



INVESTIGATING KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER REPRESENTATIONS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES VIA PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES

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Abstract:

Gender representations, as well as gender stereotypes which are often involved in them, can impact how children perceive gender [roles] in their social setting. The present paper proposes play-based activities tailored for kindergarten children seeking to investigate if and how gender representations and gender stereotypes can be identified, as well as to record how these perceptions are conveyed by children. An action research plan was designed and carried out during the school year 2025-2026 in a public kindergarten in Athens, Greece, involving a sample of 12 kindergarten children. The findings reveal how game activities provide the means through which children have an opportunity to express how they perceive gender representations and stereotypes. It was found that although children hold gender-related representations and stereotypes, they can easily change their convictions. There were cases, however, when children's views on gender stereotypes and representations were characterized by one-sidedness and refusal to change. This research seeks to underscore the importance of appropriate interventions relating to gender-related issues through the use of game activities aiming to promote gender equality from young age groups in the school context.

Keywords: gender-related representations; gender stereotypes; kindergarten; play-based activities

1. Introduction

Gender representations and gender stereotypes have been a subject of consideration not only in respective social contexts but have also been a subject of scientific research

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(Alexopoulos, 2021; Bouna, 2017). Gender representation refers to how genders are presented and depicted within cultural, social, and communication contexts. The term refers to acquired behaviors that derive their meaning from the various roles individuals assume and which are associated with their gender, resulting in the emergence of reproduced gender representations (Alexopoulos, 2021). Gender stereotypes, on the other hand, are understood as the expectations, characteristics, and roles that society assigns to individuals or groups regarding their personality traits based on their gender (Divari, 2025). Gender stereotypes are often embedded in gender representations and can act as a constraint on the individual, fostering gender inequalities (Mouser, 2025).

Children are exposed to gender stereotypes from a very early age through their parents, their school environment, and the media, further affecting their perception of their own identity and shaping the way they understand the world around them (Brussino & McBrien, 2022). Observation of children's preferences for toys or play based on their own gender reveals that stereotypes are internalized between the ages of three and six (Li, 2022). A child begins to observe gender-related features within the social environment (Koutsargioti, 2022) and at the same time, they can recognize, adopt, and reproduce behaviors related to gender stereotypes (Li, 2022; Mpizpou, 2024). Furthermore, gender representations involving stereotypes are also found in the context of professions, where children express stereotypical views regarding genders and occupations (Mouser, 2025; Papanastasiou, 2018).

The present study proposes a set of play-based activities for kindergarten children in the Greek context, seeking to investigate the extent to which gender representations and gender stereotypes can be identified through them, as well as how children articulate them.

2. Gender-related representations and stereotypes in the Greek context

Kindergarten education in Greece is considered part of the Primary Education alongside elementary school. It is compulsory to attend kindergarten for two years, starting at age four. Public primary education is provided free of charge by the Greek state. All primary education teachers, both kindergarten and elementary school teachers, are tertiary education graduates, holding at least a university degree after attending a four-year first cycle program of studies (Eurydice, 2026).

A systematic review of the relevant bibliography concerning gender representations and stereotypes among kindergarten children reveals that this is an issue of particular concern to the educational community and one that has attracted considerable research interest (see, for example, Despotaki & Pekis, 2024; Evangelinou, 2021; Mouser, 2025; Patsiatzis & Korakas, 2024; Stamatoglou & Papazachariou, 2025). Despotaki & Pekis (2024) focus on gender stereotypes through a literature review and formulate proposals for disempowering them while at the same time strengthening gender equality in early childhood. In the same vein, Bouna-Vaila and Vailou (2024) and Stamatoglou and Papazachariou (2025) examine the phenomenon of gender segregation

in play during preschool years (4-5 years) and its impact on cognitive, social, and emotional development. Furthermore, there is research interest in studying these concepts within the context of children's literature books intended for preschool ages. Mouser (2025) attempts to explore gender representations in children's literature materials, focusing on narratives for kindergarten children, and concludes that literature can serve as a vehicle for reproducing gender-related perceptions.

However, it should be noted that despite the extensive body of research carried out into gender representations and gender stereotypes as held by kindergarten children, only a small amount of research is found to investigate these notions within the context of play in kindergarten. Evangelinou (2021) examines the views and practices of both children and kindergarten teachers regarding gender representations during free and structured play through semi-structured interviews and observations, while Patsiatzi and Korakas (2024) propose an educational method related to play in early childhood that encourages children to discover themselves in a multifaceted way and to become personally and socio-emotionally empowered.

