical games, and I've also seen boys play more calmly, so in my opinion, no, there are no such divisions. The children, though, have it ingrained in them, and they refuse to do things they consider to be for the other gender, but my personal view is that these divisions don't exist."*

- Int 9: *"I just let it happen. I can't reward the obvious because, for me, that's the obvious. It's obvious that we shouldn't support gender stereotypes."*

- Int 10: *"I see it as normal. I like it when all the children play with all the toys and work together, finding new ideas for games. We've talked about this in class, that there are no 'boys' or 'girls' toys. Anyone can play with whatever they want, just like with colors. A girl might say, 'I'm wearing blue, but that doesn't mean I'm a boy,' so we've had that conversation that everyone can play with whatever they like."*

- Int 4: *"In general, I try to legitimize the choices the children make and to make the students in my class feel comfortable with the whole process, the group as a whole, and with themselves. I encourage them to support their choices…"*

- Int 2: *"As a teacher, I believe that no, my approach with the children is that when I hear someone say, 'That's for girls,' I tell them that toys are for everyone. The same goes for colors. Everyone can play in the dollhouse, and girls can play with cars and blocks, and I've noticed that they do. This mainly applies to the classroom, but they all play with everything."*

- Int 7: *"No, and especially at school, we don't make such distinctions. I won't encourage boys to play in one particular corner or girls in another because I consider it to be for boys or for girls. That kind of conversation doesn't take place at all in the classroom. All toys are for everyone."*

- Int 8: *"Also, because in all the games I organize, I often purposefully mix boys and girls, especially at the beginning of the school year, to see what they can do in the yard. I always arrange it as boys and girls together. There is this mindset, and it plays a significant role in ensuring everyone experiences the games equally. But I do this for everyone; I don't single out any gender. If we are playing basketball, we'll have boys and girls playing together, so they know they can try anything, and this helps."*

A clear sign of the consensus among educators on this issue is that five out of the twelve interviewees (Int2, Int4, Int7, Int10, and Int11) used the same words, almost as a slogan, to express their stance against gender-based distinctions.

- Int 2: *"…games are for everyone. Just like colors are for everyone."*

- Int 4: "*All games are for everyone. All colors are for everyone. All friendships are for everyone.*"
- Int 7: "*All games are for everyone.*"
- Int 10: "*…all games are for all children.*"
- Inte 11: "*All colors are for all children, and all games are for all children.*"

Five of the twelve teachers (Int2, Int4, Int7, Int10, and Int11) used almost identical words to express their stance against gender segregation, emphasizing that "*all toys and all colors are for everyone.*"

The second theme that emerged from the analysis concerns the differences that teachers observe in the play of boys and girls. The characteristics attributed to each gender's play, and the justification for these differences, form the codes that make up this theme.

**Figure 3:** Differences in boys' and girls' play
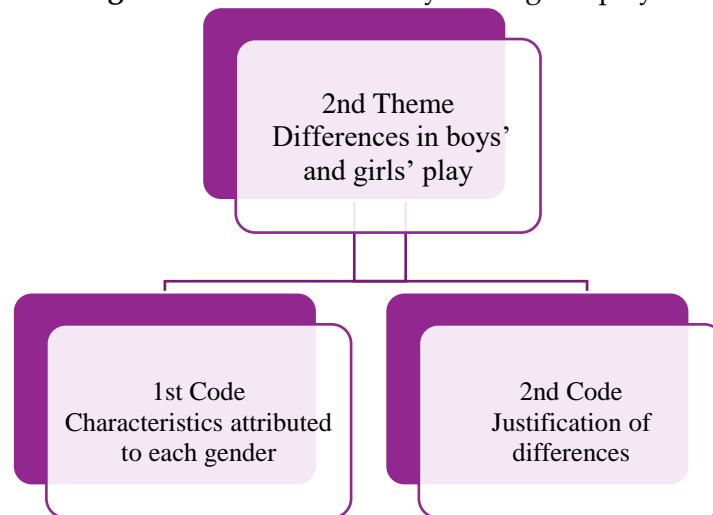


The responses reveal a strong dichotomy regarding the characteristics of boys' and girls' play. Specifically, all but two of the teachers (Int1 and Int3) described boys' play using adjectives indicating activity and dynamism (e.g., intense, physical, dangerous, dynamic, aggressive, active, impulsive). Conversely, girls' play was described as calm and passive (e.g., gentle, quiet, conventional, symbolic, cooperative, static). Additionally, girls' play was seen as oriented toward care and family values (e.g., sensitivity, tenderness, empathy).

