GENDERED PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

Eleftheria Tzannetis

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GENDERED PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS:
A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

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of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

GENDERED PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

Eleftheria Tzannetis

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate gendered play in early childhood settings by examining how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender exploration and expression. The study seeks to answer the following questions: 1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender? 2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning? 3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity? The theoretical framework guiding this study and subsequent analysis of the data is Kohlberg’s (1966) social and cognitive perspective, as is an extensive literature review. Participants of this study were early childhood prekindergarten educators from three Greek Orthodox parochial schools in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. Participants participated in virtual one-on-one interviews and focus groups, using semi-structured open-ended questions for discussion and reflection. To triangulate the data, student records and artifacts were also reviewed. The collected data was coded, corroborated, and analyzed to formulate meanings, codes, and clusters for commonly identified participant-specific themes. Analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes emerged and three subthemes raised for each. The first overarching theme was the teacher’s personal and professional identity, and the subthemes were life experiences, human diversity in the classroom, and leadership and policy. The second overarching theme was agents of children’s gender development, and
the subthemes were biology, family, teacher, peer influences, and social expectations. The third overarching theme was promoting gender inclusivity in the preschool classroom, and the subthemes were gender flexible pedagogical practices, professional development, and resources. The implications of these findings for educators, school leaders, and policymakers is discussed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................. vi
LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1
  Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................... 3
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 6
  Significance of the Study ............................................................................................ 9
  Research Questions ................................................................................................... 12
  Definition of Terms ................................................................................................... 12

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH .................................................... 15
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................. 15
  Review of Related Literature .................................................................................... 23
  Families Shape Children’s Gender Perceptions and Schemas .................................. 23
  Teachers Impact the Socialization of Gender through their Pedagogy ..................... 28
  Classroom Environments Impact the Socialization of Gender .................................. 33
  Elements of Gendering in School Settings ............................................................... 39
  Beliefs, Expectations, and Interactions ..................................................................... 39
  Curriculum ................................................................................................................ 48

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................... 70
  Introduction ............................................................................................................... 70
  Methods and Procedures ........................................................................................... 71
  Research Questions ................................................................................................... 71
  Method ...................................................................................................................... 71
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CHAPTER 4: RESULTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 1: Personal and Professional Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Diversity in the Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership and Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 2: Agents of Children’s Gender Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family, Teacher, and Peer Influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 3: Promoting Gender Inclusivity in Preschool Classrooms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1                Participants............................................................................................ 75
Table 2                Data Collection Methods ...................................................................... 81
Table 3                Overarching Themes and Subthemes ................................................... 94
Table 4                Connection of Themes and Subthemes to the Research Questions .... 191
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Kohlberg’s Theory of Gender Role Development</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early childhood classroom environments are nurturing spaces that support the development of all young children and help them to build a sense of safety and belonging; that is, these environments help to generate, in young children, feelings that they are respected by the adults to whom they are entrusted. These socioemotionally responsive physical environments are characterized by interpersonal interactions, knowledgeable teachers, program support structures, culturally responsive practices, age-appropriate curriculum, and comprehensive family engagement opportunities. These elements work together to build partnerships and connections between school and home.

Children between the ages of birth to eight years old would be considered within the early childhood years. Researchers such as Bakken et al. (2017), who focus on early childhood development, asserted, “There is considerable evidence among those who [study] child development and early childhood education, that [suggest] 4-year-olds gain from being in a high-quality, early learning setting” (p. 1).

Similarly, other researchers point to the need for high-quality learning environments that “focus on laying the foundation for growth, physical development (fine and gross motor coordination), intellect (knowledge, creativity, emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence), socio-emotional language (attitude and behavior), and communication” (Awalya, 2012, p. 2). They are the underpinnings for future positive attitudes of learning. Specifically, they are key to creating safe spaces that support and encourage children to explore, identify, and express their authentic gender selves, even if these foundational building blocks challenge stereotypical social norms. Gender is a human made system of categorizing people and making societal expectations of how
people are supposed to be. And it includes roles, behaviors, expectations, needs, identities, bodies and attributes, given what society considers as appropriate for different genders. It changes over the years, and is different for different people. Gender is connected to who we are and interwoven with our other identities. Which means-race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. They all come together to make us who we are (Garcia et al., 2021).

Although the acquisition of gender identity, gender labeling, and gender-typed play starts in infancy, it is in early childhood that children become conceptually aware that the world is divided along gender lines. Gender-typed play is defined as any association of play of one sex or the other in ways that conform to cultural stereotypes (Dinnell & Weisgram, 2018, p. 1). According to Halim and Ruble (2010), early childhood is a critical time since it is at this stage that gender perceptions and identification emerge and become salient. Children typically learn that there are two gender categories—male and female—and that they belong to one of these categories. Furthermore, gender differences become more evident to children when they start school. Most school settings tend to be very traditional and stereotyped with gender-specific expectations (Bigler et al., 2013). Once early childhood professionals become aware of the influence they have in reinforcing gender stereotypes and in shaping children’s gender attitudes and perceptions, they can then adapt their behavior accordingly, to minimize the possible negative effects of gender inequity in their classrooms. Provided, of course, that this awareness is accompanied by robust, sustained professional development.
Teachers fail to provide their students with equitable teaching and learning experiences when they “reproduce and recreate gender-based expectations” through their “dimorphic biased treatment of boys and girls based solely on biological differences, rather than their individual needs” (Wingrave, 2018, p. 1). Knowing how sensitive children are to the cues in their environment, as Halim et al. (2017) posit, teachers need to be mindful of the messages they send both consciously and subconsciously, through the gender pronouns they use, the color of toys and materials they have access to their students, the gender-specific books they read, the types of activities they plan, and their attitudes associated with gender-specific behaviors. By failing to challenge stereotypical gender attitudes, teachers limit children’s future opportunities, affect their intergroup behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Rutland and Killen (2015) highlighted the importance of raising teachers’ awareness and encouraging them to engage in regular reflections in their practice. These reflections are suggested in hopes that they will promote equitable opportunities for all the students in their classrooms, regardless of their gender.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate gendered play in early childhood settings by examining how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender exploration and expression. Considering the amount of time children spend in childcare settings interacting with their teachers and peers throughout the day, it draws attention to understanding the attitudes of early childhood educators. As Balter et al. (2016) posit, educators’ perceptions affect their pedagogical decisions when planning activities and engaging with their students. It is through these interactions that children
begin to construct their gender perceptions, develop skills, and lay the foundations for future success.

The topic is important to the field because as young as six years old, girls are less likely than boys to believe that members of their gender are “really, really smart” or brilliant; while by age 7, girls begin to avoid novel activities as they believe them to be for just the children who are brilliant. This adjective acquires the meaning and reference to boys (Bian et al., 2017). In early childhood, these preconceived notions are subconsciously internalized. For example, girls are traditionally socialized through their interactions and messages in their environment to be more deferential and passive than boys, while boys are expected to be more assertive and freer expressing any emotions. The systematic differences between men and women start at an early age, and one can argue are a result of the stereotypical expectations and socialization in early childhood.

As Kersey et al. (2018) posited

Recent public discussions have suggested that the under-representation of women in science and mathematics careers can be traced back to intrinsic differences in aptitude. However, true gender differences are difficult to assess because sociocultural influences enter at an early point in childhood. (p.1)

Studies conducted by Bian et al. (2017) showed that gendered notions of brilliance are acquired early on and have an immediate effect on children’s interests. Since “gender differentiation occurs throughout our lifespan within a wide variety of domains, including activities, careers, cognitive abilities, traits, and behaviors” (Blakemore et al., 2009), in early childhood settings, children can be supported in being
successful by having access to equal educational opportunities. These will allow them to
develop self-efficacy early on and a wide range of skills, regardless of their gender.

Evidence suggests that boys and girls “initially approach STEM with enthusiasm”
(Master & Meltzoff, 2020, p. 153), perform equally well, have comparable abilities, and
are equipped to acquire and perform well in mathematical competencies in early
childhood (Bakker et al., 2019). Brain scans have shown that when the mosaic inside the
brains of boys and girls were compared, there were much bigger differences within the
group of a particular gender, than there were between the presumed male and female
groups of children (Garcia et al., 2021). Early childhood settings, however, fail to provide
students with equitable experiences and opportunities and have different expectations for
boys and girls (Del Rio & Strasser, 2013).

Once stereotypes emerge from media, home, or school, during the early childhood
developmental window, motivation is key and malleable to challenge ideas and beliefs
about who can and should be proficient in STEM (McGuire et al., 2020). When we are
aware of the cultural stereotypes of our society (Master & Meltzoff, 2020), we can then
put processes and interventions in place to address them. Incorporating a gender
perspective into early childhood teaching unlocks children’s potential at the very
foundation of their development. It can build a sustainable approach to gender equality
and quality education and foster the development of human resources for the whole
society.

Educators who have gender awareness and have been trained with a gender-
sensitive approach can improve equal participation of all children in a learning
environment. Through their interactions with their students and being open to helping
them explore who they are, they can support the children’s development of different
types of skills, personality attributes, and career aspirations, as well as their long-term
cognitive and socio-emotional development—free from gender constraints (Chi, 2018).

In the last five years, for instance, in New York State, where this study took place, the Division of Early Childhood of the New York City Department of Education has transitioned in overseeing all private and public early childhood Pre-K programs. The extent and scope of this expansion, as well as its vision to ensure high-quality learning experiences for all children—public and nonpublic—was, in fact, the reason why this study was conducted in New York, at the location which Chapter 3 details.

**Theoretical Framework**

Gender is a topic that can be explored in many ways. When we think about child development, gender exploration, and expression in preschool settings, a range of theories exist that look at gender from a biological, social, or cognitive perspective. “Gender can be seen as subjective depending on how it has been learned and can take various forms accordingly” (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.39). Gender schema theory explains how individuals become gendered in society and how sex-linked characteristics are maintained and transmitted to other members of a culture (Bem, 1981). It underlines that children receive “input” from adults in their surroundings and media, conveying gender roles; this may explain why children have such a robust reliance on gender at an early age (Shutts et al., 2017). On the other hand, Ward’s Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT) examines how stereotypes and prejudice are formed and controlled among children. Children single out groups as targets of stereotyping and prejudice and, through frequent exposure to stereotypical images and processes, learn
both the characteristics (i.e., stereotypes) and affective responses (i.e., prejudices) that are associated with these groups in their culture (Bigler & Liben, 2006).

For this study, gender was viewed from a social and cognitive perspective. On the one hand, the researcher explored how children’s gender perceptions are socially influenced by the environments and the people in their lives, while on the other hand, how cognitively children construct meaning as they “seek, interpret, and act on information to match their behavior to their understanding of gender” (Miller, 2016, p.5). These theories were applied to examine how early childhood educators engage and interact with children of diverse backgrounds and experiences throughout the day.

Children’s experiences in and out of school impact their gender development. Economic, social, and cultural factors have a major impact on how children grow and develop across the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional domains, while their social interactions play a fundamental role in their overall development. As Kohlberg’s (1966) Cognitive Learning Theory states, children, develop gender at their own levels and pace. At around age three, children recognize their gender identity but do not see it as fixed until the ages of five to seven. This identity marker provides children with a schema, a set of observed or spoken rules for how social or cultural interactions should happen, and in which to organize much of their behavior and that of others. Thus, they look for role models to mimic maleness or femaleness as they grow older (The Interplay of Sex and Gender, 2020). As gender-schema theory suggests, context and models are used to understand gender. Learners construct their own knowledge and meaning from their experiences. “Extreme, or repeated patterns of gender behavior or associated attributes can lead to gender stereotypes” (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.39). Since children
spend most of their day in school engaging in play with their teachers and peers, play is their context, while their teachers and peers are their models. Therefore, it is important to focus on children’s play experiences.

Play experiences and choices allow children to enact their understandings of gender and to further develop their gender identities: Play offers children a context to engage in social learning; in play, children can practice new skills and understandings before they start using them in other situations (Johnson et al., 2005). It is during these social learning play experiences that children’s gender identities are constructed and shaped, and teachers can observe, engage, and get to know their students (Yelland, 1998). Through their interactions and meeting their students where they are, teachers can push their students’ thinking and help them reach their full potential. When children engage with their classmates and teachers, learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior. Children learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others. These behaviors get reinforced by outward motivational factors such as acquiring rewards and punishments for their behaviors and the reactions they receive for their displayed behaviors by others based on how socially acceptable they are (Bandura, 1986).

If children receive positive reinforcement, they are motivated to continue a behavior, while if they receive indicators of disapproval, they are likely to stop that behavior. If children receive praise when they engage in culturally appropriate gender displays and disapproval if they do not, it will impact their willingness to explore and express gender role behaviors, especially when they are contrary to the stereotypical binary norms. For example, a teacher may have a “boys will be boys” attitude when a boy
displays aggressive behaviors. However, the same teacher, when observing a girl displaying the same aggressive behavior as the boy, may give her little or no attention. Seeing the teacher’s reaction, the children learn different meanings for aggressiveness when it comes to their gender development. Boys may continue being aggressive, while the girls may become more “properly” behaved and docile to please.

Teachers’ gender perceptions and their views of the world are shaped by their cultural experiences, race, and class identity. Teachers communicate these perceptions in the cultural context of their classrooms and by how they interact with their students. Through their micro-level relationships and communication with their families, teachers, and peers, students make sense of their social worlds and their roles within them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Significance of the Study

A review of the literature on gendered play in early childhood revealed that there had been limited research conducted on the topic of teachers’ gender perceptions and how they affect their interactions and planning of activities in their classroom “with a focus on play from a gender perspective” (Ramdaeni et al., 2017, p.109). Previous studies have shown that preschool-aged children come to school already exposed to the influences of social rules, gender-specific behaviors, and gendered play (Zosuls et al., 2009). Once children are in their classrooms, their teachers’ gender perceptions and beliefs are transferred to the students and consequently influence the children’s behaviors and development of gender identity (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Educators’ perceptions emerge and come to life in how they set up their classroom environments, through their program planning, through the resources they use
and those they have available, through the feedback they provide, through their interactions and involvement in children’s play (Chapman, 2016), and through their modeled behaviors. It is through these interactions and reactions to their behaviors that students are empowered to be themselves, get out of their comfort zone, and try new things. “How early childhood educators, both men, and women, model a flexible approach to the performance of gender, disrupts the prescriptions for men to model masculinities, and women to model femininities” (Warin & Adriany, 2017, p. 2). This study affirms prior research that emphasizes the importance of raising educators’ awareness of the impact they can have in shaping and dismantling children’s stereotypical gender beliefs, schemas, and behaviors. “When gender stereotypes are forced within the early years and encouraged, it can contribute to a prejudice culture which can negatively impact young children by placing limitations or expectations, and may not suit their unique individual needs (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.39). A prejudice culture, because of gender stereotypes, can affect children’s opportunities, achievement and health, and can cause negative impacts on children’s emotional well-being (Zero Tolerance, 2013, p. 10). Additionally, self-esteem, particularly in girls, was reported to be low in some children due to pressures of meeting stereotypical ideas of how different genders should look and act (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.41).

Research has shown that when educators become aware of gender, they can then begin to create early childhood learning environments that are inclusive and counter stereotypes. Master and Meltzoff (2020) posit that it can be done by

(a) emphasizing the importance of a sense of belonging and self-concept; (b) acknowledging variation between STEM fields as part of our conceptualization
rather than glossing over differences, and (c) considering developmental issues and the motivation of students from preschool through college. (p. 156)

This shift in practice focuses on promoting gender equality by setting and achieving high-quality program goals, gaining a deeper understanding of theory, reviewing existing policies, and planning instruction accordingly, to improve learning outcomes for all students.

The present study is aligned with both federal and state education goals. On a federal level, the United States Department of Education Early Learn goals seek to improve the health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes for all children…, so that [they] all… are on track for graduating from high school- college and career ready… [through] initiatives that increase access to high-quality programs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

On a state level, the New York State Education Department (NYSED), through the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), is committed to the goal of “fostering an educational environment for all students that is safe and free from discrimination—regardless of sex, gender identity, or expression… to progress academically and developmentally” (The New York State Education Department, 2015).

This study and related research are significant because they can inform practice, promote advocacy, and provide guidance in supporting school administrators and mentors in planning for professional learning sessions, teacher preparation, and training programs. It can serve as a resource that examines preschool educators’ roles in creating supportive spaces for gender exploration and expression through ongoing self-reflection, curriculum planning, and meaningful interactions. As Sullivan (2009) posited, children,
express gender in a form that is acceptable to others; hence, classrooms need to be supportive and inclusive spaces. This research study can be insightful in understanding how one can begin to support teachers in ensuring gender-inclusive early childhood programs. By raising awareness, it may lead to stakeholder buy-in to commit in promoting equitable future success of all children, regardless of their gender. Without the buy-in of all stakeholders, it can be difficult to bring about the desired change. As Heikkila (2020) stated, gender equality is something that cannot be achieved once and for all but needs to be evaluated and considered as an ongoing process of systematic change across different settings, disciplines, and practices.

The researcher conducted this study by staying committed to the inherent dignity of all people. In innovative and ethical ways, the researcher prioritized empowering, motivating, and transforming communities by advocating and serving through inclusiveness, openness, and collaboration. Hence, the nature of this study, its significance, and the researcher’s role in conducting it were all directly aligned to the Vincentian mission towards promoting social justice - exercised on an individual and personal level.

Research Questions

The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
2. How do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?
3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used throughout the study.
Anti-biased teaching curriculum- Anti-biased teaching curriculum is an approach to early childhood education that sets forth values-based principles and methodology in support of respecting and embracing differences and acting against bias and unfairness (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

Feminine- Feminine means having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Gender- Gender is defined as being either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered regarding social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Gender norms- Gender norms are also known as social sex roles. It is a social role encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people in a society based on their biological or perceived sex (Welsch & Vivanco, 2018).

Gender roles- Gender roles are defined as the behaviors, values, and attitudes that a society considers appropriate for both males and females. (Welsch & Vivanco, 2018)

Gender schemas- Gender schemas are defined as an organized set of gender-related beliefs that influence behavior formed because of the children's observation of how society defines what it means to be male and female in his or her culture (Bem, 1981).

Gender spectrum- Gender spectrum refers to the idea that there are many gender identities (female, male, transgender, two-spirit, etc.). It also acknowledges that there is a range of gender expressions or ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of
presentation. Gender expression may or may not conform to common expectations around one’s gender identity (Pride Education Level, 2011, p.5).

*Interaction* - Interaction is defined as communication or direct involvement with someone or something (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Masculine* - Masculine means having qualities or appearance traditionally associated with men, especially strength and aggressiveness (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Perceptions* - Perceptions are defined as the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information to represent and understand the presented information or environment (Schacter et al., 2011).

*Play* - Play is engaging in an activity for enjoyment and recreation, especially by children (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Reflection* - Reflection is defined as serious thought or consideration (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Sex* – Sex is either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided based on their reproductive functions (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Stereotypes* - Stereotypes are widely held but fixed and oversimplified images or ideas of, as a result of a person or thing (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

*Unconscious bias* - Unconscious bias, also known as implicit bias is often defined as prejudice or unsupported judgments in favor of or against one thing, person, or group as compared to another, in a way that is usually considered unfair. Thus, certain people benefit, and other people are penalized (Vanderbilt University, n.d.)
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Chapter 1 provided the reader with an overview of the study, introduced the problem, and defined the purpose of the research study. The chapter introduced the theoretical frameworks that are guiding this study, identified the significance of the study, introduced the three research questions and the definitions of terms. The first purpose of this qualitative study is to explore teachers’ perceptions of gender. Second, this study will also explore how do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning. And lastly, this study will identify how do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity in their classroom environments.

To understand the phenomenon being studied, this chapter will discuss the use of Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning and cognitive learning theory as the primary theoretical framework, along with Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) ecological systems theory and Bem’s (1981) gender schema theory. Additionally, this chapter provides a review and synthesis of relevant literature, and lastly, identifies the proposed research gaps the study will address.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, gender was viewed from a social and cognitive perspective. As discussed in Chapter 1, the study uses Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning and cognitive learning theory as the primary theoretical framework to explain gender. The theory asserts that social interactions play a fundamental role in children’s overall development and that economic, social, and cultural factors have a major impact on how children grow and develop across the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional domains. Sex is viewed as the biological differences between males and females and determined by genetics and
hormones, while gender is considered from the lens of culturally constructed distinctions between masculinity and femininity.

Kohlberg’s social learning theory asserts that imitation and modeling influence the development of social behaviors. Children learn by observing their world and the gender-typed behaviors within it. They internalize others’ responses to the same gender real-life models, as well as the responses to symbolic models when they engage in gender-type behaviors. Symbolic models are people or cartoon characters in movies, television, or storybooks. What children witness guides their behavior and make them self-driven to actively participate, construct and develop their own knowledge and understandings about gender-based behaviors, standards, and beliefs.

Kohlberg’s (1966) cognitive, environmental approach, also known as the developmental constructivist approach, looks at how the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in the children’s lives interact with each other and to what degree does each influences their behavior. It emphasizes that children’s responses are situational and shaped by their self-efficacy and self-regulatory control. It asserts that gender-based behaviors are directly linked to age-related changes. Children go through three stages of gender development. First, they become aware of their gender identity (whether they are boys or girls), then they transition to gender stability as their gender knowledge remains the same throughout life, and lastly, they reach gender consistency based on their unchanged gender knowledge. The knowledge they acquire about genders drives their individual motivation to seek information, form their gender schema, and consequently predict their perception, attention, memories, attitudes, and behaviors.
Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning theory is based on Piaget’s (1936) cognitive development theory. The theory was developed in 1966, more than 50 years ago, and at a time when social norms of what is acceptable were much different than today. Kohlberg’s (1966) social cognitive theory of development is dually influenced by biology and environment. Biologically, it asserts that children develop gender constancy over time and eventually come to understand that their biological sex is fixed and permanent. In their environments, children are internally motivated to understand the social world around them, as they seek information and are active agents in their socialization. Once children can label their gender, they begin to apply gender to themselves and gender-normed behaviors.