The present research seeks to make an empirical contribution to this emerging field of study regarding gender representations and stereotypes, focusing on the use of diverse, creative, age-appropriate, and engaging play-based activities for children aged 4–5 within the framework of the organized activities as outlined in the kindergarten curriculum.

More specifically, the study aims to address the following questions:

- 1) How can gender representations in children be identified, and how are they expressed, and
- 2) Whether gender stereotypes are identified and how they are expressed.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Research design

Action Research, a form of qualitative research, was employed for conducting this study. Action research is a type of reflective research methodology aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of educational practices under investigation while simultaneously enhancing them (Magos, 2007). The primary goal of action research, through its transformative approach, is to improve the quality of the educational process rather than to exercise control (Mezirow, 1994). Identifying areas where deficiencies and weaknesses are found serves as a springboard for reassessing and redefining approaches and devising action plans within the school context (Vekris, 2018). This framework first and foremost enables the educator to engage in a joint activity with the children and to operate within a specific environment, communicating, acting, and interacting with the particular social context and the relationships that structure it (Efsthathiou, 2008). Action research is approached as a social process of an interactive nature (Tsiolis, 2018).

Action research is characterized as participatory and collaborative on the grounds that the individuals involved in the research process engage in dialogue and

communication. In the course of the research, there is no separation between research and action, because the research itself is the action, and the educational process constitutes its primary basis. The individual conducting the research assumes the dual roles of educator and researcher, thereby bridging the gap between them (Efsthathiou, 2008). At the same time, the researcher gains insight into how the participants make sense of their environment and view the world through their personal stories and lived experiences (Tsiolis, 2018).

The qualities of action research presented above are deemed the most suitable ones since they enable children to produce spontaneous and natural responses regarding the exploration of gender representations and stereotypes through the use of play-based activities.

3.2 Participants

The research was conducted during the school year 2025-2026 in a public kindergarten in the southern suburbs of Athens in the course of the full-day programme of the school as part of research within the framework of a postgraduate study program. Prior to conducting the research, a visit to the kindergarten took place; with the assistance of the class teacher and head teacher, parents and guardians were informed about the purpose of the research, while the anonymity and the protection of the children's personal data were confirmed. A consent form was distributed to each parent/guardian, and those consenting to their children's participation were asked to return the form completed and signed. The study sample consists of 12 kindergarten children (4-5 years old), of whom 7 were boys and 5 were girls. It includes the children for whom the completed consent form was returned.

3.3 Action plan

In view of the implementation of the action research, three play-based activities were designed to take place in the kindergarten classroom—in particular during the prescribed teaching hours allocated for organized activities. In order to familiarize the children with the researcher and allow her to engage with the group's dynamics, two ice-breaking games were planned to take place prior to the implementation of the three play-based activities. The theme of these games was unrelated to the subject under investigation; they were intended to encourage the children to feel at ease and express themselves more spontaneously during the three activities (Evangelinou, 2021; Papanastasiou, 2018).

A. "Professions" activity

The first activity was designed aiming to identify and document children's ideas and gender-related mental representations regarding professions and gender. For this activity, a semi-structured group interview was selected as the data collection method, given the children's young age. Semi-structured interviews are commonly employed as a data collection tool in action research as they provide "space" enough accommodating meaningful communication, storytelling, and dialogue, thus aligning with the principles

of action research (Tsiolis, 2018). The collected data are ultimately comprised of the children's spontaneous responses.

The semi-structured interview questions are based on 18 items that can be used to relate to professions and gender: a firefighter's helmet, a telephone, a white apron, a stethoscope, a hammer, a screwdriver, a cleaning cloth, a small broom, a pear, an orange, a whisk, a chef's hat, a musical stick with bells, a magnifying glass, a stuffed dog, a baby doll, a paintbrush, and flowers.