- Int 4: "*There's a lot of movement from the boys, and that's what I've noticed, the intense energy. Regarding the girls, I often see more emotion, more stability in a family context in their symbolic play, more tenderness in their words. I don't see that as much in the boys.*"
- Int 6: "*Intense play. I think the intensity is more characteristic of boys because they run more, they have more physical activity. Some girls are a bit more dynamic, but generally, this is more common among the boys. For example, they might run races with old tires we have at school. The girls do the same, but they're more careful. In the same game, boys are less cautious.*"

- Int 9: *"I generally believe that boys' play is more dynamic and physical. That's what I've observed over the years. Girls, on the other hand, seem more compassionate. They naturally adopt a maternal attitude, helping and protecting others."*
- Int 10: *"I think boys prefer to run, release energy, climb, and build things. Girls, on the other hand, play more in the 'kitchen' area or on the slide, pretending it's their house, engaging more in role-playing games. In that sense, I think gender influences their play choices in the schoolyard."*
- Int 11: *"As I mentioned earlier, when boys play together, their games tend to be more intense, whereas when girls play together, the game is usually more static. They run, but then they sit down, and their play becomes more mimetic. They might find a small house in the yard and pretend it's their home, collect leaves, feed the cats, run around a bit more, and then return. Boys are more impulsive in their play."*
- Int 12: *"The boys in their play seem to have more intense personalities. The girls, at least the ones in my class, are calmer and more artistic. They'll sit down to draw on the pavement; that's what I'd say about their play."*

On the other hand, some participants in the study noted that competitiveness is a feature observed in the play of both boys and girls.

- Int 6: *"It doesn't have to do with gender; it's about the child's personality, not whether they are a boy or a girl. I've noticed competitive behavior in both boys and girls."*
- Int 1: *"No, I think I've seen it equally. In every class, there are both boys and girls who, even when playing in mixed groups, try to take on leadership roles. I can't say it's characteristic of boys or girls."*
- Int 11: *"Again, I don't think decision-making is related to gender. I can't think of any examples that would suggest otherwise. I believe both genders can take initiative."*
- Int 3: *"I can't make a distinction. I've seen dynamic individuals, both boys and girls. For me, it doesn't depend on gender."*
- Int 5: *"It's the same. It depends on the child. In today's meeting, for instance, it wasn't about whether the child was a boy or a girl; it was about their confidence in speaking in front of the group."*

These positions reflect the observations of teachers in the schoolyard. For a more comprehensive picture, it is important to consider the reasons they attribute to these differences. The second code of the theme completes the picture, as it explores the causes that teachers identify for the differences in children's play. The participants in the study attributed these differences to the influences of the social environment (Int2, Int4, Int5, Int7, Int8, Int9, Int10, and Int12), as well as to the individual personalities of the children (Int1, Int3, Int6, and Int8).

- Int 2: *"A lot depends on the child's temperament and possibly what they've absorbed at home, like what's allowed for boys and girls. I think that also plays a role in their behavior."*
- Int 4: *"Sometimes the fault lies in what we, as educators, cultivate. For example, the teacher who runs the afternoon program might say, 'Boys sit with boys, girls with girls,' to calm the boys down, or she might say, 'You're a girl, you shouldn't do that.' Sometimes, the adults are the ones doing the damage. Children aren't blank slates; they bring all the ideas*

*and values they've absorbed from their environment. So, it's very likely that we're preparing the ground and indirectly passing on the message that this is how things should be."*

- Int 12: *"I think it's the stimuli they receive. Girls aren't encouraged to watch or engage in things that prompt intense, physical play. They aren't encouraged to watch shows that are more active, while boys are. I think it starts from there. The choices children make in their play are heavily influenced by what they see on TV or YouTube, and that's what drives their play."*
- Int 1: *"It's not about whether they're boys or girls, but more about their personalities, like whether they're more introverted or extroverted."*
- Int 8: *"The differences in play choices start from what they have in mind. It's about the character of the child and their influences, and how they operate."*
- Int 7: *"In general, I believe it also has to do with other factors, such as the parental environment and the way they have been raised. What parents encourage, what they nurture, and how they handle certain situations all play a role."*

Some of the participants also pointed out that the differences in boys' and girls' play could be attributed to the nature of each gender (Int4, Int5, Int7, Int8, Int9, Int10, and Int11).