Kohlberg (1966) asserted that children’s perceptions of gender behaviors are crucial for their development of gender. As shown in Figure 1, there are three stages to Kohlberg’s Theory of Gender Role Development. The development of the child’s thinking influences gender identity. Gender identity results from the changes in our thought process surrounding gender. The more we see a behavior, the more it becomes part of our socialization and modeling. It is an ongoing process that may occur intentionally or unintentionally. Children do not only observe the modeled behavior, but they also monitor how others react to these behaviors. As they go through the three stages of gender development- 1. gender identity, 2. gender stability, and 3. gender constancy, they engage in enactive experiences, direct instruction of expected behaviors, and modeling of expected behaviors.
The first stage of gender development is gender identity. Gender identity usually occurs by age three. During this stage, children can say if they are girls or boys, become conscious of the physical differences between boys or girls, but may not understand that this is a characteristic that cannot change, like length of hair or what they are wearing. During the gender stability stage, usually around age five, children start to realize that boys will grow up to be dads and girls to be moms, but still do not understand that gender cannot change in appearance or choice of activities. Lastly, during the gender constancy stage, around age seven, is when children begin to understand that sex is permanent across situations and over time, and they begin to act as members of their sex, seeking models of same-sex to learn gender-stereotyped behaviors. As children go through these stages and are exposed to social influences, they develop schemas, mental processes, perceptions, thinking, and thought patterns associated with gender development. Once these are developed, it is hard to change them (Kohlberg, 1966).
Like Kohlberg’s (1966) cognitive, environmental approach, Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2006) ecological systems theory (Figure 2) highlights the multiple levels that influence children’s development. He asserted that children’s interactions with their immediate environment, their individual relationships, and connections within their communities, as well as the wider society and the societal factors within it, affect children’s development. The five levels of environmental systems discussed are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The chronosystem level looks at the patterning of environmental events and transitions over a life course, as well as sociohistorical circumstances that may affect a child’s development. The macrosystem focuses on the culture and values in which individuals live. While the exosystem examines the social setting in which an individual does not have an active role in their immediate context, such as workplace, media, city government. The interconnections within the microsystems and interactions between the family and teachers, as well as the relationships between the child’s peers and their family, make up the mesosystem. Lastly, the children’s family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers are part of the children’s microsystem. This study will look at the microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2006) microsystem level focuses on understanding how children’s family, school, religious institutions, neighborhoods, and peers affect their development. When engaging with students, to best meet their needs and support them in reaching their full potential, teachers play a vital role in investing in getting to know each of their students holistically and understanding how each aspect of their lives affects their learning in the classroom. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) maintained that human
development takes place through complex interactions between an active and evolving human organism and the persons and objects in their environment. The nature of these interactions influences children’s development and may vary based on each of their individual attributes and character traits. When engaging with each of the children, individual learning needs need to be considered.

Figure 2

*Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory*

![Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory](https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory/)


The degree to which personalized learning can take place depends on the quality of teacher–student interactions and on whether a student’s characteristics, living situation,
and stage of development are part of his or her personalized learning plan (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The teacher-student interactions are based on the prior’s understanding of the individual students’ gender, race, class, and temperament. It is essential for teachers to devote time to getting to know each of the students while planning for opportunities to enhance parental involvement and engagement. Lastly, teachers can invest in partnering with relevant stakeholders to increase awareness and involvement. Acknowledging that they each play a vital role in the children’s personalized learning and overall gender-specific development. This literature review and the review of additional research continue to affirm the perspective undergirding this study and support the need for exploring the questions posed.

Over the years, Kohlberg and Bronfenbrenner conducted a series of studies, and other scholars have built on his work. Albert Bandura (1986) built on them through the social learning theory (SLT). Bandura (1986) asserted that early in a child’s development, through direct instruction and differential reinforcement, parents are already encouraging gender-appropriate activities and discouraging cross-gender activities. Children observe, imitate, and follow the behavior of individuals who are of the same sex and become increasingly aware of gender stereotypes. They begin to exercise their preference for gender-typed toys or activities. These same-sex models may include any individual from teachers and older siblings to media personalities. Children select and organize gender-related information and how that information is stored in the memory of the future. When engaging with children, we need to focus on them as individuals rather than as groups of boys or girls (Bandura, 1986).
Similarly, Bem (1981) conducted studies to explain how individuals get gendered or are sex-typed by formally introduced gender schema theory. She asserted that children actively construct representations about that which defines males and females by observing individuals in the culture in which they live. Such schemas are incorporated into the child’s self-concept, aid in the search and assimilation of the subsequent information that the child deems schema-relevant, and are consequently changing as the child develops. It is through their schemas that children make sense of the world. When it comes to gender behaviors, these schemas help children at the moment decision-making become easier and quicker (Bem, 1981). Once children recognize their own gender groups and begin to build schemas, they can only be one or the other, with little flexibility. Bem (1983) argued that traditional gender roles are restrictive for both men and women and can have negative consequences for individuals as well as society. It is through schemas that children begin to interpret their world and what their memories are based on.

Through the lens of Kohlberg’s social learning and cognitive learning theory, this study aimed to examine the extent to which the teachers’ gender perceptions shape the experiences children are exposed to in early childhood classrooms, affect their gender development, and consequently impact their future behaviors. Kohlberg’s social learning and cognitive learning theory also informed the analysis and synthesis of relevant literature.
Review of Related Literature

The review of related research showed that: families shape children’s gender perceptions and schemas, teachers impact the socialization of gender through their pedagogy, classroom learning environments impact the socialization of gender, and how the elements of gendering in school settings occur through words, expectations, and interactions, curriculum, and toys.

Families Shape Children’s Gender Perceptions and Schemas

Through their everyday interactions, children develop gender roles and identities consistent with the stereotypical expectations of society and by their interactions with familiar adults (Browne, 2004). Bryan (2012) asserted that “students are learning about gender and sexuality from adults in their lives all the time, as much-if not more- by what these adults do than by what these adults say” (p. 340). There are biological and experiential factors that affect children’s gender role behaviors, perceptions, and schemas. As children develop, they form gender schema connections through their experiences with those they interact with. Gender category knowledge begins to emerge in the second year of life and is related to the development of gender-typed behaviors through their interactions with their families. Females tend to express beliefs stronger in gender congruency than do males when it comes to occupations and activities (Baker et al., 2016). These findings support the hypothesis that the development of early gender-typed attributes is influenced by the ability to categorize oneself and others by gender and the impact families have through their interactions with the children.

Zosuls et al. (2009) argued that the acquisition of gender labels starts in infancy and how children come to school already with gender perceptions based on their
interactions and perceptions from home. The study provided support for the idea that
gender category knowledge begins to emerge in the second year of life and is related to
the development of gender-typed behavior. Among school-aged children, parents expect
sons to find science easier and more interesting than daughters despite no differences in
performance (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). These findings are consistent with the self-
socialization hypothesis that the development of early gender-typed attributes is
influenced by the ability to categorize oneself and others by gender. Parents’ stereotyped
views of differences in boys’ and girls’ abilities in English, math, and sports were linked
to both children’s performance and self-perceptions of ability (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002).

Blakemore et al. (2009) asserted that there are four types of parental influence in
children’s gender development. The first type is called “channeling or shaping.” It is
how parents name, dress and expose their children to toys and activities that correspond
to their assigned gender based on the child’s sex at birth. The second type of influence is
“differential treatment.” It is how parents interact with each other based on their
respective genders. For example, they may be more physical and rougher with their sons
but more focused on relationships with their daughters. The third type of influence is
“direct instruction.” It is when parents instruct their children about socially acceptable
behaviors based on their respective genders. For example, boys are not supposed to cry,
while girls are to look pretty and be trained in how to run a household. The fourth
influence is “models.” Children learn about socially acceptable behaviors for each of the
genders by imitating their parents’ behaviors. Additionally, Blakemore et al. (2009)
asserted that the type of family children grow up in, such as traditional, single parent, gay
and lesbian parent home, and presence of siblings, also affect children’s perceptions of gendered behaviors.

In their study, Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019), set out to examine how in early childhood, gender roles are perceived by parents and practitioners, and how these perceptions compare to what was observed in children’s behaviors, as well as what was found in the latest most relevant research. The researchers also investigated how these perceptions may have been developed, why there might be a difference among them, and offered suggestions of how gender can be taught as to not perpetuate gender based limitations. The study was conducted at an early childhood setting located in a high socio-economic area. To triangulate the findings, data was collected from eight parent questionnaires; two 40-minute focus groups with four practitioners, and lastly, observations of what children said and did when asked about “what a boy/a girl is like”. Children were given a choice to dress up or make drawings of characters from storybooks, and from a collection of visuals of figures in positions in authority.

The study found that “a child’s play is greatly influenced by the practitioners’ own perceptions of gender and consequently, are cofounding to the children’s own view of gender roles” (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.39). Participants felt that they unintentionally conform to following some gender stereotypes within their practice, TV and toys were heavily impactful toward influencing gender stereotypes in the early years, and had observed differences between the genders in behavior; boys predominately engaging with physical, agentic attributed play and girls predominately with creative and communal attributed play (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.42). The data showed that although parents may claim that they treat their children equally and promote gender
equality, their true perceptions were revealed through their interactions with their children. For most parents, these interactions reinforced children’s learning of gender stereotypes, while some parents with more modern views, challenged traditional gender stereotypes, by encouraging gender flexible experiences (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.40).

Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) concluded that children learn about gender through the observation and internalization of how a certain behavior is received and rewarded. When girls were observed to demonstrate gender flexibility, they were being more readily rewarded by adults than the boys (p.42). The researchers argued that “from the early years, adults, must ‘help children to deconstruct their gender binaries’ should they wish to limit gender-based inequality” (p. 43). It was recommended that early-childhood settings should aim to follow practices and pedagogies that offer equality between the genders, especially during the critical transition period when children go through the gender development stages. Educators and parents can promote gender flexibility by adopting a gender-neutral pedagogy, becoming aware of the differences in parenting based on the children’s sex, helping to reduce gender stereotypes by accepting the different choices made by children based on their own individual interests, and communicating regularly in relation to issues of equality, promoting inclusivity (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.44).

Parents who may want to challenge gender stereotypes and to promote equality and inclusivity, worry that their children will not be accepted in their social environment. Emphasizing the importance of exposing children early in gender incongruent individuals, toys, and experiences, and making parents aware of these developmental
milestones, before children enter school. Diane Ehrensaft (2016) explored gender development through the lens of biology, nurture, and culture. She argued for the need to move beyond the gender binary and view gender as fluid and gender-expansive across a spectrum. She emphasized the need for raising awareness, creating inclusive environments, and advocating for parents to encourage and support their children in finding their true selves through gender creative parenting. Following this approach, Myers (2020) wrote about her experience of raising her child using gender creative or gender-expansive parenting. Parents who adopt gender creative parenting allow their children to explore without limiting them based on societal standards of acceptable gender behaviors. Ehrensaft (2016) and Myers (2020) advocated for bringing up children without assigning any specific roles, labels, pronouns, and expectations and using the gender-neutral pronouns, they/them. They sought to start their own kind of gender revolution by allowing children to explore and develop self-identity by giving them access to all opportunities.

The concept of raising children without any gender-based limitations is described in the tale titled *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* by Lois Gould. *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* was first published in a magazine as a short story in 1972, and then as a picture book in 1978. It is the story of a child named X, and whose parents participate in a scientific experiment of raising X in a gender creative manner, and without disclosing the child’s gender to anyone. The scientists give the parents a manual which guides them through their parenting of X; anywhere from raising they without any limitations of gender specific expectations and behaviors, to answering the difficult questions and the challenges that may arise due to their unique parenting style, and the nature of society’s
rigid gender binary. Conversely, Myers (2020) highlighted that we live in a heteronormative, straight, or cisgender world and argued that binary views cause a lot of harm because those who do not fit those boxes or categories go unseen. While those who do, their experiences are limited within the boundaries of the socially acceptable preconceived notions about gender.

The development of children’s early gender-typed attributes is influenced by the ability to categorize oneself and others by gender. Through their interactions with familiar adults, such as their families, children learn socially acceptable behaviors for each of the genders by imitating their parents’ behaviors. Furthermore, biological and experiential factors within their environments, shape their perceptions, schemas, and identities.

**Teachers Impact the Socialization of Gender through their Pedagogy**

The individual beliefs and practices of early childhood educators influence their social environment, choices, and interactions with their students within each setting. Jacobson (2011) asserted that as teachers, when we enter the classroom, we bring ourselves with us. Our personal feelings, early childhood memories, prejudices, values, beliefs, and attitudes accompany us, as we struggle to gender young children to become future citizens of a world that is developing more rapidly than we can imagine. (p. 11)

However, “while unintentional, a teacher’s inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices” (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Through face-to-face interviews as well as observations of the children at play, Goble et al. (2012) gained insight into the educators’ perceptions of gender and
their views of the nature of the children’s play. Findings suggested that through social exchanges with their peers and teachers, children were exposed to a greater range of activities than what they experienced when they played by themselves (Goble et al., 2012). Furthermore, how teachers engage with their students impacts their students’ future success. Ewing and Taylor (2009) asserted that the quality of teacher-child relationships is a predictor for the girls’ school competence perceptions and the hostile-aggressive behavior for boys. Jacobson (2011) posited that

teachers’ interactions set the tone for what happens in classrooms, and then decide which messages are transmitted to children unconsciously or intentionally...we have the power to reinforce gender stereotypes and develop more humane, just and fulfilling ways of relating to one another. (p.18)

In Warin and Adriany’s (2017) study, teachers revealed how their gendered practices were influenced by their underlying assumptions about gender differentiation and subscribed to implicit ideas about biological essentialism. This biological argument which is deeply embedded in the teachers’ practices was strongly associated with religious discourse and the fear of doing anything remotely different or questioning what is currently in place would challenge the status quo. Bigler et al. (2013) asserted:

Teachers and classmates shape children’s gender attitudes and, in turn, gender differences in cognition and behavior, unfortunately, teachers receive relatively little training in recognizing and combating gender stereotypes and prejudices—their own and others—and, consequently, teachers often model, expect, reinforce, and lay the foundation for gender differentiation among their pupils. (p. 3)

Chapman (2016) conducted a case study of gendered play in preschools and how
early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence their interactions with children during play. The findings suggested that there were differences in the individual beliefs and practices of the educators. Through face-to-face interviews as well as observations of the children at play, the researcher gained insight into the educators’ perceptions and views of the nature of the children’s play. Chapman (2016) found that early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play and suggested that a reflective role might be encouraged for educators in how they design their schedules and activities and how they facilitate and support children’s participation.

In their study on gender identity and expression in early childhood classrooms, Solomon and Henderson (2016) presented how teachers can be reflective and intentional in their practice when engaging with students to challenge traditional gender roles. They looked at the influence materials, and teacher expectations play, as children seek power, and sources of expressions and behaviors that shape their mind, schemas, and overall gender development. When given a set of objects, children of two and three, classified them based on gender stereotypes. Older children, ages four to five years old, with more advanced language skills than the prior, classified objects in their world by criteria such as colors and shape, rather than just the gender stereotypes they’ve been exposed to. These gendered practices were rooted in teachers’ implicit gender beliefs and influenced by larger socio-political discourses. As also reported by Aina and Cameron (2011), skilled teachers in early childhood, can encourage cross-gender activities and play in cross-gender centers, and can positively reinforce children who are playing with non-stereotyped toys by talking with them and supporting their learning. They can focus on countering gender stereotypes and begin to implement activities that acquaint children
across genders, such as coed lunch seating arrangements, partnered group projects, and performing plays with cross-gender roles.

Teachers’ gendered practices were influenced by their own underlying assumptions about gender differentiation, gender essentialism, and religious discourse—all of which may or may not challenge the status quo. “Early childhood educators must develop gender consciousness before they can deliver a gender-conscious pedagogy” (Warin & Adriany, 2015, p.2). This is also supported by Bigler et al. (2013), who asserted “educators who adopt a commitment to gender egalitarianism and thus promote cross-gender interaction, expose pupils to counter-stereotypic models, and discuss and teach challenges to gender stereotyping and harassment optimize their pupils’ developmental outcomes” (p.3). They can then make interventions in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach through gender flexible teaching practices because they can intervene at the very beginning of an individual’s educational trajectory.

Before educators can make interventions in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach, they must first engage in reflective practice. Schön (1984) defined “reflective practice as the practice by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience” (p. 50). The professional, in this case being the teacher, reflects on a “past performance and searches for new perspectives and new solutions” (Yip, 2006, p.779) through their own personal and individual experience. Educators can gain insight into their thought processes, feelings, and perspectives by evaluating a given situation. Like “peeling off the layers of an onion, go deeper, reflect, and start being consciously aware of one’s performance, to
critically assess their ideology and belief behind their thinking and feeling in action” (Yip, 2006, p. 778). The individual gains new perspective and understanding through “reflection in action” and “reflection on action” (Schön, 1984). Schön (1984) posited that “reflection in action” occurs as something happens. It allows the individual to consider the situation and decide how to act immediately and accordingly. “Reflection on action,” on the other hand, occurs after something has happened. It allows the individual to reconsider the situation and think about what needs to be changed in the future. Bryan (2012) made the analogy of the individual functioning as a barometer who regularly check-ins with one’s self, and stays informed through professional development (p.128). Participating in different stages of professional development can help change educators’ behavior and practices. However, before that can happen, they first need to raise their awareness by engaging in an ongoing reflection cycle of - teach, self-assess, consider, practice, teach (Bryan, 2012).

The individual beliefs and practices of early childhood educators influence their social environment, choices, and interactions with their students within each setting. How teachers engage with their students impacts their students’ future success. Children’s gender-related information and play experiences with their teachers affect their responses to their social world (Warin & Andriany, 2017). Educators have different individual beliefs and practices. Any biases that they may have because of their individual experiences and larger socio-political discourses can potentially manifest themselves in their practices. To break this cycle, gender-conscious educators needed to commit to creating classroom environments that promote gender flexible pedagogy, engage in ongoing reflective practice, and have the willingness to resist potential gender bias and or
being gender blind.

Classroom Environments Impact the Socialization of Gender

The social environments offered and the individuals within them are significant to children’s brain development and understanding of gender roles (Koch & Irby, 2005). In an ethnographic study conducted by Gansen (2017), the gendered sexual socialization of children was examined through their interactions with their teachers. One hundred and sixteen three to five-year-old students were observed in three preschools across nine classrooms in Michigan. The study involved 15 teachers and seven part-time aides. The findings showed that teachers’ gendered sexual socialization was evident through their facilitative, passive, and disruptive approaches when interacting with their students. They each affected how “sexual discourses become constructed, normalized, or disrupted in preschool classrooms. Preschool teachers are socializing agents of gendered sexual socialization” (Gansen, 2017, p. 268). Highlighting the need for schools to have policies and training in place that guide teachers in how to respond to children’s gender-specific behaviors. Jacobson (2011) emphasized the importance of viewing each child as an individual and supporting them accordingly. Doing so will affect how heteronormative ideologies that are “already ingrained in children by ages 3-5” (Jacobson, 2011, p. 268), get disrupted or normalized.

Within the classroom environment, children’s interactions with their peers also impact their socialization of gender. Blakemore et al. (2009) explored children’s peer relationships and their effect on developing children’s social skills. When children are as young as two years old, they tend to engage in same sex-play groups. Boys prefer more physical activities, while girls enjoy more domestic ones. When children engage with
peers of the opposite gender and in more diverse and non-stereotypical children’s play experiences, they develop better social skills. Once children become aware of their genders, they tend to play with same-sex peers because they find them to be similar in their preferences. Girls usually do not like the physical nature of boys’ play and the fact that they cannot manage or influence boys’ behaviors. While boys tend to segregate girls from their activities. Both boys and girls teased their respective peers, when engaging with members of the opposite gender, and tended to gravitate towards those who engage in the same interest and gendered play experiences (Blakemore et al., 2019, p. 377).

Blakemore et al. (2009) posited that children’s holistic development is enhanced when engaging with peers of both sexes. Hilliard and Liben (2010) conducted a study examining children’s play in the classroom with their peers. They found that “after 2 weeks of peer play observations, children in the high salience conditions showed significantly increased gender stereotypes, less positive ratings of other-sex peers, and decreased play with other-sex peers. Children's own activity and occupational preferences, however, remained unaffected” (p.1). This emphasizes the importance of teachers creating spaces that promote gender flexible pedagogy, their willingness to resist potential gender bias, being gender blind, and explicitly focusing on developing gender consciousness through gender activism.

To examine how the environment affects children’s gender-based social preferences, stereotypes, and automatic encoding in carrying out a task, Shutts et al. (2017) conducted a study in Sweden with three to six-year old students enrolled in gender-neutral preschools. The task presented children with color photos of children dressed in gender-neutral clothing, but with different hair lengths and obvious boy/girl
names, and asked which they would rather play with. They found that compared with traditional early childhood preschools, children were more interested in playing with children of the opposite gender and scored lower when measuring how children think and feel about people based on gender stereotyping. However, the same children, were not less likely to automatically encode and spontaneously notice the gender of other children.