Exploring objects was deemed appropriate, as they are directly linked to each individual's own experience. According to Choleva (2019:106), an "experiential exchange" is established between the individual and the object, which can then reveal inner meanings and issues of identity—such as personal and family histories and roles. For each object, the following questions will be put to the children:

- 1) *"What is this?"*
- 2) *"Where do we find this object?"*
- 3) *"Which people could possibly use it?"*
- 4) *"Show us how you would use it in the profession of ..."*
- 5) *"Do you imagine a boy or a girl having this profession / using this?"*
- 6) *"Can a girl / a boy also have this profession / use this?"*

Questions 1–3 serve as an initial introduction to the object, allowing the child to recall prior knowledge related to it. With question 4, the children are asked to reflect on professions, roles, and the utility of the object. Finally, questions 5 and 6 are about gender: Question 5 seeks to determine the gender the child imagines for the subject of the previous questions, while Question 6 addresses the extent to which gender influences the actions of the person the child is thinking about.

The researcher will note down the children's responses regarding the objects during the activity, as well as take notes of the way they interact with the objects through storytelling and non-verbal contact.

B. "What shall I play with?" activity

The second activity was designed to reveal the children's gender-related representations and stereotypes by encouraging them to play with toys they would otherwise consider less desirable. At the start of the activity, six toys will be presented to the children: (1) Barbie dolls, (2) kitchenware, (3) a doctor's kit, (4) toy cars, (5) tools, and (6) shape-sorting toys. A discussion follows, allowing the children to talk about which of these games they have played the most and which the least, and to explain their reasons. Time enough is allowed for all the children to respond as well as to listen to the responses of the rest in the group.

Next, each child is asked to choose a toy they have played with less and usually "do not prefer," and to play with it for 2–3 minutes. The researcher will observe and note

how the children play and interact with the toys. A brief discussion takes place at the end of the activity.

C. "Heroes/heroines from a different perspective" activity

In the third activity, drawing is employed as a research tool and a data collection method (Boyatzis & Eades, 1999). The aim is to investigate the extent to which children's gender representations and gender stereotypes can be revealed through drawing. The materials required for the activity are colourful markers and two sheets of A4 paper for each child in the class.

At the start of the activity, each child is asked to draw a hero or heroine of their choice. Once they have finished their drawing, they describe what they have depicted to the researcher, and their responses are noted on the drawing paper itself. During this phase, the researcher seeks to identify the characteristics and roles of the drawn figures as conveyed through the children's verbal descriptions, as this can yield valuable insights into their choices and the underlying connotations behind them. Next come questions such as "Can my hero/heroine be caring?" and "Can a heroine be strong?" and the researcher asks the children to create a second drawing in which the hero/heroine is portrayed "somewhat differently"—featuring a change or a twist—such as a hero showing care or a heroine doing something more "difficult" or "daring." This second drawing is then compared with the first to see if any changes in the depiction can be identified. The researcher once again notes down below the drawing what the child has depicted, as well as whether there is any change—and what. The children gather in the group circle again, and each child's two characters—along with the differences between them—are presented.

Through this activity, children are expected to discover alternative characteristics/qualities and roles of the hero they drew and to relate them to the concepts of strength and care, which can coexist in a single hero.

3.4 Data collection

In the first activity, the researcher presented a chest containing the 18 objects. The children were excited and eager to see what was inside. The researcher explained that each child would randomly select an object from the chest so they could get to know it. While the children were familiarizing themselves with the objects, the researcher noticed they were struggling to answer the previously mentioned questions regarding professions (Questions 1–4), so she simplified the four questions into the following three:

- 1) *"Where can we find this object?"*
- 2) *"Who uses it?"*
- 3) *"What is their profession?"*

With this rephrasing, the children responded immediately, participated actively, gave targeted answers, and drew upon personal experiences and prior knowledge. The

initial questions 5 and 6 regarding gender were asked as planned, as no difficulty in answering them was observed. Responses were provided by the group as a whole, other times by raising hands or even without following a specific order. Whenever the researcher noticed that a child's answer had gone unnoticed by the rest of the group, she would repeat it, prompting the children to immediately focus and listen. The children remained active throughout the entire activity, and when all the objects had been taken out of the chest and the questions were answered, the activity was completed.

Table 1 below presents the children's responses as they were recorded per object.