- Int 5: *"I think boys are hunters by nature. They have that need. Girls do it too, but they prefer symbolic or conventional play, like playing with the dollhouse. I believe in the natural characteristics of boys and girls. Boys have more developed mobility and the desire to exert strength, to be hunters, while girls are more nurturing."*
- Int 7: *"I think it's related to gender. Generally, boys are more active and have a greater need for physical release compared to girls."*
- Int 8: *"Boys have a natural tendency to run, move a lot, and be more active."*
- Int 4: *"Perhaps boys have more energy. I'm not sure how scientifically supported that is, but it might be due to gender-specific traits. I'm not entirely sure; I'm just interpreting what I observe."*
- Int 11: *"I think it has to do with how boys and girls are built differently. Whether it's hormonal or related to physical development, I think they are different."*

It's evident from the responses that most of the teachers attribute the differences in children's play to a combination of factors, both social and biological.

The strategies that boys and girls use when managing conflicts during free play emerged as the third theme. Two main strategies were identified for conflict management.

**Figure 4:** Managing conflicts in play
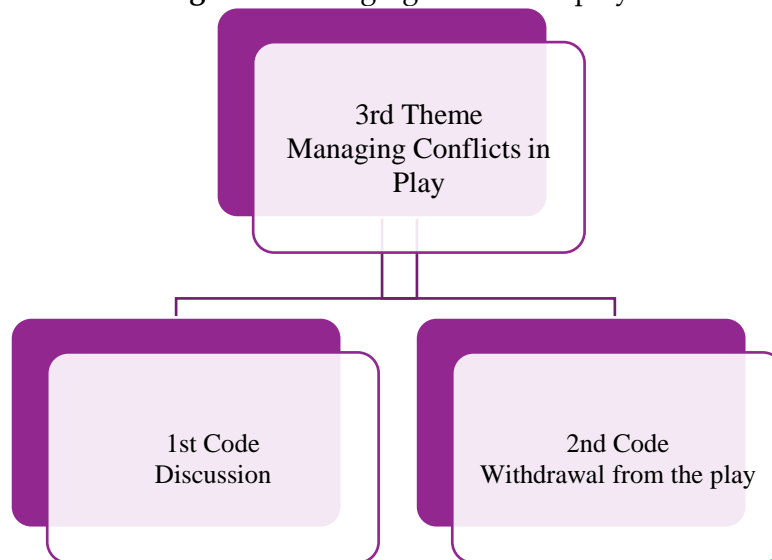


The first strategy is discussion. According to the majority of teachers, girls tend to resolve conflicts more through conversation (int1, int6, int7, int8, int9, int11, and int12), and this makes them more effective at handling disputes (int6, int7, and int9).

- Int 1: "I *think girls try to resolve conflicts more verbally, discussing things like, 'No, I had the toy first,' while boys might try to take the toy first and then explain why they want it*."
- Int 6: "*I've observed that girls, not just this year but in previous years as well, seem more mature in handling certain situations*."
- Int 8: "*I think girls improve faster in this area. They are better at communication and handling disputes verbally. Boys need more time for that*."
- Int 12: "*The girls, except for one, don't come to me that often. They try to resolve things on their own first. Some of my boys come to me more often, without first attempting to resolve the issue themselves*."

Conversely, only two teachers mentioned that boys, like girls, try to resolve conflicts through discussion (Int5 and Int10).

- Int 10: "*The older boys usually discuss the issue among themselves without my intervention. The same goes for the girls*."
- Int 5: "*I don't think it's a matter of whether boys or girls are better at communication*."

The second strategy relates to withdrawing from the game as a way to end a conflict. Most teachers stated that withdrawal as a conflict management strategy is not linked to gender (Int3, Int4, Int5, Int6, Int7, Int10, and Int11).

- Int 11: "*It depends on the child and their personality, not whether they're a boy or a girl*."
- Int 5: "*Yes, both boys and girls might leave the game if they can't resolve the conflict any other way*."
- Int 3: "*It depends on the child, the group they are in, and how I work with that group. I see different things in both cases. Both boys and girls might resolve something diplomatically or withdraw and ask for my help*."

- Int 4: "*Again, I couldn't be absolute in saying that it plays a role for either boys or girls. I think it depends on the child and their interest in each game.*"

Among the others, only two mentioned that girls withdraw from the game more often (Int1 and Int8), while three reported the same for boys (Int2, Int9, and Int12).