Similarly, King et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of twenty-one studies in sixteen articles, to examine gender stereotypes and biases of three to five-year-old children in early childhood settings. The review showed that children were aware of gender stereotypes and biases and based them on the schemas they formed from cues when interacting with other individuals, the activities they have access to and engage in, and the language they were exposed to within a given environment. The researchers asserted that knowing that gender stereotypes in early childhood are flexible and malleable, yet quite damaging if one considers their long term social effects, we can begin to “prevent or mitigate their establishment in the early years” (King et al., 2021, p.113) by investing in understanding the factors that affect children’s development of gender categories in early life, and work towards inclusive early childhood settings.

Other factors, such as the male and female teachers’ gender perceptions, were examined by Børve and Børve (2017). They conducted a case study in Norway to explore how indoor physical environments and children’s play were affected by the teachers’ gender perceptions when setting up the playrooms. Consequently, children’s play practices produced and reproduced the employees’ ideas of gender. The findings revealed that gender is interwoven in the physical environments and materials available to the students. Emphasizing the importance of educators engaging in reflection when planning
for their learning environments. Female employees seemed to be more interested than males when it comes to planning and setting up physical environments.

Børve and Børve (2017) connected these findings to be associated with women’s traditional roles in family and childcare. Children in the study did not have a say in the setup or choice of materials within these environments. They were expected to function, participate, and play within certain norms and expectations that were viewed to be very traditional. Boys’ practices were associated with being louder and more physical, while the girls’ activities were calmer and quieter. There were only a few exceptions of children crossing stereotypical gender boundaries. The way the spaces were organized did not allow for materials and activities to be equally available for all children, regardless of their gender or choice. The activities they engaged in often-times depended on the availability of adults who monitor them and the adults’ interests. When planning for activities learning environments, we want to ensure that boys and girls have equal opportunities to participate in all available activities and materials as they wish, regardless of their gender. Similarly, Brown and Irby (2011) highlighted the importance of teachers being aware of the changing student demographics in their early childhood environments and adjusting their practice accordingly based on their understandings of their students’ diverse needs (p.174).

Similarly, Barea and Martin (2020) examined the extent to which early childhood settings are stereotyped and gendered through a mixed methodology of questionnaires and observations. The study sample was composed of 158 five-year old boys and girls, from eight classrooms, across five schools in the Region of Murcia, Spain. Students were observed during indoor and outdoor play and were asked questions about their preferred
sex, where and what they like to play, what they want to be when they grow up, favorite colors, preferred cartoons, which should be doing different chores at home. The findings showed that the early childhood settings were quite gendered when it came to the children’s gendered perceptions and behaviors. Girls gravitated towards the art center and dramatic play area, pretending to be mommies and princesses. The boys engaged in more aggressive and physical play, pretended to be superheroes. Assuming leadership and mostly seen in the building corner. Although they used gender-neutral language when engaging with each other, and boys selected red, instead of the expected blue as their favorite color, the type and color of their clothing and lunchboxes were reflective of the traditional stereotypes associated with the respective genders. The authors argued that gender stereotypes are passed down in society from generation to generation and transmitted across a range of factors to the children. By being aware of these shortfalls, educators can begin to break this cycle of sexist stereotypes, starting with ensuring equitable early childhood centers.

The Nordic countries - Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Greenland, have committed themselves to the ongoing process of working towards gender equality by converting theories into practice from a multi-dimensional perspective throughout the children’s day in school. Heikkilla (2020) conducted a study to find the ways. Nordic preschools promote gender equality. The research showed that boys and girls were viewed as equal learners, both intellectually and emotionally. Although there are policies in place, there is no one uniform way that schools have used to ensure equality systematically. One can see this as a positive, as it allows each of the local or individual school settings to do what works best for them when implementing the policies.
in their own unique ways. However, five aspects of the work seemed to emerge. 1. [Having] an epistemological understanding of gender knowledge, 2. Management support [from administrators] and politicians who… believe in… the work, 3. Goal setting for gender equality work, 4. Organization around the work to be carried out, and lastly 5. Development of climate through dialogue and collaboration amongst [all stakeholders]. (p.4)

Also of importance to consider is the types of school these classrooms are in and their respective expectations. For example, as Bryan (2012) shared,

religious affiliations face a unique obligation when articulating their mission in relation to gender and sexuality diversity. They must answer to the standards set by educational accreditation authorities and to the doctrine on which their faith is based. Catholic, [Greek], Quaker, and Jewish schools must attend to the ways matters of educational mission and religious doctrine inform and are influenced by each other. (p.68)

The individual beliefs and practices of early childhood educators influence the social environment, choices, and interactions with their students within each setting. Children’s gender-related information and play experiences with their teachers affect their responses to their social world (Warin & Andriany, 2017). How teachers engage with their students impacts their students’ future success. Educators have different individual beliefs and practices. Any biases that they may have because of their individual experiences and larger socio-political discourses, can potentially manifest themselves in their practices. To break this cycle, gender conscious educators needed to commit to creating classroom environments that promote gender flexible pedagogy,
engage in ongoing reflective practice, have the willingness to resist potential gender bias and or being gender blind, and the freedom to adjust their practice accordingly based on their understandings of their students’ diverse needs.

Elements of Gendering in School Settings

To ensure gender equality in school settings, four elements of gendering emerged-1. beliefs, expectations and interactions, 2. curriculum, 3. toys, and 4. words. Each of them are essential when thinking about the day-to-day experiences of children in early childhood settings, and the role these four elements play in creating classroom environments that encourage gender exploration and expression. Children’s gender schemas of what is considered socially acceptable behaviors are shaped by the beliefs, expectations and interactions, curriculum, toys, and word choices educators use and expose children to when engaging with their students throughout the day’s activities (Solomon, 2016).

Beliefs, Expectations, and Interactions

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) noted that expectations and perceptions regarding a child’s gender might affect important developmental processes and experiences, as well as their interactions in school. Interactions allow children to experience what is possible. Teachers’ sex-differentiated responses are most pronounced in elementary school and less evident in high school (Taylor & Grebre, 2016, p. 207). In elementary school, teachers tend to call on boys more than girls but call on boys and girls equally when they volunteer answers (Altermatt et al., 1998). Research showed that teachers tend to believe that elementary school boys are better at math and science than girls (Tiedemann, 2000) and throughout the school year and tend to attend more to boys

39
than girls (Ruble et al., 2006). In line with the bioecological model, gender as a person variable helps shape children’s experiences in the classroom. It presents an important attribute in the teacher–student relationship to consider in creating individualized learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Examining one’s beliefs around gender is important to think about when lesson plans are constructed and where teachers’ instruction and attention are directed in the classroom. It is during the teacher-student, and peer interactions that subconsciously; preconceived notions may emerge, and may drive each of the students’ and teachers’ actions. They may be affected by their individual ethnicities, race, temperament, socio-economic status, and language skills development. As Jacobson (2011) posited, “Having playmates or friends of both genders, as well as of other cultures, ethnicities, and abilities leads to a broader set of experiences” (p. 210). These will consequently influence the quality of their relationships, interactions, and senses of belonging. An individual’s behavior and how socially acceptable it is can affect the extent of their belonging, membership, inclusion, agency, or marginalization in a particular group or community (Little, 2001).

Furthermore, Aina and Cameron (2011) found that “males demand and receive more attention from their teachers and therefore receive more specific, instructive feedback, while females become less demanding of the teacher’s attention” (p. 13). Koch and Irby (2005) spoke of children’s world of play and how its dynamics are often reflective of the power dynamics of genders in society. By being aware of their potential gender bias, teachers can empower their students for future success rather than hinder
their achievement, self-esteem, social emotional well-being, and future career goals (Koch & Irby, 2005).

In a study conducted by Munroe et al. in 1984, with children across cultures and countries, it was revealed that children progress through the same stages, as outlined by Kohlberg. They concluded that the sequence must be biologically and developmentally driven and does not come down to cultural and social norms. Slaby and Frey (1975) found that children self-socialize and actively seek information, rather than passively receive it. Kohlberg’s stages of development became evident when children were asked what they thought they were when they were young and what they would be when they were older. Children were also asked if their genders would change if they changed clothing or got a haircut that was associated with the opposite sex. During the first and second stages, children watched and observed, while by the third stage, actively sought gender-appropriate models. Boys showed less flexibility in gender roles and greater resistance to opposite sex activities than girls. Prompting us to take into consideration expectations and interactions as key factors of socialization when studying gender development with children of different ages.

Similarly, Cervantes (2018) conducted a study in Vallarta, Mexico, to examine the emergence of gender identity with 32 children between the ages of one to six year olds. The study found that younger children, ages one to three years old, classified 24 images of people, accessories, domestic animals, toys, clothing, and footwear, by criteria such as color and shape, and their responses were affected by their attention span and language development. The older children, ages four to six classified images based on their individual experiences and how each of depicted images resonated and connected
with their daily lives and gender models around them. As children get older, around the ages of six to eight years old, they view gender norms as a personal choice, based on individual similarities and differences, and are more flexible with their enforcement (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012).

Chapman (2016) conducted a study to examine how educators’ gender stereotypes and beliefs affect children’s play in preschool settings. How educators set up the physical and social environments and their level of involvement plays a pivotal role in supporting and encouraging gender stereotypes and children’s understanding of their gender roles (p. 1282). The study found that there are individual differences in the beliefs and perceptions of educators. These emerge in their practice and are thus transferred to the children. These views also affect educators’ roles, engagement, involvement, and facilitation of children’s play- where they play, how they engage in play, and what they play (p. 1271). “Some educators felt that their roles were to observe, rather than get involved, and allow children to decide what to play, while other educators described themselves as facilitators of play with varying levels of involvement” (Chapman, 2016, p. 1282). Chapman (2016) asserted that when educators are aware of the connection between play, gender roles, and stereotypes, they become more intentional in planning for each experience, so that it is inclusive of children of both sexes (p. 1281).

Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2009) conducted a study to examine educators’ beliefs about key preschool classroom experiences children should have in early childhood settings. They interviewed 75 early childhood educators in eleven focus groups from three different settings – 1. public center-based programs, 2. private center-based programs, and 3. family center-based programs. Although there were some variations,
and differences between each of the settings, overall, the findings showed the following dimensions: “teacher-child interactions, learning environment, and learning opportunities teachers. Being supportive of children, encouraging individualization, and being a role model were important types of teacher-child interactions” (p. 21). These interactions were closely linked to teachers’ certification status, their teaching philosophy, and implementation of developmentally appropriate practices that take into consideration children’s perspectives and interests. Teachers believed that “age appropriateness, teacher resourcefulness, and having clear rules and consequences” [were an important part of learning environments.] “The amount of independence an educator has regarding decision-making about the learning environment in his/her classroom was associated with teachers’ structure and beliefs about the types of experiences to offer children” (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009, p. 21). Teachers’ own learning opportunities and training were “deemed important” in preparing children for kindergarten by exposing them to a range of “play, hands-on, small group, and one-to-one activities” (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009, p. 22). These are significant factors to keep in mind when thinking about how they each affect how children get gendered in the classroom.

Cahill and Adams (1997) explored how early childhood teachers’ beliefs towards adult gender roles impact their attitudes about children’s gender role behaviors in the classroom. Through survey responses, the study found that compared to college students, female teachers’ child rearing attitudes were nontraditional to adult gender roles. They concluded that this might have been because of them being older than the college students, and having more life experiences. Early childhood educators were more encouraging, accepting and lenient in their child rearing attitudes with girls, particularly
when exploring cross-gender role behaviors. Individual teachers’ beliefs of socially acceptable behaviors influenced their teaching when interacting with their students. Qualities such as being independent and assertive were often viewed as being traditionally masculine. However, if boys displayed behaviors that might have been more feminine, teachers felt uncomfortable and feared that their encouraging responses might promote homosexual attitudes.

Furthermore, Emilson et al. (2016) conducted a study to examine to what extent the beliefs and values of ten preschool educators are communicated and transferred over to their everyday interactions in the classroom with their students. The data was collected from eight Swedish preschools through ten semi-structured group interviews on gender issues. The participants expressed gender-related beliefs of duality and neutrality. Duality viewed boys and girls as being separate and different when it comes to traditional gender-related societal expectations (Emilson et al., 2016, p. 230). This presented to be particularly challenging to teachers when children’s behaviors and attitudes were contradicting stereotypical expectations of the family members and commercial interests. Although practitioners may have felt very strongly when it comes to ensuring equity and equality in their students’ experiences, regardless of gender, they doubted themselves when it came to managing this in practice (p. 232). In terms of gender neutrality, the data showed that the participants did not believe in gender differences but rather in the individuality of all children, free choice, and equality in their opportunities, as sex differences were irrelevant. Practitioners also believed that it is the preschool’s responsibility to ensure gender neutrality by making a “conscious effort to exert influence on the parents, the language used, and the classroom environment” (p. 234). Arguing that
although gender neutrality should be a priority, it might not always be the way to go. Participants felt that it is important for practitioners to have the freedom to adjust the curriculum accordingly, so that they can respectfully address children’s individuality, interests, and choices, through open-mindedness (Emilson et al., 2016, p. 234).

Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the often-missed signs of sexism in their own classrooms by asking questions that examine their practices and curricular material and disrupt gender inequalities that send boys and girls on different life paths (Sadker et al., 2009). When planning for professional learning experiences, administrators are called within each of their school settings to keep in mind the teams’ teaching experience, previous training received, and overall student population and expectations. Training can then be differentiated to prepare teachers to engage in self-reflection and use appropriate interventions and supports to ensure the best student outcomes, regardless of the impact of potential bias. Some of the suggested practices include exposure of students to role models of both genders, being intentional in giving all students an equal voice (regardless of their gender), and taking advantage of teachable moments that bring students’ attention to social justice issues that might arise in the required curricular material used.

Prioletta (2020) asserted that curricular decisions are informed by the developmental ideologies of teachers and their perspectives around play and gender. Resulting in classroom cultures, practices, and play opportunities that are patriarchal in nature and limited in addressing “gender inequalities” (p. 243). The research findings from the investigation in four Montreal preschool classrooms showed that teachers focused on individual children reaching their developmental milestones through play, relied on developmental ideologies to guide their understanding of their students,
believed that “gender differences are natural but also learned,” and lastly, that “preschoolers are too young to know about gender” (Prioletta, 2020, p. 244). Concluding that although free play is important for children to explore and learn about their world, equally important is teachers engaging in other forms of play, such as guided play with their students to disrupt traditional “gender binaries” and “gendered power imbalances” (Prioletta, 2020, p. 250). If these go unaddressed, they can result in limiting their students’ learning opportunities.

When thinking about students’ future success and learning opportunities, as Gansen and Martin (2018) argued, it is important to also examine how teachers’ gendered beliefs manifest themselves through their interactions with their students in terms of behavior expectations and disciplinary practices. This is closely aligned with the idea that one’s beliefs manifest themselves through our actions. Based on the nine participants that were interviewed and observed, the study found that teachers “discipline boys and girls differently, and create gendered stories about why disciplinary differences exist” for the same behaviors (p. 404). For example, when students call out, girls are usually reminded to wait until they are called on, but if the boys called out, teachers responded to them differently, regardless of if it is related to what it was being discussed. This can impact not only students’ academic achievement, but also their social emotional development, gender perceptions and understanding.

Driven by societal norms and the assumption that they each have different needs, boys are believed to be more assertive and physical, while girls are viewed as respectful and responsive. As per Gansen and Martin (2018), “teachers in the study reported that, when disciplining children, they are more likely to use reasoning strategies with girls and
consequences with boys” (p. 395). By teachers “seeing children as different, rather than similar, it makes them unaware of the gender inequalities and the societal standards of masculinity and femininity from which they stem” (p. 405). Failure to do so robs children of the “opportunity to develop as people rather than just as boys and girls” (p. 405). Research suggested that to proactively and effectively change mindsets, it is essential to shift beyond just identifying teachers’ beliefs and rather focus on their preservice training.

Teachers’ beliefs around gender need to be considered when thinking about how they can be transferred to the children and can affect their developmental processes and experiences. Based on the quality of experiences, interactions, and relationships, preconceived notions may emerge. They drive each of the students’ and teachers’ experiences, actions, and sense of belonging within the classroom and school community. As children go through different stages of development and engage in a range of activities, they self-socialize, actively and passively receive information, and develop their own beliefs. Teachers’ beliefs drive their actions, curriculum planning, and interactions, as well as their engagement, involvement, the facilitation of children’s play, and what they play. Teachers’ certification status, their teaching philosophy, and their training also shaped their beliefs. Preservice trainings and teacher preparation programs can help dismantle “gender stereotypes” that may perpetuate in the classroom, by raising their awareness, and encouraging them to regularly engage in self-reflection in their practice. They can help build teachers’ capacity in reflecting on their own gender attitudes, and phobias, and becoming comfortable to encourage cross-gender play, for both boys and girls, regardless if they challenge traditional and socially acceptable gender
roles (Cahill & Adams, 1997). Additionally, taking into consideration children’s perspectives and interests, promoting equity and equality, and implementing developmentally appropriate, nontraditional gendered practices.

**Curriculum**

Looking at the curriculum used within the classroom settings, and how reflective and inclusive it is of the population of students taught is another area to examine when addressing gender disparities. In early childhood, to ensure the best outcomes, the use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum is considered best practice. Meaning, based on what we know on how children develop, learn and grow across the trajectories, educators meet them where they are and through scaffolding and individualized support help them reach their full potential and their goals. They invested in getting to know each of the students and their families well, and implementing culturally responsive practices to meet their diverse needs. Based on their interviews with two sets of teachers in Sweden and Indonesia, Warin and Adriany (2017) highlighted the need for teachers to be gender conscious and use a gender-sensitive curriculum to model and expose students to alternate forms of masculinities and femininities. Before they can adopt a gender flexible pedagogy, they need to first become aware of their gender blindness (p. 378).

When exposing children to alternate forms of masculinities and femininities, Gunderson et al. (2012) asserted that knowing girls tend to have more negative math curriculum attitudes than boys, teachers need to be mindful about not only addressing their own math related anxieties, but also those of their students’ parents. This matters, as these gender-biased beliefs consequently affect students’ self-efficacy when delving into the math curriculum. Implementing effective interventions both at home and in school
early on, can improve students’ math attitudes and self-efficacy. Weiler (2009) asserted that we need to engage in examining the curricula materials available to the students, to ensure they are representative of the student population they serve, if we want to create a more equitable learning environment. Bryan (2012) posited that “no matter their race, gender, family constellation, or financial situation, they are reflected in our curriculum and have a mirror in which to see their reality reflected…What is a mirror to one child, is a window to another” (p. 151).

As per Baker (2013), to increase girls' participation and engagement in science, we need to rethink their experiences in school starting in early childhood. In his study, Baker (2013) examined instructional strategies, curricula, and organizational structures to support girls' interests and needs in science. Some of the recommended practices included but were not limited to making connections to "real-world experiences, student presentation to classmates, classroom interactions that value the students' points of view, increase hands-on experiences, exposure to role models, having enough materials for activities, and allowing time for revision and discussion" (Baker, 2013, p.15). Systematic change may be challenging, but the work can begin by investing in building teachers' capacity. When we invest in building teachers' capacity to meet the needs of all students, girls will then be given the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary science activities through intentional grouping that is student-centered, and will consequently develop their self-efficacy and love for science through a more inclusive curriculum.

Around the world, there has been a shift in exploring more inclusive pedagogical practices and curricula. Chan and Lo (2017) conducted a study in Hong Kong, to examine strategies teachers have used to meet the diverse needs of their students, “regardless of
their disabilities, race, ethnicity, gender and social class” so they can all succeed (p.714).

To create more inclusive classroom environments, the data showed that teachers need to have the autonomy to implement practices and strategies that they see best meet their students’ diverse needs. Just like their students, they need to be supported for ongoing growth through professional learning sessions. They were starting with embedding in the teacher preparation programs reflection in their practice for ongoing professional growth. These give teachers the opportunity to network, exchange ideas, best practices, share experiences from the field with administrators and policy makers, plan learning sessions accordingly, and collaborate with university academics through a socio-cultural approach. Together, developing a vetting system for available resources such as toys, books, games, and television shows. They are invaluable in the children’s gender typing process (Cha & Lo, 2017).

As per Cameron and Morrison (2011), one of the best practices to create equitable learning environments, and to dismantle gender stereotypes, is for teachers to reflect on what they know about their students, and introduce new ideas and concepts through activity orienting. This practice addresses preschoolers’ academic and self-regulatory skills, regardless of content area and the children’s gender. Activity orienting is defined as teachers previewing with the students the available activities throughout the centers, and clearly explaining how the activities are organized. Doing so helps norm expectations allow for smoother transitions, and more time to differentiate instruction through meaningful engagement based on individual student characteristics and needs. The data collected showed that regardless of the students’ gender, content area, and beginning of the year skill level, orienting before engaging independently in the planned activities
throughout the centers positively predicted children’s end-of-the-year outcomes. Orienting allows teachers to focus and scaffold the learning by providing the rationale, procedures, and behaviors that pertain to an upcoming activity through explanations, demonstrations, and other forms of guidance. By presenting the available activities in advance, it allows teachers to gauge the students' understanding, encourages them to ask questions for clarity, and adjust instruction accordingly before students undertake the activities on their own (Cameron & Morrison, 2011).

Teaching teams sent home weekly newsletters to communicate with families the types of experiences children engaged in school as they related to the curricula. By “walking” families through each of the week’s activities, they tried to help them understand how these experiences supported children in their self-expression, beginning associations about gender, and gender identity development. Sharing with families about how through their interactions, teachers validated children’s choices, while encouraging them to be independent. Developing a sense of freedom and belonging, as they explored their emerging autonomy. Additionally, teachers shared about the books they read, as well as the terms they used in the classroom, and made themselves available to address families’ questions and concerns about how to have these conversations and learning reinforced at home (Garcia, et al., 2021).