Table 1: Children's responses to the questions about the 18 objects

Objects	Where can we find this object? Who uses it? What is their profession? (Questions 1-3)	Can you picture a boy or a girl doing this job? Using this? Why? (Question 5)	Can a girl or a boy also do this job? Use this? (Question 6)
Firefighter's helmet	- the firefighter, - the fire truck with a ladder, - extinguishes fires with water and a hose, - rescues people	- boy, - boys are brave, - mom is afraid, - always boys firefighters	- only a boy, - yes, a girl can, too
Telephone	- grandparents, - the fire department, - mom and dad, - police officers calling, - ordering pizza	- boy, - girl	both (genders)
White apron	- cook, - doctor, - scientist, - painters	both (genders)	both (genders)
Stethoscope	- listens to the abdomen, - listens to the heart, - at the hospital	- boy, - girl, - both (genders)	both (genders)
Hammer	- buildings, - houses, - churches, - cars, - statues, - handyman, - grandpa and dad, - dad is an electrician, - dad makes houses	both (genders)	- mom uses the hammer, - both (genders)
Screwdriver	- the mechanic uses it, - dad, - dad is screwing	- boy, - girl, - both (genders)	- both (genders) - dad uses it, not mom because she may get poked
Small cloth	- we wash cars, - we wash, - it wipes, - mom	- mom, - dad too	both (genders)
Hand-held vacuum	- mom and dad, - grandma,	mom vacuums more	both (genders)

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	doctors		
Pear	- garden, - farm, - open market, - shop, - tree	both (genders)	both (genders)
Orange	- shop, - village, - garden, - super market, - open market	- boy, - girl	both (genders)
Whisk	- beats eggs, - we cook, - scrambles	- girl, - boy, - only a boy	both (genders)
Chef's hat	- cook, - the cook is talking, - is cooking	- boy, - both (genders)	both (genders)
Musical stick with bells	- don't know (what this is), - drum, - tambourine, - with a microphone, - the male singer, - the female singer	both (genders)	both (genders)
Magnifying glass	- it can see big things, - spy, - police, - detective, - doctor	- only boys, - girls will not find (thing with the magnifying glass), - only a boy, - both (genders)	- only boy, - both (genders)
Stuffed doggie	both grandmas and mom take care of doggies	I have 3 doggies in Albania, and they are taken care of a man who is a boy	- boy, - girl, - both (genders)
Baby doll	- babysitter, - it is taken care of	- girl, - boy	both (genders)
Paintbrush	- to draw - painter, - to paint	- girl, - both (genders), - boy	boy
Flowers	were not linked to a place, use or profession/role	- the girl gives them (to the boy), and the boy gives them (to the girl), - both genders give it	both (genders)

In the second activity, the researcher placed the six toys in the center of the group circle and presented them to the children. The children were excited as soon as they saw them and began talking about which ones they would like to play with. The girls seemed to choose the Barbie dolls, while the boys opted for the tools.

The researcher began by asking which of these toys children played with the most. The girls mentioned Barbie dolls and the doctor set, while the boys named interlocking

blocks, the doctor set, and toy cars. Pointing to the kitchen corner in their classroom, both boys and girls mentioned the play kitchenware set, while one boy pointed to the many toy cars they also had. Some girls said they had Barbie dolls at home as well.

Next, the researcher asked the children to think about which toy they had played with the least and told them to try playing with it so that they could get to know it better. Most of the children did not want to choose a toy they had not played with. The researcher spurred them to try playing with one all the same, without, however, interfering with their choices. Eventually, three girls who had initially wanted the Barbie dolls went to the doctor's kit along with a boy, while one girl went to the Barbie dolls, saying, *"I've played with them a lot, and I want to go to the Barbie dolls."* No children went to the kitchenware set; two boys and one girl went to the shape-fitting toys, four boys to the toy cars, and another two boys to the toy tools. The children were particularly excited about the doctor's kit. In the final few minutes of the activity, some boys from the tool and car areas moved over to the play kitchen area.

The children returned the toys, and a discussion followed. When asked, *"Children, what did you think of the game?"*, their general demeanor suggested they had enjoyed it, while some boys remarked that they, too, had many tools at home. On the grounds that it had been observed that the children struggled to choose a toy they had played with less frequently, this question was asked: *"Did you play with any toys that you had played with less?"* Although the question was asked in a neutral tone—conveying curiosity and wonder rather than anything else—the children were hesitant to answer. Most gave a one-word reply: *"No."* When the researcher then asked, *"Why?"*, the children explained that they wanted to play with something they were familiar with. However, some children mentioned that they had never played with the doctor's kit before, which was why they had gone over to it.