- Int 9: "*Not the boy, for the girl. I don't consider them to be more submissive, nor more diplomatic. They tend to want to find a solution... They don't want the game to stop; they want a solution, whereas a boy is more likely to say 'I don't like this, I'm leaving.'... Yes, I think I can say that with confidence.*"
- Int. 12: "*For me, as I mentioned before, I think it's more common among boys… In my experience, boys are more likely to leave the game.*"
- Int 8: "*And I can say that in most cases, about 20% are girls, while for boys it's around 10%. Yes, they will withdraw, often saying something like, 'I won't play with you again,' 'You won't be my friend,' or 'Next time you want to play with me, I won't let you.'*"

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to explore preschool teachers' representations of children's gender as a factor in differentiating their free play in the schoolyard. Representations formed and shared within a group can influence the development of characteristics in another group (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clémence, 2001). In this way, teachers' representations of children's gender traits influence the choices they make and affect the formation of their gendered subjectivities. Specifically, the study focused on teachers' representations on gender segregation in the schoolyard, the personality traits and behaviors they attribute to girls and boys based on their observations of play, and how they evaluate conflict management during play.

From the teachers' accounts, it is clear that they do not accept a number of stereotypical views that underpin gender inequality, such as the inability of girls to handle conflicts and their lack of competitiveness in play (Goodwin, 2006). It also appears that they oppose gender segregation in the schoolyard and positively view children who challenge gender divisions. Additionally, they claim to provide children with freedom of choice in play through their attitudes. However, the fact that girls often have to fight for their place in the schoolyard (Goodwin, 2006; Mayeza, 2017), combined with the observation that children who choose to challenge gender norms in the schoolyard face consequences such as harassment and exclusion (Mayeza, 2017; Thorne, 1993), leads to the conclusion that the schoolyard is not a neutral space of free choice for children. Instead, it is a space highly influenced by gender divisions and inequalities. Therefore, adopting a neutral stance in the name of free choices for all is more likely to reinforce gender segregation and inequalities.

The declarations against gender segregation are also contradicted by the reasons teachers provide for the activity and dynamism they observe in boys' play, as well as the passivity and calmness they attribute to girls' play. The inconsistency between teachers' statements and their actual practices has been noted in other studies, both internationally

(Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010) and in Greek literature (Deligianni-Kouimtzi, 2008). The analysis showed that multiple causes are used to justify these differences. Specifically, the differences are attributed to both socio-cultural and biological factors. The appeal to biological factors aligns with other research findings (Chapman, 2016). The approach that interprets gender differences in biological terms justifies them as natural and inevitable. This view, presented as the fixed and established rules of nature, is used to justify gender inequality (Cameron, 2020; Connell, 2006). On the other hand, the combination of biological and socio-cultural factors, within the framework of the "two-worlds" hypothesis (Maccoby, 1990; 2000; Pasterski *et al.*, 2014), acknowledges the influence of the socio-cultural environment without excluding the possibility of individuals striving for self-determination. However, it positions biology as the ultimate regulator within which gendered subjectivities can develop and within the constraints it sets (Connell, 2006). According to this approach, the differences observed in boys' and girls' play have a biological basis, are influenced by the social environment, and are linked to social skills useful for the roles they will take on in the future (Campbell, 2004; Maccoby, 1990). However, according to Cameron (2020), gender differences are reproduced within social structures, and it is the power relations within these structures, not biology, that define and limit individuals. Patriarchy, like any other form of structural inequality, is reproduced within the framework of these power relations. Therefore, attempting to interpret children's behaviour in the schoolyard on the basis of gender differences contributes to the maintenance of male dominance.

Given the limitations of the present study, particularly the small and geographically restricted sample, as well as the uneven distribution of men and women in the sample, the analysis of the data showed that the majority of the preschool teachers in this study construct a reality different from the one they claim regarding their opposition to gender segregation. Both through their neutral stance during recess and through their justification of the differences observed in the free play of boys and girls, they seem to contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of gender divisions and inequalities in the schoolyard. The observed discrepancy between the teachers' statements and their practices regarding gender segregation in the schoolyard could serve as a starting point for further investigation of the phenomenon, with the aim of understanding it in depth. It is recommended that larger-scale studies be conducted on this subject, expanded to other levels of education, and that ethnographic research within the schoolyard be carried out.

**Conflict of Interest Statement**
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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