To address gender disparities, examining the curricula used within a classroom setting is essential. By collecting data and meeting children where they are, teachers can then plan for a gender sensitive curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, addresses children’s needs and interests, and exposes them to alternate forms of masculinities and femininities. Teachers can be trained in being mindful that the curriculum used is
reflective of the student population they serve; they give them a sense of belonging, and invest in building their students’ self-efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence. These training and professional learning sessions give teachers the opportunity to network, exchange ideas, best practices, share experiences from the field, and plan learning sessions accordingly. Some of the recommended practices included but were not limited to planning for a curriculum that involves making connections to "real-world experiences, student presentation to classmates, classroom interactions that value the students' points of view, increase hands-on experiences, exposure to role models, having enough materials for activities, and allowing time for revision and discussion" (Baker, 2013, p.15). By first introducing new ideas and concepts through activity orienting, these activities would then be available for the children throughout the classroom to apply their prior “knowledge, independence, and emerging regulatory skills” (Cameron & Morrison, 2011, p. 621) to engage in their activities autonomously and make sense of the world around them.

**Toys**

When engaging in activities through the classroom, students have access to a range of toys. Toys are different types of curricula materials within the learning environment that students are exposed to and can explore to learn and develop their skills. Blakemore et al. (2009) asserted that toys, along with books, television, video games, and computers are factors that affect children’s gender perspectives, play choices, and how they develop a preference for gender specific toys and skills across the domains. Based on how gendered the media is and the time they spend engaging with each of
them, it affects the level of their skill development and how gendered their views are (Blakemore et al., 2009, p. 339).

In a longitudinal study, Coyle et al. (2016) examined the effects of engagement with Disney Princesses on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and prosocial behavior in children. The findings showed that both boys and girls displayed more gender-stereotypical behaviors after a year of engagement with the Disney princesses. Girls were more focused on body esteem and image, while the boys were encouraged to have more prosocial behaviors, such as sharing, caring, and helping others. These gender-stereotypical behaviors were reinforced through parental mediation. “Considering the extent to which toys are a part of children’s lives, … relatively little research has been devoted to the study of their impact on children’s behavior and on the development of their cognitive and social skills” (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010, p. 667). What children prefer to play with starts with the toys their parents purchase for them and expose them to, how they set up their rooms, and what they request in their letters to Santa. Knowing students’ diverse backgrounds and experiences, teachers can be intentional in exposing children to an assortment of toys.

Ramdacni et al. (2019) explored how children construct gender through toys by examining children’s play experiences and teacher attitudes. They argued that boys often reinforce their masculinity through “masculine” associated toys such as superhero characters, battles, football, Lego and blocks, while girls reinforce traditional femininity through Barbie dolls, or toys related to domestic chores. By pretending to be superheroes, boys use a sense of power and domination to exclude girls from activities traditionally viewed as masculine. Both children and teachers, often unaware, reinforce gender
stereotypes and societal expectations, perpetuate gender segregation and treat children based on their biological sex identity. The findings showed that when toys are used as tools for learning, their selection results in boys and girls being taught and socialized to adopt conventional traditional gender roles. Society expects them to conform to the “appropriate” birth-assigned roles. By children solely engaging with gender-specific toys, it leads to the continuation of gender inequality in early childhood settings.

Oncu and Unluer (2012) investigated the views of preschoolers on gender-related games and toys at two different preschools with four, five, and six-year old children. For the first part of the study, participating preschoolers were introduced to two characters- a boy and a girl. They were each shown a gift package and asked to share what they thought was in each of the packages for the respective characters. For the second part of the study, children were shown drawings of two girls, two boys, a girl and a boy at home, and a class at the playground. The preschoolers were asked to name the games that children in the drawings could play together in the classroom, the playground, and at home. Results of the study showed that in preschool, children exhibit “definite preferences for gender role stereotyped toys and activities and tend to reject cross-sex stereotyped toys and activities” (Oncu & Unluer, 2012, p. 5926). Girls engaged in more pretend play, while boys engaged in more physical play. Games played at the playground were viewed as neutral by both boys and girls. Younger children tend to be more open to exploring cross-gender activities. However, as they get older, parental attitudes towards gender roles, social influences, peer modeling, and simply labeling a toy “for boys” or “for girls” is enough to influence their preference and willingness to play with a toy that may or can be sex-typed (Oncu & Unluer, 2012, p. 5927).
Freeman (2007) studied three and five-year old preschoolers in identifying “girl toys” and “boy toys” and predicting their parents’ reactions to their choices, before surveying their parents to describe their reaction to gender specific toys and behaviors. Children have presented a range of objects/toys. Although parents reported support for cross-gendered play, the messages children were getting about appropriate play indicated that they were mismatched and not aligned. Their children felt that their parents would only approve gender-typical play. The three-year-old girls were found to be more stereotypical than boys when it comes to identifying toys for girls and toys for boys. The tea-set, doll, tutu, gown, and straw hat were classified by the children as toys for girls, while skateboards, motorcycles, baseball/mitt, army coat, and a suit coat were classified by the children as boys’ objects. Both boys and girls felt that their “opposite-sex parent would be more supportive if cross-gender choices” (p. 359). By age five, children already had more stereotypical views as shaped by society and individuals in their lives. They held the same beliefs as their three-year-old counterparts, but five-year old boys seemed to have “more narrowly defined gender stereotypes” compared to the three-year old boys (p. 359). Keeping the above in mind, as well as knowing how children construct meaning based on the potentially stereotypical cultural expectations and the toys children are exposed to, there is a short period of available time to influence children’s gender specific perceptions and disrupt possible traditional gender stereotypes.

In two different studies, Bradhard et al. (1986) and Martic et al. (1995), conducted neutral toy experiments and found that when children were exposed to different types of toys, boy toys, girl toys, and neutral toys, they actively seek the toys classed as “in-group” above any others, even though the toys were gender neutral. Children used gender
schemas and gravitated to gender-normed toys, and were more likely to spend time playing them. To explain gender differences in children’s toy preferences, researchers posit going beyond their individual behaviors and interests, and taking into consideration biological, cognitive, and social factors (Dinella & Weisgram, 2018, p. 254). Keeping this in mind, parents too will then be more intentional with the toys they expose their children to, and consequently support their children in developing their skills, regardless of their children’s gender.

Cherney and Dempsey (2010) investigated the role of neutral and ambiguous toys in thirty-one three to five-year old’s play behavior, and their understanding of gendered toys, based on their attributes. Ambiguous toys were toys that have “perceptually salient characteristics and would more likely be categorized as stereotyped,” while neutral toys, were described as less salient” (p. 662). The children were exposed to five ambiguous sex-stereotyped toys (medical kit, airplane, microwave, pirate ship, doll) with mixed gendered characteristics, four neutral toys (bus, barn, preschool, cash register) without any gendered characteristics, one masculine (castle) and one feminine (house) stereotyped toy (p. 662). They stated, “Because play is understood to mirror cognitive development, it is important to assess children’s play with such toys” (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010, p. 664). The findings showed that the toys’ gender and the possibility of complex play, as well as the age and gender of the children, affect their behavior when engaging with each of the toys. Play complexity varied based on the understanding that children develop at different rates of cognitive functioning, while the visual appeal of their color was the most frequent reason why children associated them with a particular gender (p. 665). This determined whether they chose to play with them independently.
Previous research had shown that when children played with gender-typed toys, they stayed longer engaged than when playing with non-gendered typed toys. Consequently, developing skills across domains at different trajectories. Keeping that in mind, by conducting two studies, Weisgram et al. (2013) explored the characteristics of toys and how they differentially affect boys’ and girls’ interests, stereotypes, and judgments. The findings showed that children were interested in playing with the toys of their corresponding gender and color. Toys that were blue and light blue were viewed as boys’ toys, while a light pink, fuchsia color was for girls. If a toy would have been considered masculine, but was pink, girls made the connection, that it would then be okay to play with, and boys would not, because pink is for girls. The same was the case when children were asked to predict whether their peers of the same sex would play with the toy in question. This was also confirmed by a study done by LoBue and DeLoache (2011), which found that young girls strongly preferred pink objects, while boys tended to avoid anything that had any resemblance to pink.

For the second part of the study, Weisgram et al. (2013) investigated how children responded when presented with a set of toys that were novel. Since children were unfamiliar with them, they could not have had preconceived notions about who could and could not play with them. When the novel toys were initially introduced, they were explicitly labeled as “for boys” and “for girls” and decorated in masculine and feminine colors. Just like in the first study, attaching gender labels to them, and manipulating their gendered colors, affected children’s decision making on whether it is ok for them to play with them, as well as who else should. While girls were more easily swayed in playing with cross-gendered toys just by seeing their pink color, boys needed to be given more
cues and explicitly told. This is important to keep in mind when engaging with our students into play, the toys they are exposed to, and the language we use to guide and scaffold their play experiences.

Toys come in many different colors. There is strong evidence of social-cognitive influences on the development of gender-typed color preferences, and consequently children’s choice of toys based on their color. This affects gender color-coding and gender labels on performance. Yeung and Wong (2018) showed that gender color-coding had minimal effect on performance. However, attaching gender labels to toys could widen the gender gap in play performance and experiences. The colors of the materials and toys available for the students to engage in and explore within the classroom are important to consider when planning activities for children’s skill development across the domains. When making their toy selection, children tend to prefer gender specific items by making connections to what is socially acceptable—emphasizing the importance of exposure to gender neutral colors, that allow children to focus on the task, rather than selecting them based on their color.

Yeung and Wong (2018) discussed children’s color preferences and play performance. They argued that because different colors are frequently paired with girl-typed or boy-typed objects, and because adults tend to choose products ranging from toys to clothes in these gender-typical colors for children, girls and boys have been bombarded with pink and blue, respectively, since their early years. The study showed the prevalence of gender-typed preferences for pink versus blue, how gender-related information affects children’s responses to the social world, and suggested that the current gender color divide should be reconsidered. It provides direct and strong evidence of the social-
cognitive influences the development of gender-typed color preferences can create by merely attaching gender labels. The study also examined the effects of gender color-coding and gender labels on performance and found that gender color-coding had minimal effect on performance, but having any gender labels could widen the gender gap in play performance because different types of toys offer different learning experiences.

Blakemore (2005) examined the 50 toys as either boys’ or girls’ toys. Forty-one of them were rated as either boys’ or girls’ toys, while just nine of them as gender neutral. Girls’ toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skill, while boys’ toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting and somewhat dangerous. Neutral/moderate toys were educational and developed children’s physical, cognitive, and artistic skills, while gender-based toys appear to be less supportive of optimal development than neutral or moderately gender-typed toys. As per Aina and Cameron (2011),

Any materials that promote gender stereotyped play should either be removed so that the classroom conveys a gender-neutral invitation for all students to enjoy, or discussed with children to ensure that they understand these toys are for males and females. (p.16)

In today’s contemporary world, children’s development is best served by exposure to moderately stereo-typed toys (especially moderately masculine toys, but to some extent moderately feminine toys also) and gender-neutral toys, rather than to strongly gender-stereotyped toys. Children of both genders would benefit from play with toys that develop educational, scientific, physical, artistic, and musical skills. Both boys’ and girls’
development could be enhanced by learning domestic skills, as well as by learning to build with construction toys (Blakemore, 2005, p. 632).

Trawick-Smith et al. (2014) examined the effects of toys on the play quality of three and four-year-old preschool children. The toys were selected based on parent and teacher recommendations and characterized as developmentally appropriate. Sixty children from four different classrooms were video recorded playing with the toys on twelve separate twenty-minute periods during free play time. The findings showed that the quality of play varied among the children, based on their gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the length of time the toys were available in the classroom (Trawick-Smith et al., 2014, p. 249). The nine toys used in the study were bristle blocks, Duplo bricks, Lincoln blocks, Measuring Cups, Rainbow people, castle bucket set, shape, model and mold, tree blocks, and a wooden train set. The findings showed that toys make a difference in children’s play experiences and overall development. When exposed to novel toys, Weisgram (2016) found that children follow two different pathways. Children select new toys to play with based on the information children receive from their environment related to gender, their gender schemas and individual interests. Children who were gender schematic, meaning that their behaviors were aligned to those considered socially acceptable gender behaviors, engaged with only the new toys that would be considered aligned to their respective gender. While the children who were gender-schematic, chose toys that they were interested in, rather than would be socially acceptable as “boys” or “girls” toys. Highlighting the importance of being mindful in exposing children to toys that inspire play activities for both boys and girls, as well as
keeping in mind children’s diverse backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and socioeconomic status that may affect their toy selection criteria.

Toys that are more open-ended in their use, allow children to use their creativity and engage in meaningful play. Meaningful play is described as going beyond just children liking the toy when playing with it, but rather “thinking and problem solving, engaging in social interaction and language, and being creative and autonomous in their play (Weisgram, 2016, p. 254). Based on their ongoing observations, teachers can rotate the toys throughout the year to best meet their individual students’ needs, help them stay engaged, and interested in their learning as they develop across the domains and reach trajectory benchmarks. Weisgram and Dinnella (2018) posited that:

Children who play with different kinds of toys reap different cognitive, emotional, and social benefits. Toys teach children various skills, including lessons about how they should or should not behave. Gender-typed play, therefore, both reflects and codifies gender stereotypes and constrains children’s later social roles. (p.3) Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) asserted that when “children are split based on their sex and limited to different toys that have different cues of how they should behave; mostly being communal based for girls and agentic based for boys, … [it results in] setting a foundation for … gender stereotypical inequalities (p.41). Communicating these understandings with parents as well, can help build their capacity in reinforcing their children’s learning at home, by exposing them to high-quality toys when their children are at home, just like the teachers do at school (Weisgram & Dinnella, 2018, p. 256).

The different types of toys that children are exposed to can serve as the tools that children use to explore, learn, and develop their skills. The toys children are drawn to
when engaging in certain types of play, in turn, foster and reinforce certain types of behaviors. Children’s initial toy preferences are a result of the types of toys purchased by their parents. Keeping their diverse experiences and backgrounds in mind, teachers can then be intentional with the types of toys they have available in the classrooms. Since children progress at different rates of cognitive functioning, open-ended toys can be used by all children to develop their skills, promote learning and creativity. Preschool children make personal connections, and based on the gendered characteristics of the toys, as well as their color, determined whether they would be appropriate and appealing for themselves and to their peers. Children exhibit “definite preferences for gender role stereotyped toys and activities and tend to reject cross-sex stereotyped toys and activities” (Oncu & Unluer, 2012, p. 5926).

Embedding a variety of toys that might appeal to girls and boys throughout the day’s activities, teachers can help to further disentangle the social, cognitive, and biological determinants of sex differences, and support children’s overall development (Blakemore & Centers, 2005, p. 619). By being gender aware in creating gender flexible play spaces, we can provide all children, regardless of their gender, with equal opportunities to engage with toys that develop skills for their holistic development, and disrupt possible traditional gender stereotypes.

**Words**

When engaging with students, research has shown the importance of using inclusive language that challenges gender stereotypes and does not exclude anyone. This means being intentional with using gender neutral language and avoiding gender pronouns that are based on gender assumptions and stereotypes. Teachers are encouraged
to carefully examine and critically evaluate picture books for gender bias. Their words and content define standards for feminine and masculine behavior, and have the power to produce positive changes in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior, and exposure to diverse characters and behaviors that challenge stereotypical traditional role models (Aina & Cameron, 2011).

Language plays an important role in students' academic achievement, social emotional well-being, and consequently self-regulation. As per Vallotton and Ayoub (2011), language skills help children regulate their own behavior. Girls and boys have different trajectories when it comes to self-regulation. Symbols in their environment, such as spoken words, affect children's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Knowing how language develops over time through exposure and immersion, it is important to consider the emergence of gendered language in early childhood settings. Additionally, Prystawski et al. (2020) asserted that [gendered language] “emerges early in life and mirrors the public’s gender associations” (p. 1092), [societal standards], and children’s television programs” (p.1088). These gender associations are directly reflected in the word usage during early childhood development” (p.1092).

The study found that with English-speaking children, gendered words emerge around two years old, and their level of speech progression was directly correlated with that of their caregivers and adults in their lives. While male adults tend to be more involved in engaging in physical activities, mothers use more focused in exposing children to concrete vocabulary words, and use more supportive language when speaking. Particularly when interacting with girls. This may explain why girls tend to be able to self-regulate, and can articulate their thoughts, needs, and ideas verbally earlier than
boys. There is a direct association between the “input and output” of words and “gendered word usage during early child development” (Prystawski et al., 2020, p.1090).

Freilino et al. (2011) posited that language has the power to shape social stereotypes about gender (p. 269). An investigation of one hundred and eleven countries showed that countries with natural, rather than gendered languages, had greater overall gender equality for men than women. Natural gender languages are most inclusive and gender fair, while gendered languages are characterized by their nouns, which are always assigned a feminine or masculine (or sometimes neuter) gender (p.260). Language systems do "not only reflect the conventions of culture and particular patterns of thought. Language can actually shape our cognitive understanding of the world around us" (p. 270). This is particularly true with our students who are easily impressionable and their gender perceptions and understandings are shaped by their experiences and interactions. “Societal expectations of their culture, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral practices of men and women” (p. 269) are also important to consider. Until more countries "actively reform their languages to reflect a more genderless outlook” (p. 269), just like in Norway, we each need to do our part to ensure that when interacting and communicating with our students to be gender-neutral.

Gustafsson et al. (2015) examined the shift in attitudes and behavior of introducing a gender-neutral pronoun. The four-year study took place in Sweden, where the pronoun “hen” (adapted from the gender-neutral Finnish word hän) was introduced to “be used both generically, when gender is unknown or irrelevant and as a transgender pronoun for people who categorize themselves outside the gender dichotomy” (p. 1). It first appeared in Sweden in 2012, through a gender neutral main character in children’s
books. Advocates for the word shared that it allowed for the children to experience the setting, plot, and the events of the story without the gender limitations of the characters. Findings showed that attitudes towards gender fair language changed faster than behaviors and varied by “age, sexism, and political orientation” (p.8). Although the introduction of *hen* was faced strong resistance, over time, as people became more familiar with the word, the attitudes became more positive (p.9), and so did the willingness to use the *hen* in their day to day interactions.

Given the important role teachers play in shaping children’s gendered mindsets, Sczesny et al. (2015) examined how people decide to use a more gender-inclusive language beyond their sexist beliefs. They found that some participants “mindlessly used sexist language forms habitually, while others were more deliberate, and reasoning based on their sexist beliefs” (p. 951). The authors recommended implementing interventions that encourage gender-inclusive word usage through repetition until it becomes habitual and investing in building individuals' understanding of the implications of failing to use gender-inclusive language (Sczesny et al., 2015, p. 952). This is important to consider as we try to shift our mindset in using gender-neutral language in and out of the classroom. Garcia et al. (2021) talked about exposing children to stuffed animals who had their own names and interests, to introduce children in using gender neutral pronouns.

Words are also very important in terms of how novel toys are introduced to students. In the study by Weisgram et al. (2013), the findings showed that when novel toys were initially introduced, and were explicitly labeled as “for boys” and “for girls,” children attached gender labels to them. It, in turn affected their decision-making on whether it is ok for them to play with the available toys, as well as who else should. Girls
were more easily swayed in playing with a cross-gendered novel toy when hearing the
verbal cue of the toy being labeled as “for girls.” Boys needed to be given more cues and
explicitly told.

The words used within the classroom and when engaging in activities throughout
the day can perpetuate or challenge gender stereotypes within the classroom environment.
Being mindful not only of what teachers say, but also how they respond to what is said by
their students. When engaging with students, using gender inclusive language when
addressing children as individuals, or a group, challenges stereotypes and does not
exclude anyone (Jacobson, 2011). This means being gender neutral and avoiding gender
pronouns that are based on gender assumptions and stereotypes. Especially when talking
about professions and careers and exposing children to different role models. Countries
with natural (gender-neutral nouns, rather than gendered languages/words (meaning
having nouns characterized by feminine or masculine (or sometimes neuter) tended to
have greater overall gender equality for men than women. Gendered words emerge
around 2 years old and the level of speech progression is directly correlated with that of
their caregivers and adults in their lives. Consistent repletion and exposure are needed, to
best support and explain to individuals why it is important to shift from gendered to
gender-neutral language.

This review provides conclusive evidence about how families shape children’s
gender perceptions and schemas, skill development based on gender specific toys and
experiences, and how teacher perceptions influence the planning of play activities, use of
words, to create gender flexible pedagogical learning environments. However, there are
still open questions on 1. how the evolving societal expectations on gender behaviors
over the years have affected pre-k educators’ awareness of gender in their classrooms, 2. how traditional expectations of gender roles influence curriculum planning decisions in the early childhood settings, and 3. how do educators encourage, engage and interact with students, that may challenge traditional gender norms.

The research is significant for educators in how they design their schedules and activities as well as how they facilitate and support children’s participation, choice, and learning. This suggests that a reflective role might be encouraged. Teachers can be reflective and intentional in their practice when engaging with students who challenge traditional gender roles and display gender deviant behaviors (Browne, 2004). Teachers are encouraged to be reflective in their practice by considering the following: 1. The influences of available materials and their expectations; 2. Children’s desire and search for power; and 3. expressions and behaviors are illustrating children’s state of mind and development. Early childhood educators must develop an explicit gender consciousness before they can deliver a gender conscious pedagogy. Understanding that our identities, both those of adults and children, are evolving every day, based on our experiences, and enable us to adapt and function in different contexts within society (Browne, 2004). Teachers can make interventions in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach through gender flexible teaching because they can intervene at the very beginning of an individual’s educational trajectory. They can begin by explicitly focusing on the creation of gender consciousness and gender activism through a gender sensitive curriculum.