To better understand the children's thoughts, the researcher asked: *"Kids, let me ask you: if I had brought only Barbie dolls today, let's say..."* The researcher had hardly finished her sentence, and she was interrupted by exclamations from the boys: *"Oh!", "What?", "No!", "Ew!"*. Then the researcher asked: *"Wouldn't you like it if we all played with Barbie dolls?"* One boy replied, *"I don't like Barbie because she has long hair."* The researcher asked, *"What do you mean? Can you explain your thinking a bit more?"* The boy retorted: *"It has long hair that is girly, and boobs (sic). I'm never going to try playing with a Barbie."* The researcher concluded the conversation by saying that it is nice to try playing with different toys.

In the third activity, the children began by drawing a hero or heroine of their choice. On each child finished their drawing, the researcher asked them about what they had drawn, and their responses were noted on the drawing paper itself. Next, the researcher asked them to make a second drawing in which this time the hero or heroine appeared "somewhat different." Most children started the second drawing, although three completed only the first. Nine children completed both drawings to some extent; however, due to lack of time, it was not possible to have a more extensive discussion about them. Descriptions of the children's drawings are presented in Table (2).

Table 2: Descriptions of children's drawings

A/A	Responder's Gender	1 st drawing description	2 nd drawing description
1	Boy	Batman	Batman fighting
2	Boy	My super-hero	The hero is fighting a villain
3	Boy	Batman and the lion	Halloween and the Zombie
4	Boy	Spider-Man and Hulk defeat Venom and are resting	A villain is trying to kill them
5	Boy	Hulk	Hulk with hair
6	Boy	Hulk	Hulk is resting
7	Boy	He is fighting a super-villain	He had no time to draw the 2 nd
8	Girl	A little house	She had no time to draw the 2 nd
9	Girl	Me, sister, mom, dad	She had no time to draw the 2 nd
10	Girl	Family	Birthday
11	Girl	Me and my sister	Me digging for the chest
12	Girl	The Little Cookie-girl	Chest

4. Results

The first activity aimed to explore children's gender-related representations and stereotypes through various objects primarily associated with professions. Initially, examining the 18 objects involved identifying the profession and the person who practices it; once it was confirmed that the children had a clear grasp of the specific profession, follow-up questions were asked exploring whether they associated it exclusively with a specific gender. The children's responses regarding gender representations and stereotypes revealed the following.

When asked whether they pictured a boy or a girl performing the previously mentioned profession, the children's responses in some instances focused primarily on one of the two genders. Regarding the firefighter's helmet, most children imagined a boy in the role, with one child noting that boys "*are brave*." By contrast, the female gender was mentioned to state the opposite, as it was associated with fear; when one child said, "*Mom gets scared!*", the others chimed in, "*Oh! My mom gets scared too!*"

Similarly, regarding the screwdriver, the initial questions concerning the associated profession elicited more references to male figures, although most children subsequently stated that they could imagine both genders using it. However, in the final question, one child remarked that "*Mom might get poked, whereas Dad wouldn't.*"

Regarding the handheld vacuum, although responses to the initial questions—as well as to the last one—contained the idea that both genders can use it, the response to the question of whether they picture a boy or a girl using it was that it is mostly Mom who does the vacuuming.

The responses regarding the magnifying glass are also interesting. Initially, the children identified its use in connection with various professions, including police work.

When asked whether they pictured a boy or a girl using it, some children replied that they imagined only boys using the magnifying glass, reasoning that girls wouldn't find anything with it. In reference to the last question, some children again mentioned only boys, but when a child exclaimed, "*Hey! My mom is a police officer!*", the children as a whole group reached a consensus that a girl could also hold any of the professions previously mentioned.

In the initial questions, the stuffed dog was associated with caregiving, with the figures of the mother and grandmother prevailing. However, in one instance, a child gave an account of a personal experience involving a male caregiver for the dogs they have in Albania.

The paintbrush was the only object regarding which the children unanimously answered—in response to Question 6—that a boy could work as a painter. Regarding Question 5, responses mentioned: both genders, only girls, or only boys, though boys were the most frequently cited.

The children's responses also reveal cases where the focus is on both genders evenly. The white coat was associated with the medical profession and was seen as something worn by both men and women. As a child characteristically phrased it, "*Both, because I know a doctor who is a boy and a doctor who is a girl.*" The children took a similar stance regarding the stethoscope, agreeing unanimously that it can be used by both genders.