Research needs to further explore to what extent does the short attention span of preschoolers results in the limited type and number of activities educators can engage in
and develop gender-stereotypes. Conducting research in a range of settings to examine how different curricula and interactions are managed. Investing in creating, adapting, and evaluating gender sensitive and flexible curriculums to disrupt the slow but steady progress of gender entrenchment. Examining to what degree the training and professional development individuals are offered and receive, is effective in addressing topics of sexuality and gender within the classroom and childcare settings, and educators having an understanding about how children make meaning and internalize perpetuated societal gender norms. Considering the extent to which toys are part of children’s lives, more research needs to be done to study their impact on children’s behavior and their development of cognitive and social skills through their exposure to cross-gender-stereotyped toys in a wide range of colors inequitable early childhood environments.

To develop gender conscious pedagogues and equitable early childhood environments (Browne, 2004), educators can begin to assume a reflective role in their practice, when it comes to their perceptions of gender, and the extent in which they question gender issues that they might have otherwise accepted at face value. As Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) posit, this matters, because “perceptions of gender roles can... influence educational outcomes as well as have an impact on [children’s] emotional and social wellbeing; yet, often educational practice still does not reflect the need to follow a gender-neutral pedagogy” (p.39). To determine how much of an influence educators’ perceptions, have on children’s play we also need to look at the nuances of play—studying gender development along a continuum and how culture and socioeconomic status affect the processes and course of early gender development. Most
of the existing research on gender in early childhood is based on traditional stereotypical
gender norms.

This research study will help fill the gaps in the literature by focusing on understanding children from a gender expansive lens. Through the study’s findings, providing guidance for educator training, promoting advocacy, and implementing the findings in practice to ensure gender inclusive early childhood programs for the children we serve, and investing in equal opportunities for future leadership roles for all, creating environments that allow children to make choices as they wish, without being limited by gender specific items, colors, emotions, expectations, character traits, traditional, and stereotypical literature, and mindsets in their early childhood classroom settings. Chapter 3 presents the research design of this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In Chapter 1, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study to investigate gendered play, and how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender impact their pedagogical decisions on how they plan activities throughout the day, and how they interact with children to create spaces that are inclusive and supportive for gender exploration and expression. In Chapter 2, the researcher discussed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, reviewed and synthesized relevant literature as well as identified the gaps that the proposed research intends to fill. This chapter provides information about the research design, methods, and methodology for the proposed study. It includes the methods for data collection and the corresponding data analysis techniques. It features a description of the participants in the study, the research procedures, instruments, and limitations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate gendered play and how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender impact their pedagogical decisions when planning activities throughout the day, and interacting with their students, to create spaces that are inclusive and supportive of gender exploration and expression. To conduct this study, the researcher began by first submitting a research design outline based on the findings of gaps in the literature review and experience from the field on the topic. The study will follow a case study design. A case study design is a critical and fundamental data collection technique a qualitative researcher can use to enrich and inform the study and explore the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Methods and Procedures

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?
3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

Method

A case study methodology was used to investigate the research questions of the topic. Yin (2003) posited that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p.13). Yin also stated, “a case study is “a trans-paradigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.)” (p. 80). This intrinsic case study was undertaken because of the researcher’s intrinsic interest in the topic, and focus on presenting an unusual or unique situation. (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005). The researcher identified specific cases within the boundaries of space and time, and wanted to “provide an in-depth understanding of the cases” (Creswell, 2009, p.100). To provide an in-depth understanding of the cases, the researcher engaged in a set of procedures to best examine the research problem. (Stakes, 1995; Yin, 2014).

The data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and analysis of artifacts. The date and time of the interview and focus group arrangements were made via emails and phone calls. Once the consent form was reviewed and the participants signed it, the researcher proceeded with the interviews. Special arrangements were made based on the
participants’ schedules of availability. Recruiting and interviewing were done this way to accommodate the safety restrictions put in place due to COVID-19, and the daily changing circumstances based on the latest data and guidance from the experts.

Guided by the latest data and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), schools scrambled to prepare in transitioning to remote learning to keep everyone safe due to the widespread and unexpected effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and its disruption of all aspects of daily life. Over the course of the past year, its implications also affected researchers around the world and across the globe in unique and unprecedented ways. The researcher of this study had to quickly pivot and modify the data collection methods to conduct this research, as engaging with their participants in person out in the field was not an option. To continue moving forward with this study, the researcher used video communication (Zoom, WebEx, Facetime) to engage in in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

Setting

The study’s participants came from Greek Orthodox parochial schools across the five boroughs of New York City. The data was collected from three New York City Greek Orthodox parochial schools in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. The three schools were identified as School A, School B, and School C. Data collection sessions were scheduled outside school hours- after school, and/or on the weekends. Keeping everyone’s mental health and well-being in mind, conducting research during these challenging and unprecedented times under the COVID-19 virus was a cathartic experience for the informants. It presented an opportunity for participants to express their feelings, be heard, connect, and remain hopeful for better days ahead. As a thank you for
their time, participation, and contribution to the study, the researcher provided the participants with a summary of the findings to inform future professional development sessions and offered to facilitate training sessions as needed to help the teaching teams reach their individual professional goals, and grow in their practice.

Participants

With the granted approval of the Director of the Greek Education Department of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the researcher recruited participants from three Greek Orthodox Parochial Schools located in the boroughs of Queens and Manhattan of New York City. Parochial Greek schools are under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and overseen by the Director of Greek Education of the Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Each parochial school community is autonomous in its decision-making. School decisions were made by members of the clergy, the school board, and the community board. Participants were educators working in the Greek Orthodox Parochial schools. Additionally, they were prekindergarten educators outside the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) public school system, from non-3K and Pre-K for All affiliated preschool programs and included seven (7) teachers, six (6) assistants, and three (3) administrators.

Assistants, whose function in the classroom is to support both the teacher and children within their classrooms and the administrators, whose expertise is to ensure safe and supportive school environments, were included in the study to determine if their perceptions were aligned or contrasted those of the pre-k teachers, the focus of the study. More details about participants follow and Table 1 provides visual details about participants.
Pre-K for All and 3K for All was a 2014 initiative by Mayor Bill de Blasio, to offer access to free, full-day, high-quality, universal early childcare education to every four-year old, regardless of family income. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Pre-K for All and 3K for All contracted programs, must meet a set of quality standards and expectations while following one of the approved curriculums. They are inclusive of all students, regardless of religion, race, culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The informants of the study came from non-public, private, Greek Orthodox parochial schools, with a strong focus on the orthodox religion, Greek language, and culture. In Table 1-Participants, I am identifying the three schools that each of the participants came from as School A, School B, and School C.

The technique used to identify and select groups of participants who could best inform the research topic was a purposeful criterion sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful selection criteria for the included participants focused on key characteristics or dimensions (Patton, 2002) of individuals with similar community demographics and backgrounds- ethnicity, age group, education, cultural upbringing, years of teaching experience, and specific preschool teaching experience. The researcher started by using criterion sampling to recruit a small group of informants, and then through snowball sampling, the researcher then asked the initial informants for further contacts to be identified with the desired characteristics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Where Have Lived</th>
<th>Sex/Gender</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years in Pre-K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>NYC</td>
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<td>Master</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Asian/Korean American</td>
<td>Korea, NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Caucasian/Irish American</td>
<td>Ireland, NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Peru, NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 6</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Caucasian/Italian American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 7</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>Ghana, NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black/Ghanaian-West African Hispanic</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2yrs. of College</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 3</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Some College Bachelor</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Caucasian/Greek American</td>
<td>Greece, NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 6</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Hispanic/Puerto Rican White</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin. 1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruiting participants this way was helpful to best identify themes, as well as intragroup differences and patterns, and ultimately, to answer the research questions. It allowed for many perspectives to be heard through maximal variation sampling. To achieve what Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined as saturation, or the point in the research process when no new information is discovered during data analysis, the researcher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin. 2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Italian American White/Italian American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin. 3</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White/Greek American White/Greek American</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
<td>6/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 8</td>
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<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 9</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>White/Greek American White/Greek American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 10</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>African/Arab Middle Eastern White/Greek American</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 11</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 1</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 7</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Caucasian/Greek American</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 8</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White/Greek American</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant 9</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White Hispanic/Colombia Maltese America</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
considered the recommendation of Creswell and Poth (2017) and included 23 participants in the data collection process:

- Three administrators, seven teachers, and six assistant participants for the one-to-one interviews,
- three teacher assistants for one of the focus groups, and
- four teachers for the second focus group

Each group of participants have specific responsibilities that their roles entailed. Administrators were responsible for ensuring safe and supportive school environments, creating school culture and a sense of community among all stakeholders where all stakeholders have opportunities to be heard, ensuring high-quality instruction for all students, performing teacher evaluations, planning for ongoing professional development of the teaching teams, the implementation of policy, and compliance to state and federal regulations. On behalf of the Archdiocese and the Greek Government, they have to disseminate high-level guidance. It included guidance around compliance specifications and curriculum expectations. Teachers are responsible for supporting their students’ social-emotional and academic needs and their holistic development as outlined in the New York State Standards in a warm and nurturing classroom environment. By engaging in the data cycle, collecting data, setting individual goals, planning for differentiated instruction, and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies used to help their students reach their full potential. They collaborate and communicate with the children’s families to inform them of the learning happening in school and how it can be reinforced at home. The assistants are responsible for supporting both the teacher and children within their
classrooms, throughout the day’s activities, under the direction and guidance of the teacher.

**Data Collection Procedures**

To conduct this qualitative study, the researcher began by first submitting a research design outline based on the findings of gaps in the literature review and experience from the field on the topic. To explore the topic, a case study design was used to collect the data. Once permission was granted by the Director of Greek Orthodox Parochial schools, the researcher emailed the administrators of the three participating schools. Each of the administrators sent an email to their Pre-k teams on behalf of the researcher, and those interested in participating in the study were encouraged to contact the researcher directly. The date and time of the interview and focus group arrangements were made via emails and phone calls. Before the interviews took place, the consent form was reviewed by each of the participants. Once the participants signed it, the researcher proceeded with the interviews. Special arrangements were made based on the participants’ schedules of availability, as well as considerations on how to dress and how to speak when engaging in the sessions. These considerations were intended to allow participants to feel comfortable and easy to share their experiences in a safe and non-threatening virtual space and at a time when they can focus and give their full attention. Most Interviews were conducted after school, while some during the day on a student non-attendance day. Recruiting and interviewing were done this way to accommodate the safety restrictions put in place due to COVID-19 by the health experts and the daily circumstances of each of the participants.
The interviews lasted for an hour. In preparation for the sessions, the researcher used the notes section of the iPhone, as well as digital recording on the iPad and laptop using the Voice Memo and Otter apps. The Voice Memo App allowed the researcher to record and share audio, while the Otter app is designed to understand and capture long-form conversations that take place between multiple people. The latter allowed the researcher to record, transcribe, and share voice conversations through automatic transcription. Audio-recording the interviews allowed for all the words, phrases, and environment to be documented and captured accurately. This was done to ensure that everything verbalized by the participants was captured. At the same time, their behaviors during our conversations and interactions were also noted using field notes. To maintain the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were used throughout. The data from the interviews, focus group, observations, and field observations were transcribed and stored in password-protected devices in Dropbox and available for the participants to review at any time. Although available upon request at any time, none of the participants requested to review them.

**Interviews**

The primary methods of data collection for this study was primarily from in-depth interviews with teachers, assistants, and administrators, focus group interviews with teachers and assistants, and a review of teachers’ records (anecdotes, work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in the classroom), to triangulate the sources of data.

The participants were pre-kindergarten educators working in the Greek parochial schools during pre-arranged times. To accurately capture the viewpoint of the individuals
being studied and the meaning attached to their words, phrases, and actions, semi-structured open-ended questions were asked. As Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) posit, “the semi structured style of interviews allowed for focus questions which are able to flow freely between each other, [allowed for] the ability to delve into relate areas of discussion relevant to the topic” (p.41), allowed informants to elaborate and answer without being confusing or directional (Fraenkel et al., 2012) and [lastly] allowed the researcher to “explore individual experiences and perceptions in rich detail” (Curry, 2015, p.1445). Using in-depth interviews, the researcher found out what was on the participants’ minds, what they thought, and how they felt. Interviews were conducted “face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person, telephone-researcher interviews by phone, focus group interviews with six to eight interviewees in each group” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 191). The one-to-one interviews included three administrators, seven teachers, and six assistant participants.

By using the interviewing technique and following the interview protocol, the researcher began to understand “how people have organized the world, and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. [The researcher] had to ask people questions about those things” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 406). Once the information was collected, the data was then compared, contrasted, and analyzed for emerging themes in understanding how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender impact their pedagogical decisions, how they plan activities throughout the day, and how they interact with children to create spaces that are supportive for gender exploration and expression. Table 2 presents the data collection methods.
Table 2

Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews with Teachers, Assistants, and Administrators</th>
<th>Focus Groups with Teachers and Assistants</th>
<th>Review of Teachers’ Records and Artifacts</th>
<th>Audio Recordings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent 1-hour in-person technology-based interviews with teachers and assistants from two different schools</td>
<td>2-hour long semi-structured conversation with lead teachers and teachers’ assistants</td>
<td>Review of anecdotes, work samples, and photos of students engaging in activities in the classroom</td>
<td>Two types of audio-recordings using Otter and Voice Thread, to capture with accuracy what is shared by the participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview protocol was useful, as it “allowed the researcher control over the line of questioning” and provided information that may not necessarily be directly observed. The researcher developed open-ended interview questions to address how early childhood pre-kindergarten educators’ perceptions of gender affected their interactions with their students and how they planned for play experiences in the classroom. The sub-questions in the research study were phrased in a way that interviewees could understand, and were intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants when it comes to an understanding of their perceptions of gendered play (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured interview protocol included major questions, sub-questions, and follow-up to obtain detailed, in-depth answers (Seidman, 2006). The questions were finalized after several rounds of review and drafts to ensure that they elicited the data that we needed to answer our research questions. The interviews were conducted remotely, and the researcher was intentional in giving the participant enough “think” time to understand, process, reflect, and come up with their responses. Table 5: Interview Protocol Questions
Focus Groups

One teacher-participant focus group of four and one assistant teacher-participant focus group of three was conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the conversation and additional follow-up ones as needed for elaboration based on the information shared. This format helped guide the conversation yet allowed for flexibility to further explore unanticipated issues (Creswell, 2009). As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), “focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees likely yield the best information… and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (p.164). The focus group protocol provided a broader range of information, opinions, perspectives, and insights on minimally understood topics such as gendered play (Berg, 2007). The participants’ backgrounds and experiences impacted the dynamics of the group and helped provide information on the subject that was not anticipated by the researcher. The focus groups “generated unique insights into shared experiences and social norms” (Curry, 2015). The researcher had protocols in place to allow for all the voices to be heard and to keep the discussion focused and moving, and all voices to be heard. The focus group interviews lasted for an hour.

Teacher Records

Teaching teams were encouraged to share records and personal documentation of anecdotes, lesson plans, student work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in the classroom related to gendered play. This collection of data pertaining to the students’ experiences helped the researcher understand how what is
shared theoretically in the interviews and focus groups by the educational teams looks like in practice. The data collected from the records and personal documentation of anecdotes, lesson plans, student work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in the classroom related to gendered play and those obtained from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed holistically to gain a richer understanding of the research problem and related questions.

**Trustworthiness of the Design**

Social scientists use qualitative research to study people, events, and phenomena where these naturally occur or live (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). “This method of inquiry has often been challenged by positivists and quantitative researchers on the grounds of lacking validity, reliability, and objectivity” (Del Vecchio, 2005, p.79). To determine the quality and value of the study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) encouraged establishing trustworthiness by evaluating a set of criteria known as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the “truth” of the findings. Transferability is the degree to which the research study findings can be applied to other contexts, while dependability looks at how consistent the findings are and if they could be repeated. Through confirmability, the researcher showed the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not through research bias, motivation, and or interest.

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested the use of corroborating evidence through triangulation as a strategy to ensure the qualitative research study measures that which it is intended to measure and the truthfulness of its results (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Triangulation is one of the steps the researcher can take to increase the study’s
credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995). Triangulation determines the reliability of a qualitative research study by collecting evidence and data from multiple sources and utilizing multiple methods to analyze the data and identify common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the primary sources of data collection were primarily from:

1. in depth interviews with teachers and assistants
2. focus group interviews with teachers, assistants, and administrators
3. a review of teachers’ records (anecdotes, work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in the classroom).

The interview and focus group sessions were audio-recorded to enhance the validity of the study by utilizing the qualitative methods described above in gathering the evidence and data, and accurately capturing participant responses. Audio-recording allows the researcher to capture and gain a better understanding of the phenomenon from different perspectives and provides dependability through the flexibility to engage in constant review of each dimension for accuracy. The collected data was analyzed to identify common themes and consequently substantiate the study’s claims (Creswell, 2009). Teachers’ records, such as anecdotes, work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in the classroom were closely examined to see that there was an alignment between what participants had shared was happening in their classroom and what was actually happening as evidenced through their records. Evidence of students engaging in play and activities throughout the day, as well as their respective behaviors and interactions.
The credibility of this study’s claims was achieved by conducting an audit trail, interrater reliability, positioning of the researcher, engaging in member checks throughout the study, and making constant comparisons of the data collected using different sources—interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Having conversations with colleagues and keeping regular reflective memos enabled the researcher to name the biases that she may have in relation to race, gender, and culture. Throughout the study, the researcher engaged in peer review as a strategy to establish credibility. The data, methods, and findings were discussed with experienced master preschool teachers, instructional coordinators, educational stakeholders (teachers, assistants, administrators), as well as with the dissertation chair/mentor and committee members, and doctoral cohort members. This process was aimed to evaluate the researcher’s interpretations of the data in objective and critical ways and to provide another level of triangulation. At the same time, the researcher cross-referenced and checked in with the participants throughout. When reporting the data, the researcher did not add her own characterizations and comments and instead described the participants’ views in detail to give them the opportunity to experience and interpret them for themselves. The work was approached from an interpretive framework that was rooted in a realist ontology in which knowledge of the world is generated and constructed through social interactions between human beings.

Confirmability of the study was achieved through thick description. Thick description provides as much information as possible in terms of the context of the research and the researcher’s unique perspective. The researcher attempted to record the data with accuracy and in alignment with the research questions. By having available
audit trails or residue of records of the data collected, memos, procedures, descriptions of participants and settings, personal perceptions, and the strategies used to identify themes, the researcher can provide as much information as possible to allow for tracing back to the original sources, ensuring confirmability, and informed decisions to be made. This allowed individuals to come to their own unique understandings of the phenomenon by being able to check and recheck what has been presented.

**Research Ethics**

When conducting this research study, throughout each stage of the process, the researcher clearly defined her role and protected the participants of the study. She always engaged with integrity, objectivity, honesty, transparency, and fidelity in the work, and stayed focused on the research questions. By being aware of the key principles of ethics, the researcher ensured the researcher-participant relationships were not compromised while always striving towards protecting, understating, and respecting the participants and their values. Once the proposal was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher sent recruitment emails to potential informants based on the directions of the Director of Greek Orthodox parochial schools. After informed consent was granted by the participants, the topic was explored by collecting data through one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and artifact analysis. Within the letters of consent, the researcher outlined the steps to be taken to ensure their voluntary participation and the protection of their rights to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity when analyzing the data and sharing the findings. All data was stored in a password protected laptop, iPad, iPhone, and Dropbox and was available for review at any time, throughout the research process, upon the informants’ request.
Data Analysis Approach

The researcher read and reviewed the transcribed data and artifacts several times to begin to identify significant words, phrases, or sentences that pertain to the experiences of the participants. The transcriptions were reviewed and analyzed manually. The researcher formulated meanings, codes, and clusters from the commonly identified participant-specific trends. “Focusing on a few key issues (or analysis of themes), not for generalizing beyond the case, but for understanding the complexity of the case” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 352). Always be mindful not to force, “fish,” or ignore data to match the original assumptions or by “pulling apart and putting back together again meaningful analysis and synthesis” (Stake, 1995). Throughout, self-checking and reflecting on the field notes, the methodological notes, and connecting them back to the theoretical frameworks. The researcher engaged in journaling and memo writing while analyzing the data. Journaling helped the researcher to begin to code through several rounds and look for possible themes and trends to emerge. Each unit of data was assigned its own unique code. In qualitative data analysis, “a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or “translates” data” (Vogt et al., 2014, p. 13). The coded collected data were the records of social life that the researcher began to make meaning from.

The researcher began to make meaning of the data by being organized, flexible, persistent, and creative (Saldana, 2016). The researcher thought critically used an extensive vocabulary to code, process, deduct, synthesize, evaluate, and engage in analytical memo writing to help with the ambiguity of the process. Memos allow for “theorizing and write-up of ideas about codes, and their relationships as they strike
the analyst while coding” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). Since coding is cyclical, keeping a record of the emerging codes in a codebook, helped stay organized, as the data got coded in cycles, and the number of codes accumulated quite quickly. As Saldana (2016) asserted, “coding is a heuristic (from the Greek, meaning “to discover”) – an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas or algorithms to follow” (p.40). Within the data, the researcher sought patterns and trends to help understand people’s “‘five Rs’: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships” (Saldana, 2016, p.35).

The research found that the data and codes that shaped each other were interdependent and inseparable when trying to understand the given phenomenon. Throughout the cycles, the researcher broke them apart, and continuously asked further questions. The patterns and trends that emerged, helped make the data more meaningful. Data with shared characteristics, were similarly coded, and synthesized to form corresponding categories. The researcher meticulously coded and recoded, while engaging in reflection to identify emerging patterns and meanings. As the researcher went through each coding cycle, codes were “subsumed by other codes, relabeled, or dropped altogether” or “rearranged into different and new categories, which may contain clusters of coded data that merit further refinement into subcategories” (Saldana, 2016, p.12). By streamlining the progression from data, codes, sub-codes, categories, subcategories, themes, concepts, and finally assertions and theory in the given qualitative study, the major categories were synthesized to help understand the “particular reality” of the participants and the given phenomena (Saldana, 2016).

Since this qualitative study was conducted by a solo researcher, to validate the findings, in a rigorously ethical manner, the investigator, consulted with the participants
themselves throughout, by engaging in a “member checking” protocol. During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher checked for understanding to confirm that what the researcher understood was in fact, what the informants intended to convey. Member check-ins were also done during the coding of the data and as themes came up. The researcher engaged in informal virtual conversations with volunteer participants from each of the respective schools to share findings and check for accuracy of descriptions or interpretations of phenomena” (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985, p. 388).

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher is a Greek-American female who lives in NYC. She has been employed by the NYCDOE as Pre-K and K teacher, and now as an early childhood instructional coach. During this academic school year, she has been temporarily redeployed as a Pre-K teacher of the blended part of remote learning, and as an in-person classroom teacher. She has strong feelings related to the topic based on her background, upbringing, culture, experiences – both personal and professional, and social justice beliefs. The researcher’s interest and focus on this topic stem from wanting to better understand how to support teachers and administrators of diverse needs, perspectives, and mindsets. Together, finding ways to work collaboratively in creating spaces that encourage, allow, and support each child to be who they want to be, regardless of their gender, to reach their full potential and prepare them for future leadership roles. Even if that means challenging the ongoing perpetuated cycle of stereotypical and patriarchal mindsets. “Many of the socialization processes that lead to gender differentiated outcomes, including gender segregation, are not well understood. In addition, more work is needed to identify effective means to prevent and minimize gender biased attitudes and
behavior” (Bigler et al., 2013, p.3). The researcher wondered how do educators ensure that all children have equal opportunities to the possibilities life offers by exposing them to a range of experiences. Aina and Cameron (2011) asserted that by equipping young children with positive messages of empowerment regardless of gender, in addition to the critical thinking skills to identify stereotypes, teachers and families could impart in children self-concept resiliency, even when faced with negative stereotypes. (p.18)

When conducting this qualitative research, the researcher was the “human instrument,” and consequently, there was potential for researcher and participant bias that could affect the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2009). To explore the topic objectively, the researcher maintained an open mind throughout the duration of the study, while engaging in a continuous process of reflexivity and regular self-reflection. Keeping analytical memos and reflective journals, and engaging in conversations with fellow colleagues, can limit any potential researcher bias. The researcher was mindful and present when listening to what was shared, without running the risk of making assumptions based on her experiences related to what was investigated. Acknowledging each, and thinking about how they have contributed to who she is today. The researcher wanted to ensure that when conducting this study, she maintained a separation of researcher as a practitioner and researcher as the instrument when answering her own research questions. Not just summarizing the research of others, to try to put ideas into context, and uncovering what cannot be observed about the subjects’ feelings, thoughts, and intentions. Doing so by using the proposed qualitative methods within manageable time and space, and in a way, that is safe and affirming for the participants.
The researcher wondered about how much of herself she should reveal to her informants. While the researcher asked others to be vulnerable, she remained invulnerable during the interview process, in an effort of risking not maintaining neutrality. The researcher rehearsed the questioning techniques with family, friends, and colleagues in advance, which helped in preparing for a clear delivery, and in maintaining an impassive expression that hid her true feelings when the participants provided their responses. The following questions guided the researcher to navigate through her role as the researcher:

(1) Have I connected the voices and stories of individuals back to the set of historical, structural, and economic relations in which they are situated?

(2) Have I utilized multiple methods to analyze and construct meaning from my data?

(3) Have I reviewed my interpretations with the participants for accuracy of information collected?

(4) Have I considered how this data can be used by policy-makers?

(5) Who will these findings impact, and who is rendered responsible or exposed by these analyses? Am I doing harm to participants?

(6) What are my intentions about the information presented?

(7) To what extent has my analysis offered an alternative to the dominant discourse? What challenges might very different audiences pose to the analyses presented and how can I strengthen my presentation by anticipating its possible critiques? (Fine et al., 2000)
The researcher wanted the voices of those who have been traditionally silenced to be heard explicitly and free of bias. All perspectives are validated and taken into consideration by policymakers and all those in a position to bring change.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter 3, the researcher justified her decision to utilize a qualitative design and employ a case study as a vehicle to explore the lived experiences of teachers and how their gender perceptions affect their decision making when planning and engaging with their students throughout the day’s play activities. The researcher articulated the decision-making process as it pertains to selecting a sample size, how she ethically recruited participants, how she gained access, described the setting, and why she chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis as the data collection methods. The researcher concluded by discussing the selected data analysis procedures, outlining the strategies used to enhance trustworthiness, as well as the study’s anticipated limitations.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate gendered play in early childhood settings by examining how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender exploration and expression. This study utilized:

- two focus groups of teacher-participants and teacher-assistants participants,
- seven individual interviews of teacher participants,
- six individual interviews with teacher-assistants participants,
- three individual interviews of administrator-participants, as well as
- a content analysis of student work samples, photos, and of students engaging in different activities in preschool related to play.

This chapter provides an analysis of the collected data according to themes that emerged within the context of the research questions.

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?
3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

There were three overarching themes that emerged from the analysis of the collected data in the study. The first major theme to emerge was teachers’ personal and professional identity; that is the attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills one acquires through their experiences. The second overarching theme that emerged was agents of children’s gender development. The third overarching theme that emerged was creating preschool classroom environments that promote equity (Table 3). This chapter
concludes with a discussion of the findings, as they connect to the research questions of the study.

Table 3

*Overarching Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme 1</th>
<th>Sub-theme 2</th>
<th>Sub-theme 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Personal and Professional Identity</td>
<td>Life Experiences</td>
<td>Human Diversity in the Classroom</td>
<td>Leadership and Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agents of Children’s Gender Development</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Family, Teacher, and Peer Influences</td>
<td>Social Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Gender Inclusivity in Preschool Classrooms</td>
<td>Gender Flexible Pedagogical Practices</td>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

**Theme 1: Personal and Professional Identity**

An overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of the data was the personal and professional identity of the participants. Each of the participants, that is teachers, assistants, and administrators, shared their experiences of where and how they grew up, as well as where they worked, and with whom, that impacted the shaping of their perceptions of gender. Within the theme of personal and professional identity, three sub-themes emerged from the collected data. The first sub-theme that emerged was life experiences. The second sub-theme that emerged was human diversity in the classroom. The third sub-theme that emerged was leadership and policy. Together, these subthemes
encompassed pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender and the impact it has had in creating spaces that support gender exploration and expression.

**Life Experiences**

**Personal Identity**

The first sub-theme to emerge regarding teachers’ personal and professional identity was life experiences. Teachers, assistants, and administrators, across both focus groups and individual interviews, were asked to share their personal and professional experiences growing up when it comes to gender roles. Participants’ personal life experiences were shaped by family dynamics and parents’ roles in the household, when and where participants grew up, and their intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs. As Admin.2 stated:

> People have different points of view based on their experiences. I feel it’s okay to agree to disagree and that’s okay, and respecting one another. Especially for older people it’s harder to be liberal and open-minded. We try to be open-minded, but cannot be as open-minded as young people would like us to be because we always have in the back of our minds how we were raised.

Teachers, assistants, and administrators were molded within the unspoken rules of their respective cultures and religions. As their experiences became more diverse, so did their mindsets regarding gender. Admin.2 felt that, “When I was young, you were either a boy or a girl, now it has become more complicated and as educators, we need to become sensitive to the cause.” Assistant 4 added:

> I grew up in a traditional family unit, but my dad happened to be a good cook. If mom was out, he would cook for us and was also a caregiver as well in many ways.
Although both worked, mom could work from home, so in general, she was the primary caregiver, along with my grandparents.

A few participants share that as they got older, they began to question whether what they believe is truly them, or what had been ingrained in them and socialized to believe over the years. All within the boundaries of their respective cultures and religions. Assistant 8 stated: “Sometimes I wonder about to what extent what I believe is me or what I’ve been hearing all my life growing up.” For some participants, these personal life experiences resonated with them, and were the path they also would have liked to follow when they had their own children, families, and homes. Others insisted on living differently than how they grew up. Many adopt a “live your life” attitude and do what feels right for you. Teacher 2 shared:

Everybody has the right to their opinion and what they want to be in life. You can’t control it. The technology and medicine we have now, help people to become what they feel and want to be internally, and it helps that our society has become more accepting of it. We also see it in the media, Hollywood, and the gender-neutral bathrooms. Hey, live your life.

Assistant 8 agreed and added, “based on our gender, we were assigned a particular role. Where I grew up, women were responsible for the caretaking and housekeeping, while men went out in the world to provide for the family financially.” Assistant 3 went on to say:

I come from a Hispanic family. Women are women. You're supposed to be cooking and cleaning, and the men working. But I guess as I got older, I'm like, “it doesn't work that way.” Both my husband and I work. We should both be cooking and
cleaning. I'm not taking on everything. You know, caring for the children and all. I wanted to do things differently than how things were done growing up.

Family dynamics played a big role in teachers’ personal life experiences. Some admit to getting pushback from their respective spouses and other family members who may have different viewpoints. Teacher 11 shared, “My husband got upset with my son when he saw him playing with my niece’s baby stroller and kitchen set. He was okay, though with my daughter being strong and playing football with the boys.” Teacher 7 added:

Growing up, I had two younger brothers. Our parents let us do what we liked and what we wanted to do. I wasn't into Barbie dolls or girly things like that. I was more into coloring and the arts. Whereas my cousin, who was the same age as me, loved dressing up and playing house. My mom would expose all of us to dance, gymnastics, sports, and lots of different activities to help us find what we are interested in. My brothers danced too, but she would make sure they were doing more masculine dances when we went to the performing arts school for ballet. Having my own daughter now, I try not to push anything onto her. I tell my husband, who is more traditional and wants her to be a girly girl, to try not to do that. We try to let her take on whatever role she wants and is interested in. Whether that is ballet, music, soccer, etc.

Most of the teacher, assistant, and administrator participants grew up in two parent, patriarchal male and female traditional households, with parents having very distinct gendered roles. Admin. 1 shared growing up with a liberal mom and an old-school grandma:
Grandma used to say that girls did the dishes and boys the gardening. Mom did not agree. We all were expected to help with what needed to be done. Ironically, now at my parents’ home, roles changed. Mom does the cooking and dad the gardening. When I questioned it, mom attributed the chore assignments to simply who is better at doing something, rather than about gender assigned roles. ‘It was our happy medium based on what we are each good at’ mom said. My children do question this as well, and find it interesting. Especially when we visit their grandparents and they are asked to complete gender specific tasks; in my house, everyone helps with whatever needs to be done.

In most participants’ homes, the fathers were the breadwinners, earning a living, and moving up the career ladder. The mothers stayed home and multitasked with home-cleaning, cooking, shopping, doing the laundry, paying the bills, and caring for the children. Assistant 1 described her traditional upbringing:

The woman was at home usually cooking and serving everyone. That’s what was expected of her. Cleaning and keeping everything in order, since she is a housewife, and home all day, while the man is going out to work and providing. I grew up with similar expectations, although an only child. As a girl, I couldn’t be messy. I needed to know how to cook and clean, and always look “put together.” Growing up, I was told that I needed to learn how to be a good spouse and mom. To be ready when I have my own home to run. At the same time, of course expected to be an A+ student.

Assistant 1 added:
In my family, growing up, I saw women and men have a slight difference in their roles. Both in the house and in their jobs. I grew up with both my father and my mother. In our home, however, there weren't any, you know, specifically assigned duties to each one of them. My father helped my mother a lot—especially with chores around the house. Cleaning, shopping and making breakfast for us every morning. I now expect the same from my significant other.

Teacher 6 shared:

In the rare occasions that the mothers worked outside the home, it was in traditionally female professions, as nurses, secretaries, and teachers. Their income was considered supplemental. At the same time, although they worked, it was still expected that they must keep up with the household chores, without any assistance from their husbands. Anything that was domestic, was viewed as women’s work.

Interestingly, Assistant 7 stated that her experience growing up was a bit “untraditional:”

Both of my parents worked and shared household responsibilities. Mom was a housewife, housecleaner, and babysitter, while dad was a restaurant bus boy. At home, he was happy to do the cooking—although would be considered more female oriented. I always found it interesting how in the restaurant industry, chefs are male dominant, yet it’s the women who are expected to do the cooking at home.

Assistant 4 agreed:

I grew up in a household where my parental female and male figures, my mother and father, were quite equal. The only thing that I could think of that would make us different was the presence of both the matriarchal strength and the patriarchal strength. Traditionally in our Greek culture, the norm usually was that the father
was the breadwinner and provided for the family financially, while mommy stays at home and takes care of everything and everyone. I used to be jealous of my friends’ mothers having Tupperware parties. So, then, in my 20s, I told my mom I want to have a Tupperware party, because I never had that as a child since my mom worked. It was amazing and I still have the Tupperware from it.

Assistant 6 added:

Growing up mommy is mommy and she’s a she, and daddy is daddy and he’s a he. They always encouraged us to join sports, and everyone can do the same jobs. Everyone can do what they like. Everyone is equal, that's how I grew up. I was telling my children, the other day… because we usually talk about this. I told them when I was younger during the holidays, we would make a certain meal, it was a of like tamales; but I'm Puerto Rican, so it's Puerto Rican tamales. We would sit at the table with my grandparents and all of us had a job to do. It wasn’t grandma only doing this because it was considered cooking. We each had to help. We had to cut the vegetables and then had to shred the vegetables. We had to make up the pies, tie them up, put them in the pot, fill the pot with water, and wait for them to cook. We all had a job to do by functioning as a team.

Teachers, assistants, and administrators who grew up in single-parent homes due to divorce, separation, illness, or death in the family had different personal experiences. Their homes were characterized as being matriarchal and often challenged traditional gender perceptions early on. Teacher 1 shared: “My parents’ divorce changed my gender role perspectives and perceptions of gender. It was empowering for me to see my mom,
complete tasks one would traditionally expect males to do, with initiative, independence and confidence. I became more open-minded.” Teacher 9 added

Men and women have taken on different gender roles depending on circumstances. For example, moms are taking on different types of roles in single parent homes. Or if one of the parents passes away. I, myself, having been a single parent due to my partner’s death, I see things a little differently. I had to be a father and a mother to my children. I have four boys. All this affects children’s experiences. I think it is okay for a mom to work outside the house. Even though I personally wanted to be with my children at home. I couldn’t afford to stay home because of the dynamics of my family when I had my own children. Although I love my job, looking back, I wish I had made different choices to have stayed home with my children.

Even if the grandparents supported the family through multi-generational living, or when a step-father joined the family, it was the mothers that ran the household. Assistant 5 stated: “My mom had the final say in the decision-making. She would listen to the suggestions, but at the end, she was the ‘boss’”.

The life experiences of the teachers, assistants, and administrators, as well as where they each grew up, influenced the shaping of their personal identity. Most participants were born and raised across the five boroughs of New York City. Some moved to New York at a young age, in their teens, or as adults, from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Middle East. It is of note that participants who, although they may have come from the same country, shared very different experiences. They attributed this to having lived abroad in a city on the mainland, or in a small village on an island of
their respective country. There was a range of intercultural and intracultural similarities and differences that contributed to the shaping of their personal identity. Assistant 7 shared her experience:

I grew up in Greece. In my experience, females had a very strong role in my cultural upbringing. Women had very strong characters and they were doing a better job than the men in many ways. But, we always had to acknowledge men on their accomplishments and contributions. Men may bring the money, but the women control how it is spent. You had to respect and listen to the men, no matter what. You could not say ‘no’ to your dad, and later your husband. I’ll give you an example. The way I grew up, if we were walking and saw older men walking down the street in front of us, we had to wait for them to get to where they needed to go first. No matter how slow they were going, we couldn’t go in front of them. My grandmother made us go a different way or wait behind them. We came from Asia Manor and I grew up with my grandma and grandpa in Germany before moving to Greece and then to the United States. They passed on many of their beliefs to me.

Those who grew up in the cities were raised in a society that was more progressive when it came to gender roles and expectations. Although Assistant 7, was also from Greece, growing up in a big city, her experience was different.

Males and females had equal roles and respected each other. On the islands and villages, there were much different expectations. When I was growing up, and visiting family in the summer, we would celebrate many name days. I remember the women would sit in the room next to the kitchen and the man in the good living
room. The men were to eat the better food, and the women drunk the watered-down alcohol because they couldn’t hold the ‘strong’ stuff as they called it. Coming from the city, I was very outspoken and rebellious. I would sit with the men because I thought they had more interesting topics. I didn’t want to talk about cooking. Thinking back, I now understand how some cultures are with women. And recalling my experiences, I understand and defend their behaviors because when you are in it, you have no other choice but to act like it’s ‘normed’ or expected. Otherwise, you will be treated as if there is something wrong with you.

Participants who grew up in cities, both in the United States and abroad, felt that the densely populated nature of the cities and their diverse individuals, was much easier for one to be able to navigate life a bit more anonymously and freely. Assistant 2 stated: “Growing up in a big city, I didn’t have the constant pressure of worrying about being judged or what people may think or say.” While in the villages, the nature of its small community resulted in having to be mindful of everything one says and does. Teacher 10 added: “We always had to be mindful of where they go, to what we do, and with whom we go. Especially since we were females and gossiping about us was the villagers’ pastime.” Assistant 7 added:

Growing up in such settings, one knew they were always under the watchful eye of their cohabitants. Always ready and eager to quickly judge if one’s manner was deemed as socially inappropriate, and saw it as their duty to rectify what they’ve observed by reporting their concerns to the family members of the respective individual.
Participants had to abide by the stereotypical gender expectations for fear that failing to do so would ‘ruin’ their family name and reputation, their marriage prospects, as well as be accused of being a result of bad parenting and poor upbringing. Consequently, the participants’ personal life experiences were controlled by the intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs.

Similarly, to the small village type of mindsets on gender, were the experiences described by the participants whose families immigrated to New York from abroad. Regardless of whether they came from a city or a village, they all strived to maintain their cultural and religious family values and beliefs. Many times, much more closely than when they were back to their motherland. Assistant 2 stated:

I realized when visiting back years later, that individuals in their motherland were much more progressive in their cultural and religious family values and beliefs and not abiding to them as strictly and conservatively as the participants and their families who were doing everything they could to hold on to everything they could from back home.

Interestingly, participants who grew up in New York City, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, appreciated its diversity and did not find it unusual or question gender diversity.

Intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs were evident in the participants’ personal experiences across all cultural backgrounds and religions. Their prominence varied based on the participants’ family dynamics, where, and how they grew up. Teacher 8 shared:
I guess I'm a little old school too. I grew up to believe that if I see a boy, his gender is male, and when I see a girl, her gender is female. It's a little hard to get out of that mind frame because that's what you see. When you go out and you see a man is apparently a man dressed as a girl, of course you're going to look twice or three times. And in my husband's case, he looks four or five times. Okay! That’s how we grew up.

Admin.1 stated “I appreciate when people clarify their preferred pronoun. I grew up with diverse individuals and was taught to look at people as a person and their kindness. Not through their sexuality. I think exposure, awareness and acceptance are key”.

Participants who grew up in the two parent, patriarchal male and female traditional households, as previously discussed, experienced women being responsible for all household tasks, while men were not expected to help, as they would come home from work and needed to rest. Teacher 3 shared: “As the daughter of the family, I was expected to help my mother. That’s how I was being trained to learn how to run my own household one day.” Assistant 8 added:

My family was strict and traditional. My sister and I were supposed to help mom with cooking, cleaning, setting the table, and washing dishes, and my brothers could do whatever they want.” If the girls were busy with school and not available during the week, Saturdays were reserved for cleaning and doing the laundry with their mothers.

Teacher 6 shared:

As “good” daughters were not only expected to be obedient, helpful, and respectful, but also to be excelling academically. We were given dolls to play with and taken
to dance classes and exposed to the arts, but not encouraged to play or watch any sports. We were always expected to look well put together, but not too made up with make-up, or with clothing that was revealing and immodest.

Participants with brothers found that their brothers were not expected or asked to help with any of the household chores. They were raised to believe it is the work of the women. Assistant 7 shared:

The males in my family were encouraged to stay out, play all types of sports, and follow closely in their father’s footsteps. They were ‘groomed’ to be the leaders of tomorrow. Studying to get positions in the business world, and becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers and entrepreneurs. Without a second thought or having to adjust their career goals and plans because of family life and responsibilities. Men were to be put on the pedestal, and their accomplishments in the spotlight. Women on the other hand, no matter how accomplished they were, remained in the background behind the scenes.

Husbands had the final say in the decision-making. Wives were to be nurturing, accommodating, and submissive. Admin. 2 shared

Males were viewed as the strongest sex and the fathers, the powerful parent.
Growing up as children, we were often told “wait until your father gets home”.
And when he did get home, there was no room for discussion or even an opportunity to give your opinion or perspective for that matter. Especially regarding controversial topics.
Growing up as children, the older participants were raised to function in an “it is what it is attitude.” Being respectful of their elders without questioning what the grown-ups are saying. Gender was a topic that was off the table when it came to its discussion.