The responses regarding the hammer are interesting; although in the initial questions the reference was to male figures, when asked whether they imagined a boy or a girl using it, they said, "*both a boy and a girl.*"

The musical stick with bells was associated with both genders from the outset, and the children unanimously agreed that there are both male and female singers. Responses regarding the last question mentioned both genders. Both genders were also mentioned in relation to the small cloth. Regarding the sixth question, since the children had focused primarily on parents, an additional question was posed: "*Do you picture Mom or Dad using the cloth more?*" The answers applied to both equally. Similarly, regarding the baby doll—since the children found it difficult to associate it with specific professions—the question was rephrased as "*Can you imagine a boy or a girl taking care of a baby?*" and "*Can a boy/girl take care of a baby?*" The children responded that both could do so equally. Both genders use—or can use—the whisk and the chef's hat. There was one exception regarding the whisk: while the majority associated it with both genders, one child answered that only a boy could use it.

During the semi-structured discussion regarding the second activity, the children acknowledged that most of them had not chosen a game they had played much before. It appeared that the children found it difficult to experiment and try out new roles and games.

An examination of the drawings from the first and second phases of the third activity reveals that boys chose to draw comic book heroes (Batman, Spider-Man, Venom, Hulk), whereas girls drew elements (a small house), events (a birthday), or family

members (themselves, a sister, mom, dad). The heroes drawn by the boys are primarily depicted in active situations—fighting an enemy—in both phases. In contrast, the girls' drawings in both phases are characterized by an absence of action.

Regarding the drawings, a variation linked to gender representations is observed in case No. 5, where Hulk is initially depicted without hair, whereas in the second drawing, he has hair. The child who created these drawings may have been influenced by a classmate's comment during a previous activity—stating that he would never play with Barbie dolls because they have long hair, a trait associated with girls. Yet, the drawing depicts a male hero with long hair, demonstrating the child's openness to portraying his hero differently by incorporating a feature that had previously been discussed in a negative light. Similarly, in case No. 6, while the child described the figure in the first drawing as the Hulk in active mode, in the second drawing, he stated that the character was resting. The second drawing suggests that the child was flexible enough to place his hero in a resting position—one that was less active or heroic. In contrast, in case No. 11, the heroines are initially depicted alongside the chest without engaging in any action, whereas in the second drawing, the heroine is shown digging—an activity requiring strength.

The specific visual representations of the heroes are associated with gender stereotypes that are reproduced both by cartoons and the broader environment with which children interact, portraying the boy-hero as strong, brave, and active in combat, while girls depicting their family in roles involving little to no action.

5. Discussion

The present study focuses on how gender representations are identified and whether gender stereotypes are detected among kindergarten children through three activities designed for the kindergarten setting. The use of action research, combined with a multimodal data collection approach, enabled the children's gender representations and stereotypes to emerge. As it was established in practice, the design of the activities was appropriate, since the children participated actively throughout the research process.

In the first activity, the children's ideas and spontaneous responses regarding the objects were recorded, along with the ways they associated them with professions and roles. Although the objects were selected based on occupational categories, they did not restrict the children to responding solely about professions. The objects served as a means for the children to share their own stories and experiences, and were particularly associated with family roles.

Regarding the way gender was represented in the children's statements, it was observed that their initial, spontaneous responses—associating specific objects with a particular gender—often reflected stereotypical expectations. However, when a different perspective was voiced that challenged the initial viewpoint, the children readily accepted the alternative opinion and incorporated it into their final answer. A case in point is the hammer: while initially it was associated with male roles, the children

ultimately agreed that it could be used by both genders. Regarding the remaining objects—such as the telephone, medical coat, handheld vacuum, and stuffed dog—roles associated with both genders were mentioned from the very first responses, drawing on personal experiences; examples included "*grandpas and grandmas use the telephone*," "*I know a doctor who is a boy and a doctor who is a girl*," and "*mom, dad, and grandma use the handheld vacuum*." In contrast, for items like the firefighter's helmet, screwdriver, and magnifying glass, views reflecting gender stereotypes emerged from the start of the activity and were generalized and shared by the group of participating children as a whole. This view was further intensified by children citing examples that highlighted the weaknesses of the opposite sex. As regards the firefighter's hat, when the view was voiced that only a boy would be imagined as a firefighter because "*Mom is afraid*", all the children began to agree with this viewpoint. The responses indicate that children associate boys with bravery, whereas they associate the maternal/female figure with feelings of fear (Mouser, 2025; Siakavara, 2019). A corresponding portrayal of the mother as vulnerable and the father as invulnerable or strong was reflected in the choice of the screwdriver and the magnifying glass. The only object unanimously associated with the male gender was the paintbrush; while the children did not elaborate on this, it is highly likely that they linked the figure of the painter to a male representation.