Participants who grew up in single parent homes due to divorce, separation, illness, or death in the family viewed their mother as being progressive and ahead of their times when it comes to the intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs. Teacher 1 stated:

Based on how my mother faced circumstances, I viewed her with a sense of admiration and an added level of respect, for making the decision to divorce. Fully aware of the difficulty of her decision and the possible stigma society may place on the family due to being divorced, and the children coming from a broken home. All in exchange to provide a social-emotionally healthy, safe, conflict-free, and stable home environment.

Teacher 11 added:

When my parents divorced, my grandparents, aunts and uncles, although they had our well-being and best interest in mind, at times, seeing my mom’s independent attitude and approach to life proved to be challenging for them to accept. Women were not supposed to be independent and strong like that.

Regardless of the type of household participants grew up in, or how gendered and stereotypical it might have been, most teacher, assistant, and administrator participants felt that their parents strongly believed in installing in them to believe in themselves, working hard, and trying their best. Always guided by the parameters of their cultural, religious, and family values. Teacher 6 shared: “My parents were always supportive and
taught me from a young age to work hard in making my dreams come true.” Admin. 2 stated:

I say that growing up, in 1952, my parents had strong gender roles, my mother was a stay at home wife and mom, and my dad went to work, but they were both parents that encouraged me all through growing up, that I can do anything that I want to do. To be a leader and to believe that I was capable, in whatever field I chose to. They always encouraged me.

Participants with strong religious beliefs struggled with society’s current liberal mindsets. While others felt that girls need to be praised more than boys to raise their self-esteem. Teacher 9 shared:

Why does it matter if we are male or female? We were raised to believe we are all born as males and females and we are all children of God. Although I support the feminist movement, I still like the traditional nature of the male and female roles in society. In my daily exchanges with children, I like to praise boys and girls in their respective future traditional roles. I do not limit them though if they want to explore in areas that are traditionally considered stereotyped.

Openly acknowledging that there may be some who do not agree, Teacher 6 shared:

I respect the opinions of others, as they too have a right to theirs, as do I. Even if it’s contradictory to the majority. Honestly, I get annoyed that people ask questions about sex, race, and ethnicity. They ask for my opinion, but they get offended if it’s not what they want to hear. Considering how far we’ve come as a society over the years, we still have ways to go. Why do I have to justify freedom of speech and
what I believe. Everyone has their own reality and rights to their opinion. We don’t all have to agree, but we still should respect each other.

Among the participants, there were some outliers to the above findings. Their experiences varied due to their birth order, having siblings, and their outgoing personalities. First-born participants recalled having to always abide by the expectations much more strictly than the rest of their siblings. First-born participants were told growing up that they served as role models to their younger siblings. Teacher 7 shared:

As far back as I can remember, I was often treated as an adult, and held at much higher standards when it comes to my behavior compared to my siblings. Assuming responsibilities early on, to help my parents as much as I could and becoming wise beyond my years.

Some of the female participants, who had mostly brothers, or male cousins in their lives growing up, experienced the best of both worlds. Engaging with not only the culturally accepted gender-specific activities assigned to girls, but also playing with cars, participating in sports, and learning to be handy by shadowing their fathers. Assistant 7 stated:

My mom always bought me Barbie dolls and Barbie clothes, I also played basketball, with marbles and with trucks because of my brothers and boy cousins. But I realized, that although it was okay for me to play with the “boy” toys, it was not ok for them to play with the “girl” toys.

Assistant 1 stated:

I used to always follow around my father. And although he was happy to teach me practical life skills, at times, I could sense that at the back of his head he feared that
he might have negatively influenced my prospects. Girls were not supposed to know about construction or do home repairs. My gut feeling was confirmed, when it was time for me to apply to college. I wanted to be a construction engineer and he talked me into applying for pre-med. Years later, we had a conversation about it and he apologized for it. Regretting steering me in one way or the other because of what people might say of a woman going in the construction sector. Even if she was an engineer.

Some teacher, assistant, and administrator participants, who were parents of older children, had some more progressive understandings about gender compared to the cultural, religious, and family beliefs they were brought up with. Some attributed their attitudes to having attended counseling with family members who were LGBTQ and being present to listen to the younger generation. Assistant 8 shared: “My nephew had accepted his sexual orientation or identity and had shared it openly with family and friends.” Admin.1 stated: “My children have shared with me about the latest research regarding gender and have raised my awareness. I came to realize that there is so much more to consider beyond what we’ve been told and learned growing up.” Admin. 3 added: “As we grow up, our mentality and perceptions change based on experiences and education (ex. the language we use when it comes to gender… new pronouns, or new group/category/label), and so should our planning and teaching.” Assistant 8 agreed:

Who we are affects our decision-making and our actions. As educators, it’s not about us. It’s about the children. We must challenge ourselves and try to put our personal beliefs aside, for the children’s best interest. We can then differentiate and
plan accordingly, based on the students that we have in our class. Each year is
different.

**Professional Identity**

Regarding participants’ professional identity as it relates to their life experiences,
informants shared that it was shaped by where they worked and with whom. Most had
worked only in the field of education and with no other previous careers. One was an
assistant to a physical therapist, and another was a pre-med student before deciding to
switch to a psychology major. All others had always been in the field of education.
Having worked solely in parochial Greek schools, they’ve become familiar with the
nature of the Greek community, culture, and traditions. Even though they themselves
might not have necessarily been of Greek descent, they had found many similarities
among each of the cultures.

Several participants pointed out how working in schools, they’ve noticed that it is
a traditionally female-dominant field, and consequently has its gendered implications.
Teacher 7 stated:

> Other than the custodians in the building, our profession is female dominated.

We’ve talked about how we are expected to be doing so much… cleaning, caring,
and maintaining. If there were more males, I don’t think they would have been
expected to do as much.

Assistant 5 added:

> Professionally, I see more women as teachers, but in education and other
professions, it’s the men who have the leadership roles. Men tend to study
professions that require more time and more dedication, and choose to pursue
careers that are required more, you know, more effort and commitment. Whereas women, not that women are not clever or not capable of things, but I think they choose to not take on lead positions, because I think they're afraid of combining career and family. Men don't think about that. I feel that women always think about how their decisions may affect their family’s well-being. These are just my thoughts of course.

Participants’ work was guided by the directives provided by their respective program directors and school administrators, and in the case of co-teachers and teachers’ assistants by the beliefs and attitudes of the lead teachers in the classroom. Assistant 9 shared:

The lead teacher’s beliefs affect what goes on in the classroom, and what is allowed in the classroom. I believe in letting the children express themselves. One of the lead teachers I was working with a few years ago, had a problem with a boy wearing a pink shirt. She would intentionally give him something messy to have for breakfast, so he can get dirty and would then need to take the pink shirt off.

Teacher 5 stated:

We had a student one year that she herself believed she was a boy but born as a girl. She played with the boys and came in dressed just like a boy. She had two older sisters. Her parents shopped in the boys’ section for her to make her happy. And that was fine. I guess to each its own. It wasn’t a big deal with the children or the rest of the parents in the class. I know however my coworker would hide the tutus because there was a boy who wanted to dress like a ballerina because she believed
the mom would not allow this, but never went into the trouble to even have the conversation with her.

Assistant 3 added:

I was working with a teacher who would seem disgusted from her attitude whenever she saw a boy in the dramatic play area wear a dress. Her immediate reaction was to scream at him and tell him to take it off. It hurt me to witness that. I went to the senior teacher, who was then the grade leader and asked her if we can have a conversation about it on the next team meeting. She spoke about how we speak to children and shared with all of us the standards that drive our work. Pointing out that it has nothing to with our own personal or religious beliefs, but rather what’s right for the children. It was difficult for me to bring it to the grade leader’s attention, but I couldn’t keep ignoring it. We need to stand up for what’s right and what’s wrong.

Over the years, through their professional experiences, most participants felt confident in their abilities to create classroom environments that are inclusive, promote acceptance, and encourage students to be independent. Participants regularly connected and collaborated with their colleagues to problem solve and share best practices. By working with a diverse team of educators, it allowed participants to be exposed to varied perspectives, experiences, and points of view. Participants agreed that these collaborations allowed the teaching teams to build their capacity when working with students of diverse backgrounds, and advocating for them by being sensitive to their unique needs, including but not limited to them being gender related. Admin 2 shared:
I come from a diverse background and so do the children in our classrooms. Keeping that in mind, I always try to incorporate diversity in all that we do. Sharing resources across classrooms and incorporating diverse perspectives when ordering materials. Doing so, to ensure they are reflective of the students, teaching teams, and school community.

Particularly with gender, Admin. 3 pointed out the difference between younger and veteran teachers in being politically correct and sensitive to students who may be going through discovering their gender identity. Admin. 3 stated:

I think it’s easier for a younger teacher to be politically correct based on the current norms in society. They are more self-conscious and intentional with how they speak and interact with their students. As society changes, I think it’s also important to have on the teaching team diverse individuals. People who themselves have come out, so they can relate to the students who may have identity issues. We need individuals who are representative of that community. They're better equipped to understand and support our students. With the rest, we have to think about the types of professional learning sessions that we plan.

Admin. 2 added:

Educators are encouraged to let children be themselves and express themselves as they wish, by having access to everything in the classroom. I appreciate this from my own experience but I also foresee potential challenges. For example, I remember my little cousin wanted to experiment with make-up, just like my aunt. I put it on him, he liked it, and was happy. My aunt was upset about it. It’s so taboo, but we should let children experiment and explore. Both at home and in school.
As experienced as teachers may have been, they still questioned themselves and felt uncomfortable having conversations around the topic of gender. They found it to be complicated and very delicate to discuss both professionally and with their students’ parents. Teacher 4 shared:

I would be a little hesitant and nervous to have these conversations. I wouldn't know the family's beliefs. If something came up, I would listen, take the question into consideration, and before I have an explanation I think I would speak with the parents to make sure it's okay that I answered this question for their child because every parent thinks differently.

This was a concern of all participants- regardless of their age or years of experience. For some participants, although they had strong convictions regarding gender based on their personal and professional experiences and their knowledge of child development, they expressed them very differently when engaging with the children in their classroom, versus with their own children at home. Teacher 11 stated:

As a parent, with my two girls, I don’t like for their hair to look messy and knotty. And I won't cut it all the way off to be short because I don't want them to feel that they look like boys. And I don't want my son to have long hair. It’s a challenge to get him brush his teeth. Forget about dealing with long hair. In my classroom, it’s up to the children’s families and their preferences.

Teacher 8 stated what many teacher and assistant participants felt:

Honestly, I feel like the administration is always going to tell you the minimum of what to say. They're not going to give you clear direction. Nobody wants to talk about what they truly think or believe. No one wants anything to come back to them.
Assistant 6 added: “We want to have conversations that inform others and raise awareness, but it is hard to do without the guidance and support of our administrators.”

Administrators did not believe it was their responsibility to have conversations with families related to gender unless a concern came up. Even if they wanted to, they did not believe they were equipped to do so. The participants who were administrators, felt that their responsibility based on the parents’ expectation was to ensure students’ safety and academic success. Admin. 2 shared:

Gender conversations in parochial Greek schools can get dicey. Parents feel that we, as educators, or job is to prepare the students for college as early as possible. They are looking at us to focus on the academics, and they’ll take care of the social emotional and life stuff at home. It’s a lot to balance as a leader. How to best support your teachers but also keep the parents happy?

If something came up, administrators would consult and work with the appropriate adults- the school guidance counselor and the students’ family. Admin 3 shared:

It is not our responsibility to have these conversations. We are not equipped to have these conversations. We don’t have the training nor the licensing to do so. They are private family matters. What we are responsible for is creating a nurturing, accepting and safe space for all students. An environment in which they can all learn and be successful. If a concern does arise, we address it, but always first check in with the parents.

Administrators felt that these conversations were contrary to the religious dogmas of the Greek parochial schools, and at times their hands were tied when it came to their
discussion. Comparing it to being as controversial as the theory of evolution. Admin 2 added:

It’s hard. Even though we see the shift in our society, we have ways to go in our school and church community. It is not something that we believe or accept in our faith beyond the idea that we are all born as either male or female. That’s why, if something comes up, we discuss it privately after class. It acknowledges the concern and respects children’s privacy. Children understand that. Especially since they each have their own challenges and concerns that they are going through.

Given the context of the setting, one would expect that religious dogma played a big role in the day to day activities and interactions, but surprisingly, the findings showed it was not the case based on the participants' responses. Except for one teacher, who referenced religion as a big factor that affects her actions, as well as one of the administrators, the rest of the teachers, assistants, and administrators, did not make any comments related to the religious dogmas and their potential implications.

**Human Diversity in the Classroom**

The second sub-theme to emerge regarding teachers’ personal and professional identity, from the collected data, was how human diversity in the classroom impacted teachers’ perceptions of gender. Participants shared that over the years, the human diversity in their classrooms, prompted them to continue growing and evolving their personal and professional identities. Based on their students’ backgrounds, experiences, individual needs, interests, and evolving demographics, pre-k teachers engaged in an ongoing process of expanding their knowledge-base, broadening their experiences, and
adjusting their practices to address the needs of the human diversity in their classrooms.

Teacher 6 shared:

When they first started working in Greek schools, the population of students, was very homogeneous, but over the years, that has changed. Some of the reasons for this shift are due to mixed marriages, b. parochial schools offering comparable academics as public schools, and c. the nature of their close-knit community, more and more parents have been opting into registering their children to Greek Orthodox Parochial schools.

Just like the children, teaching teams in the classrooms and the leadership of the school have also become increasingly diversified. Out of the three administrators interviewed, only one was Greek. The other two were Italian. Admin. 3 shared:

When I interviewed for the position, I was a bit apprehensive. I was not Greek, but was interviewing for a principal’s position in a Greek parochial school. I was told by the hiring committee not to worry, as they were looking for someone qualified not necessarily Greek. Being Greek was a plus, but not a pre-requisite. I felt it was a clear message by the school community and parish that they were adjusting to the times, and sending the message that all are welcomed, valued, accepted and supported. Regardless of their backgrounds.

The three parochial schools where the teachers in the study taught, have been working towards providing equitable instruction in a judgement-free atmosphere. Progressing in raising teachers’, students’, and families’ awareness, and celebrating diversity through their teaching strategies and daily interactions throughout the day, to create inclusive classroom environments. Admin. 3 shared, “We’ve been doing a lot of
work around ceasing the teachable moments, answering children’s questions, and
addressing students’ wonderings in a reflective manner.” Teacher 5 shared: “We have
been focusing on incorporating within our instruction aspects of children’s experiences,
language, culture, race, and artifacts, as well as being inclusive of genders and different
abilities, and sharing more about ourselves.” Teaching teams planned for a range of
family engagement activities to begin building partnerships and including them in their
children’s learning. Admin. 2 stated, “Through meaningful activities and authentic
interactions with students and their families, teachers use a developmentally appropriate
curriculum to promote respect and celebrate all human diversity in the classroom and the
overall school community.” These experiences created opportunities to have discussions
so that all voices are given opportunities to be heard and diverse perspectives to be
shared.

Leadership and Policy

The third sub-theme to emerge regarding teachers’ personal and professional
identity, from the collected data, was the leadership and policy in place, in the teachers’
respective schools. Participants shared that the leadership structures in their schools, as
well as the guidance and policy provided, governed their day-to-day work and decision-
making. The communicated guidelines and the implemented protocols, established the
cultural norms and expectations within their school communities. They each played a role
in shaping the development of the teachers’ personal and professional identities, their
perceptions of gender, and consequently their students’ experiences in the classroom.

The participating schools varied in their leadership structure. School A, which had
six classrooms from nursery to fifth grade, was led by just the principal. Admin. 1 stated:
“I oversee the effective running of the program and supported teachers’ development through individualized coaching and school-wide professional learning sessions.” School B, which had a nursery, an elementary (pre-k to fifth), middle school (grades six to eight), and high school (grades nine to twelve), was led by the principal and two assistant principals. One of them oversaw the lower grades, the other the upper grades, and the pre-k director the nursery and pre-k classes. Admin. 3 stated:

The early childhood director supports the nursery and pre-kindergarten classes. My assistant principals and I oversee the overall running of the school and conduct the observations. The director serves as a liaison between the administrators and the pre-k teaching team. She supports them with planning, coaching, modeling lessons, facilitating professional learning sessions and activities, doing prep and lunch coverage, connecting with families, and assisting with the day to day operations of the pre-k program.

School C, went from pre-k through middle school with the principal being the central source of leadership, while the pre-k program of the school was overseen by the preschool education director. Admin. 2 stated:

I have over forty years of experience in the field of education. I started out as a nursery and preschool teacher, and then as an owner and director of my own early childhood center, before becoming the director here. I love what I do.

As Teacher 8 stated: “It all comes from the leadership and then trickles down to the teachers and students. At the end of the day, they are our administrators, and we do what we are told.”
Most participant teachers and assistants expressed a level of trust and respect regarding the guidance received from their respective leaders, and felt supported in implementing the suggested next steps Teacher 7 shared:

Our director is invaluable with her support. She is the number one resource for the pre-k teaching team. She supports us in aligning our work to the New York City and New York State mandates, and with whenever any other questions or concerns would arise. Including, but not limited to conversations regarding gender.

Many teacher and assistant participants shared that their leaders had supported them in bridging the theoretical aspect of their schooling into practice. They emphasized the importance of having protocols in place, transparent systems of communication, and the teaching team functioning as a unit. Teacher 2 shared: “We feel comfortable to ask for help. Particularly around understanding gender inclusivity, developmentally appropriate practice, and equity. There are so many changes, that we don’t say the wrong thing or offend anyone.” Admin. 1 added: “We assume a strength-based approach, and just like teachers are asked to differentiate for their students, we, as leaders differentiate our support to our teams.” Admin. 2 added:

You must meet each of them where they are and help them reach their full potential. Coming up with professional goals and actionable next steps. Molding them in how to best connect and be empathetic to their students and their families, while helping them all reach their full potential. Always encouraging them to try their best.

Admin.2 shared:

Yes, although at first glance it may seem like an inclusive practice that involves all stakeholders, many times it puts unnecessary pressure on our work. It becomes
much more challenging than it needs to be, as not all members have a background in education, don’t understand the academic aspect of our work, and make decisions that are not sound. Having little consideration for our input as educators. The committee at times made decisions that were not valid nor sound when it came to their alignment as best teaching practices, but justifying them on the grounds of failing to prepare the students if they don’t.

Teacher, assistant, and administrator participants collaborated to plan and goal set for the students’ future success by aligning their work as much as possible, to the latest DOE guidelines and policy.

Admin. 1 added:

Since parochial schools are private and independent of the New York City Public Schools, they are not mandated to follow the Chancellor’s Regulations. However, since there is only one Greek Parochial school in New York City that offers a middle school and high school, parochial Greek Schools, choose to follow as many of the public-school regulations as possible, to allow for the eventual smooth transition of their students into the public-school system.

Theme 2: Agents of Children’s Gender Development

A second overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of collected data was agents of children’s gender development. Each of the participants shared their views on how they felt children developed gender identity. From the collected data, within the theme of agents of children’s gender development, three sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme that emerged was biology. The second sub-theme that emerged was family, teacher, and peer influences. The third sub-theme that emerged was social expectations.
Together, these subthemes encompassed pre-k teachers’ perceptions of children’s agents of gender and the considerations they must keep in mind, when curriculum planning, interacting with students, and creating spaces that support gender exploration and expression.

**Biology**

The first sub-theme to emerge regarding agents of children’s gender development, from the collected data was the role biology plays in children’s gender development. Participants across both focus groups and individual interviews, were asked to share what they felt influenced children’s gender development. Most participants shared that when children first come to pre-k, at the ages of three and four years old, they are unaware of who they are. Assistant 6 shared:

I think it depends on the age. In my mind, when they are very little I would think they identify as either a boy or a girl. As they get older, maybe in the teenage years, that could change. They might identify as a female when they are born as a male. I feel like they can't identify yet with what they have. Meaning females have vaginas and males have penises. I feel that later, things may change. I'm not sure. I guess that may be my bias with the younger ones.

Teacher 9 added:

If a child is born biologically as a boy, then he is a boy, and if as a girl, then she is a girl. As children get older how they feel inside may change. If you are born with certain body parts, then that’s how you should be. That’s how I feel personally. But as a teacher, I leave it up to the child to decide. Generally, I feel it can be confusing if you're not told what identity you are. Especially at that age. How can you just
expect a child to know? It’s like telling them go ahead and pick. It’ll be so confusing. They behave in the gender they were assigned to at birth based on their biological sex.

Admin. 1 stated: “Initially biological, but now our days, people in society identify differently.” Admin. 2 added:

We were taught and raised to look at people biologically as male or female. We grew up as adults believing that. With all the shifts happening now in education and society, we associate people as male, female or other, while some may feel they are neither. Today, we don’t see gender any more strictly in terms of male or female biology.

Some participants felt that children at that age are too young to be able to identify one way or the other-meaning, if they are boys or if they are girls. Assistant 2 shared:

I have a niece who is now eighteen years old. She's known for a long time that she is gay. And when she came up to us, we kind of knew that. When she was a little girl she would wear dresses, and would pretend to be like her mom. When she got older, she told everybody, I'm not a girl. I'm a boy. We accepted it because it's a part of life, and by then she was older to know a bit more about herself. But I just don't feel that when they're little, they know yet, since they're still developing. They are still trying to figure out their place in the world as human beings.