The discussion during the second activity revealed that when the children were asked to choose a toy they had played with less frequently, they struggled to choose one they had not previously encountered or had been familiar with. During the group circle discussion, they expressed a preference for playing with a toy they already knew. It should be noted that, while the toys selected for the activity may have belonged to categories familiar to the children, they had not played with these specific ones before. The boys' strongly negative attitude toward choosing to play with Barbie dolls—even when that was their only option—demonstrates the existence of stereotypical notions regarding which toys are considered appropriate for boys and girls. A telling example is a boy's refusal to try playing with a Barbie because of its feminine features (long hair and breasts); this serves as a form of expression. Consequently, we reach the preliminary conclusion that gender stereotypes can be identified through interactions with toys, and that there is a reluctance to experiment with or explore different types of play.

The visual representation of heroes and heroines through painting in the third activity—despite time constraints imposed by the school's operating conditions—revealed the following: All the children depicted a hero through the art of painting and expressed themselves through it. The girls' drawings featured themes related to family and to situations or moments associated with family life. Their heroes and heroines are depicted in static poses, and the girls' verbal descriptions focus on the figures in the image rather than on their actions. By contrast, the boys' drawings featured heroes characterized by action, vigor, movement, and conflict—a clear distinction that may reflect the children's gender stereotypes and representations, and perhaps even relate to issues of gender identity. Regarding the exploration of alternative roles and characteristics for the heroes, certain variations were observed in some drawings, suggesting that the children

were open to portraying a different side of their chosen hero. Therefore, it becomes evident that in certain cases there was a willingness to experiment with and explore diverse characteristics; at the same time, however, gender representations featuring stereotypical traits also emerge—traits that could potentially evolve into more entrenched gender stereotypes.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate children's gender representations and stereotypes through play-based activities suitable for kindergarten children, employing action research as a methodological tool. This child-oriented methodological approach was enjoyable and familiar to the children, thereby minimizing the authority/power dynamics between the researcher-educator and the children. Furthermore, by acknowledging the viewpoints of all children through active listening in group-circle discussions, it was possible for every child to participate actively and contribute to the research process.

The findings bring to light three themes that provide insight into the gender-related perceptions and stereotypes held by kindergarten children. The contribution of play-based activities is showcased; these activities were suitably designed for kindergarten children and offered them opportunities to express, depict, and present their understanding of gender representations and stereotypes based on their own experiences. In addition, the play-based activities employed in the course of this research could serve as a springboard for more extensive investigation into how gender representations and stereotypes held by kindergarten children can be revealed, and/or for extending the research to younger children.

Secondly, while children do hold gender-related representations and stereotypes, they can easily alter their views. It was found that children are open-minded and flexible enough to accept a perspective that challenges their initial stance, particularly regarding gender stereotypes.

Thirdly, in some cases, the children expressed views regarding gender stereotypes and representations that were characterized by a one-sided perspective and a resistance to change—as seen, for example, with the paintbrush and in certain drawings. While this finding contrasts with the previous one, it may reflect the children's spontaneity to respond in the limited time available for the activity. It arguably shows that further investigation may be required in the future, perhaps by adjusting the duration of the activity in question.

This study provides evidence of a link between various play-based activities and the outward expression of gender representations and stereotypes among kindergarten children. It supplements and enriches the relevant literature by proposing and implementing play-based activities specifically designed for this age group and which can potentially shift their perspectives. These proposed activities enable all children to participate actively in the research and express themselves in diverse ways, while

fostering a sense of familiarity and minimizing the authority/power imbalance between the researcher and the children.

The activities designed for this research can be used as they are or alternatively, they can serve as a foundation on which to construct similar activities tailored to the specific needs of a given class. Designing appropriate interventions regarding gender issues is to foster and promote gender equality, even among young students within the school setting.

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, future research on a larger scale in Greece is deemed necessary to investigate the views of kindergarten children regarding gender representations and gender stereotypes. In any case, we advocate for further research into children's views and the potential for expressing them through play-based activities.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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