Assistant 2 stated: “They begin to learn about all that is out there through their hands-on experiences and by using their five senses to hear, see, smell, taste, and touch everything that surrounds them.” There were a few outlier participants whose views differed from the rest regarding biology. They attributed their progressive views to one or more of the
following reasons: academic coursework, having family members who had come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual over the years, or whose own children had raised their awareness of biological considerations that affect individuals’ gender identity. Assistant 4 stated, “Gender is different from sex, and that comes to mind because I remember that from a college course that I took. Gender is not just male or female; it's any fluidity in between.”

Assistant 8 added:

Because of how I grew up, at the core of it, to me, gender is biology. However, after having conversations and seeing the way society has changed, I feel it must also be expression. Sometimes, more than biology. You may also have people that feel like they're not this or that. That they are something else. Different than what society biologically tells them they should be. In the beginning, there was always just male and female. There was no worrying about gender fluidity. We had a boys’ line and a girls’ line. Same with the bathrooms. Always separate. Then my cousin who is gay, helped raise my awareness. The more exposed we became and hear different perspectives, our mindset starts to shift.

One of the participants shared that it was during the family counseling sessions that she became aware of the biological considerations, beyond the genitals, that may influence one’s gender. Assistant 9 shared about having attended family counseling to best support her cousin going through her transition.

It allowed me to make space and hear all about her experiences. Realizing how she and other like her must have felt. Often as outliers, isolated, and lonely. How much more difficult their day to day journey had been without any support from their family in this cruel world. Younger children are much more accepting and
understanding, but as they get older, they can be cruel and bullies to children who may behave in gender non-conforming ways. We need to shift away from viewing gender just from a biological perspective.

Participants with older children felt that their children were much more educated and informed on the topic of gender, than they ever were growing up and now as adults. Admin. 1 stated:

My children are so much more aware of gender issues. I think a lot of it has to do with having friends who had recently “come out”. It incentivized them to learn more about gender and its biological implications so they can best support their friends.

Participants’ children had shared with them what they learned about how hormones and chromosomes influence one’s gender, beyond their biological sex. Admin. 1 added: “I believe that it is important to take the time to ask how one identifies and how they would like to be addressed.” The participants appreciated that their children felt comfortable having these conversations with them. That was not the case when they were growing up. Assistant 9 stated:

I used to think we’re all born a certain way. When I was talking with my son, that went to NYU, he said to me, “mom, some kids are confused” and I said,” How can you be confused?” One of my son’s friends went through a very difficult time. Having a support system around him when he went through the different phases made all the difference. May son said to me “To understand, you need to be next to the person. No matter what they go through. They are affected by their environment and how others react to them. Sometimes it's curiosity, and other times, biologically
by hormones. Let's say you were born as male or female, but the hormones inside, say something different. How do you make sense of that?

Teacher 10 added:

By having these conversations, we can raise people’s awareness and advocate in our own unique ways. Especially with individuals who are older, were raised in a very close-minded and old-school manner, and having an “it is what it is” mentality. Failing to hear others’ perspectives can make others feel excluded and targeted because of their ignorance.

Family, Teacher, and Peer Influences

The second sub-theme to emerge regarding agents of children’s gender development from the collected data was the influences of family, teacher, and peers. Participants across both focus groups and individual interviews agreed that the individuals in children’s lives—family, teachers, and peers affect children’s development. Participants believed that since the time children were born and before they came to their pre-k classrooms, they have been engaging with their families. The children’s family members and primary caretakers were their first teachers. Teacher 8 stated: “In the classroom, I do what I can, but I can’t change what happens at home. The children’s family shapes who the children are through their interactions, experiences, and what they model daily by their behaviors.” Teacher 1 added: “Parents’ perceptions, beliefs, and opinions get embedded in children through what they say, do, and model to their children.” Teacher 1 added:
I had a student in the beginning of the year, who asked me if I thought boys were better than girls. It made me wonder why he would that question, and I couldn’t help but think that it was based on what he might have heard at home.

Participants believed that children’s behaviors mirrored what they’ve witnessed happening in their families. From their mannerism, the way they do things, speak and treat each other and express their feelings, to their initial understandings about gender. Their behaviors are reflective of the behavioral expectations about gender they’ve experienced and have been taught directly or indirectly by those around them. Teacher 2 stated:

Children are so impressionable. What they experience as children from their parents affects who they are as adults. From my own experience, I remember growing up and thinking ‘Oh I can't do that. My parents will yell at me.’ That stays with you as an adult. In the back of your mind, you grow up thinking that someone is going to yell, instead of trusting yourself, your body and who you are. Can you imagine dealing with all that, on top of someone exploring their gender identity?

Teacher 5 added:

Children internalize what they’ve experienced at home in terms of their family dynamics and interactions. In their home units, they’ve witnessed and their parents’ attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, their exchanges, and micro-aggressions. At a young age, these shape children’s perspectives.

What children internalize through their experiences with their families becomes evident when they play and engage throughout the day’s activities in the classroom. It is through
play (particularly in the dramatic play area), that children explore and use their imagination to be whoever they aspire to be. Assistant 9 shared:

We had recently observed two of our children playing pilots. But first they started out as husband, wife and baby. The mom was getting the milk and the bag ready and the dad was getting the baby dress. And then he tells her ‘Honey, we have to hurry. We need get to the airport to scan the tickets. “Come on, honey. Hurry. We need to be on time. We're going be late. We don't want to be late.”’ It was interesting to witness this. Usually it's the mom nagging the husband, that they must go. It was just so refreshing to see that it was the opposite and they had no qualms about it whatsoever.

Participants believed that the students’ family perspectives continued to shape and affect the children’s understandings and outlooks long after children had entered school. Keeping that in mind, teachers and assistants had to always consider children’s diverse backgrounds and experiences, and by assuming a strengths-based approach, being supportive, pushing their thinking, and scaffolding them out of their comfort zone. Assistant 2 stated:

The family members’ attitudes directly affect the children’s struggle or comfort level, as they are caught between what they’ve been taught by their family members, and what they are exposed to in school. Before they can begin to consider other’s diverse perspectives with open-mindedness, they must first overcome the gender stereotypes that they’ve learned from their families in their short little lives. When working with the children in their classrooms, participants who were parents, could not help but think about their own children. They often wondered about how their
behaviors as parents, impacted their own children, because of their family life. Teacher 11 shared:

From my personal experience as a parent, when my daughters were born, they just took on the role of being girly girls. They liked tutus, dolls, and dresses. They liked make-up and fashion as they call it, and would say “We are like mommy” as they engaged in pretend play. My son, who identifies as a boy, liked all kinds of cars, like Hot Wheels, and since he was little, he would pretend to be a mechanic fixing them like his father. One day, the girls pretended to be at the nail salon and I was painting their nails. I offered to do his as well. He responded, “No, I’m a boy. Boys don’t do that.” He just knew. I guess from what he had observed happening around him.

Assistant 3 added:

As a mother of four, two boys and two girls, I always encourage them to try new things. Regardless if they are boys or girls. As long as they are learning, they are happy, and trying their best, it’s good with me. That’s the message we try to send in our home and hope they remember for the rest of their lives.

Teacher, assistant, and administrator participants, all agreed that parents’ attitudes regarding gender exploration directly affected the children’s experiences. Admin. 1 stated: “We’ve had parents who believed in allowing their children to dress in their own way. In whatever hairstyle, clothes etc., as they tried to figure out what they are or the identity they felt most comfortable in.” Teacher 3 added:

A few years ago, there was a biological girl who said is a boy, and grandma was on board. The bathroom was not an issue. She wanted to just be a he, not a her.
We had lots of conversations with the grandma and social worker on how to best support the child, be as comfortable, and have as normal and positive experience as normal possible.

Assistant 6 shared about a boy’s parents and their transition to supporting their child’s reality: “We had a boy that considered himself a girl. The parents were supportive and got him braided hair extensions. At first they tried compromising of just buying him a pink shirt instead of a pink dress he was asking for.”

The gender perspectives that children brought from home and their parents’ support, varied based on the location of each of the schools and the community demographics. Admin.2 shared:

I believe children are influenced by nature and nurture. Mostly by their families. I’ve worked with parents in private schools throughout my career in Brooklyn. Over the years, I’ve dealt with all kinds of parents. For the most part, they were financially comfortable, with important jobs and positions. They were well-read and aware members of a progressive, forward thinking community. Most were comfortable with allowing their children to explore gender and didn’t find an issue, while others, were a bit more conservative and traditional.

Most teachers and assistants felt that since they may not be aware of the parents’ gender perspectives, they would feel challenged as to how to proceed if a situation arose.

Assistant 5 shared:

I encourage children to do different things. Especially if they grew up in typical, traditional, gender-assigned home, and here I come, telling them that it’s okay to
do something and try new things. My fear is that they will go and say “Ms. So and So said…” I often fear that this will put me in a difficult situation with the parents.

Teacher 8 added:

I feel annoyed sometimes because I know that what the children are saying is trickling down from the parents. Those are not their thoughts and it’s not their fault. I wish more parents were open-minded. At the same time, I need to respect their feelings and what they want their children. I can’t change that. What I can change is what happens in my classroom.

Very few of the participants had met parents who challenged traditional social expectations regarding gender or had adopted gender creative parenting. Admin.2 shared:

We had a boy last year who wore princess dresses, costumes, and girls’ clothes as well as boys’. We had a full class, and no one had any issues with it. The girls loved it. They loved how he looked and they would talk about their outfits. The boys would just treat him normally. There wasn’t ever a conversation telling him he is a boy and he shouldn’t be dressed like a girl. We did however emphasize from day one that we are all free to choose and wear what we like to wear and it’s okay. The boys’ parents and the other parents were also very accepting because a lot of them were friends. And the boy's mother was a costume designer on Broadway. The child was immersed in that life with the costumes. Everybody has costumes on when performing and it didn't matter if it was male or female. Everyone was very accepting.
Participants shared that when most of their students come to school, it is their first time that they are away from their families. They acknowledged how in early childhood, they are in the unique position to serve as agents of children’s overall and gender development. Teacher 10 stated:

My motto as an educator is: ‘The best teachers tell you where to look, but they don’t tell you what to see.’ We live in a city that children are exposed to so many different things from a young age. How we react to them, directly affects how they perceive the world. What are the messages we send to children based on how we dress them or have available to them to try in the classroom? As a teacher, I am hesitant to have in the classroom clothes that are traditionally pink for girls or blue for boys, or gender-specific clothing and the expectations that come with certain clothes based on their individual experiences.

Teacher and assistant teaching teams were guided by their administrators to begin supporting children’s overall development by first focusing on the children’s social-emotional well-being. Admin. 3 stated: “As educators, we need to rise above what we personally feel is right and wrong based on our own beliefs, and just do what is in the best interest and well-being of the children.” Admin. 1 added: “Supporting the students and their families the best we can as they transition to being in school and building trusting relationships.”

Teacher and assistant participants felt that through the tone they set in their classroom, their interactions, expectations, and their responses to what happens throughout the day, they send messages to the students of what is possible. Teacher 2 shared:
The toys and interactions with materials that teachers make available to the children throughout the centers are essential to their development. At times, we might observe the children congregating by gender in the blocks or the dramatic play area based on their perceived expectations of what the boys and girls should and shouldn’t be playing with. A lot of it comes from the expectations they have from home, how they see themselves, and how they perceive who is around them. The tone we set in our classrooms can begin to challenge those preconceived expectations.

Assistant 3 agreed: “What teachers approve and praise, students will continue to do, while what the teachers disapprove is what the students will refrain from doing.” All participants emphasized the importance of everyone functioning as a team in their classrooms, regardless if they were boys or girls, children or adults. Teacher 11 shared: “Everyone had rights and choices in their classrooms. Everyone’s choices are respected and supported. Celebrating each other’s diversity, gifts, and uniqueness.” Participants shared that in their classrooms, they treated their students as individuals, not as a boy or as a girl. Teacher 9 shared:

I think it depends on the individual teacher. I don't separate gender roles in the classroom. For example, I don't say the girls are the only ones that are cleaning up. I think that cleaning up is an important skill for a boy and a girl to have. As teachers, we can’t have separate rules and expectations based on gender if we want our students to be successful. Instead we are observing and ensuring that all children explore in all areas in the classroom upon their choice, and encourage them to try
new things using different strategies and respecting who they are as individuals. That’s all we can do. We are their number one cheerleader every step of the way. Participants felt that just like families expose children to experiences that they feel will be beneficial for the children’s future success, so was the case with their teachers. Assistant 1 shared:

How we set up the classroom, color code the different centers, and the language we use can help challenge how the children are raised at home, can encourage them to try new things and broaden their experiences. Challenging stereotypical gender roles and expectations by encouraging all students to be and do whatever they are interested in and what they like.

Admin. 1 stated: “As educators, we can advocate for children’s choice. From the colors, they choose to use, to the types of toys and dress-up items available to them. Having systems of open communication in place to raise awareness and promote advocacy.”

Teacher 4 added:

We need to get comfortable with talking about difficult topics. And gender is one of them. That is how as educators, we can gain a deeper understanding. Although it is a big part of our lives, the truth is, we rarely talk about gender with our colleagues. A few years ago, I did have a colleague who came to me with questions. She had asked me about what I would do if I had a little boy in my class who wanted to put on a dress in the dramatic play area. I had also seen the same colleague tell a boy to take the dress off because that is not what boys wear. It made me feel very uncomfortable to witness that. I had to have a conversation with the team on the importance of our work based on the standards. Referring to them regarding gender
bias, gender identity, and expression. I didn’t make it personal and kept it broad. Most people are uncomfortable talking about it, for whatever their reasons may be. I feel that when working with children, we need to.

Teachers believed in giving their students the freedom to be and do as they liked, so long as they respected the class norms, and everyone within their classroom community. Most teachers and assistants, in a gender fluid manner, emphasized to their students that we all have goals and areas where we need to grow and become better at. Teacher 1 shared: “We always highlight to the children that we all have strengths, special gifts and abilities to help others and share with everyone in the world, regardless if they were boys, girls, children or adults.”

Participants also shared some of their concerns. Knowing the impact teachers can have as agents of children’s gender development, at times they’ve found themselves at a difficult position trying to manage what they believed as their teaching philosophy, and what the students’ family expectations were. Teacher 6 shared:

Sometimes, I feel caught in the middle of what I know as being best practices in supporting students’ holistic development based on the early childhood standards, and trying to be respectful of the parents’ requests; which stem from their religious and cultural values and beliefs.

Many participants sympathized and understood why the parents felt that way. Teacher 8 stated:

To a certain extent, as a parent myself, I understand. You try to protect your children the best you can, after having seen how cruel and insensitive people can be when individuals behave outside the gender norms of social expectations.
They also acknowledged their roles and responsibilities as educators in preparing their students for the future. Admin.3 stated:

When our students move on to the public schools and the real world, we want them to be accepting, welcoming, and open-minded. Their upbringing is so important. I know for myself, although I was Greek, I grew up in a very Hispanic and diverse neighborhood. When I became a teacher and then an administrator, I knew my students needed to have diverse experiences to raise their awareness of what is out there.

Along with family and teachers, participants shared that the peers in children’s lives influence children’s gender development. Teachers, assistants, and administrators, believed that the peers children engage with, both in and out of school, can positively or negatively impact their gender development. It is with their peers that children engage in play, develop social skills, and through the reinforcement of pro-social behaviors, use manners, and form relationships. Admin. 1 shared: “As children transition into associate and cooperative play, they are not only interested in what they are playing but with whom. They want to fit in and have their friends’ approval.” It is during this time that participants felt children engage in new activities and experiences that develop their gender identity. They can develop it at first with friends of the same sex, then in activities that the children have a common interest in, and are usually gender-stereotyped. Teacher 5 stated:

As children get to know each other, they say and do what their friends say and do. They then act out what they’ve experienced at home, and once they become
comfortable with their new friends, they are quick to correct them, if their behaviors challenge their lived realities.

Through ongoing observation and getting to know their students well, teacher and assistant participants worked towards creating an equitable classroom environment. Assistant 9 shared:

We noticed that the boys tend to be more aggressive and competitive when playing amongst themselves. But if girls joined in or were around, then you would see a bit of a shift in their behavior. They become more mindful and gentle with them. It’s interesting to see. We always remind them that it’s okay to have fun, but we still need to be safe.

Assistant 7 added:

Yes, girls tend to gravitate towards the art center, writing, or the dramatic play area pretending to be mommies. Caring for the babies, cooking, cleaning and shopping. They also like to take turns being the babies and mommies themselves, and telling the boys they are the daddies who go to work. The boys usually explore in the blocks area, pretending to be construction workers, or at table toys, and water table.

Teachers and assistants were intentional and strategic when engaging with children into play and modeling expected behaviors. Teacher 4 stated: “It is during play with their peers, that children’s lived experiences manifest themselves in the classroom. It is quite interesting. Particularly seeing their behaviors when peers tend to challenge friends who may behave outside the traditional gender roles.” Assistant 8 shared:

Over the years, it hasn’t been an issue with the children. They are accepting by nature. If there ever was one who did say something about another child’s behavior,
I would say ‘That’s ok. Everyone likes to pretend and use their imagination to make believe and be whatever they want to be. And that’s ok. That’s what we do when we make believe and play. You can be a police officer, a girl, a dinosaur, a mountain climber, anything to express yourself; and that’s okay.’ We do lots of modeling and pretending with my assistant.

Teacher 1 shared:

Children are encouraged to engage and learn with peers from both sexes as a community of learners. As the year progresses, children slowly transition to the norms of the classroom, and independently engage with all peers in all types of activities.

Teacher 2 added:

We do a lot of modeling and using our imagination. My assistant and I give each other roles that challenged stereotypes. Especially when we hear children express to each other, who can and cannot do something. We model role playing and he may be the mom and I am the dad. It didn’t matter if our sex did not correspond to the personality because we were using our imagination and we can be anything we’d like to be. That’s the message the children get. We encourage them to try it out too and be open to new experiences. We do not put them in a box and say what should and shouldn’t be. With all that is going on today, and the different families, we cannot fit everyone in one gender.

Teacher and assistant participants shared that modeling helped the students become confident to challenge their peers if they did not agree with them, and be able to justify why they felt that way, by using the language previous modeled by the teaching team.
Teacher 7 shared: “It is beautiful to see that all the hard work we do in the beginning of the year pays off. Seeing children speak up for themselves, rotate independently throughout the classroom, and finding their place in the world is priceless.” Assistant 1 stated:

A little girl this year (who I wouldn’t say she acts like a boy), while the rest of the girls are in the dramatic play area, she is the happiest when she is in the blocks area. She loves to build and use the cars, and knows the names of each of the tools. When we were talking with her parents about what she likes to do, they said that she has her own kitchen set at home, and she always follows her dad around. He is an engineer and always tinkers with things. In the classroom, she is just interested in engaging in activities that are traditionally more characteristic of boys as per society. The irony is that although she likes what we would traditionally say is more boy things, when you see her, you would never have guessed that is the case. She is very soft spoken, feminine, and loves to dress in girly outfits. But, when it comes to expressing what she wants or what makes her upset, she is quite outspoken, and quick to tell you why she feels that way.

Admin. 1 added:

About 10yrs. ago, we had a child in one of the classes that was born as a boy, but identified as a girl. His family was very open about it and so were the classmates. One day, someone came to visit the class, and misidentified her as a boy. The children in the class spoke up and said, “That’s not a boy. That’s girl.” If a four-year-old child could recognize that her classmate identified as the gender other than
the one he was born with, and advocated for her, why can’t we, as adults and as a society, do the same?

Teacher 1 shared:

In the beginning of last year, when the children started school, one of the parents told us that her son J identifies as a she, and when addressing J, to use the pronoun “she”. We kept practicing and got used to it, but it was hard for the children to understand why we are calling a boy as “she” instead of “he”. What’s interesting is that before the mom said anything to us, I had noticed that J was coming to school with sneakers that were black, with a shade of pink and pink shoelaces. I remember thinking to myself, “That’s different than the traditional colors you would usually associate with boys’ shoes.” As the year progressed, J’s outfits became more colorful, and resembled more clothes that you would traditionally see worn by girls.

Teacher 2 added:

Knowing of the parents’ request in the classroom next-door, last year, we started doing attendance differently during the morning routines. Instead of saying “how many girls or how many boys are in school today”, we would say “How many children are in school and how many at home?”. I think that once we become aware of these things, we can take small steps towards change.

Social Expectations

The third sub-theme to emerge regarding agents of children’s gender development, from the collected data was social expectations. Most participants believed that since the moment we are identified as a boy or a girl, we are labeled and begin to follow two separate paths. Assistant 6 stated:
I grew up in the 70s. To me gender is male and female. But as I've gotten older and things have changed in society, I realized that it's other. There are people that don't describe themselves as female or male. They feel that there are other people inside, and I am accepting and respectful of it. A lot has changed over the years in what is socially acceptable.

Teacher 9 added:

There is so much pressure on how one should be, what they should think, and what their role is. Personally, I feel that this whole social feminist movement took away women’s femininity and men’s manliness. Being feminine is a beautiful thing. Being able to bear children is an amazing gift. I am a strong woman regardless. Without needing to feel pressured to conform to the latest fad and societal expectations. And neither should the children.

Assistant 3 stated: “We are expected to behave a certain way and have access to very specific gendered opportunities and experiences. These become part of who we are and our points of reference of how we should be.” Teacher 7 added: “Now, the way things are around us, you think about the climate and how people are expressing themselves through gender, and perhaps identifying with another gender, that they were not biologically born with.” Teacher 4 added: “I am noticing shifts in how we see gender and how it is represented in the world. As simple as the bathroom signs being gender neutral- half dress and half pants. Beyond just the traditional male and female signs.”

Most participants felt social expectations are commuted throughout the popular culture and found across all outlets of the media- television, movies, games, books, songs. By default, participants viewed social expectations as the one agent of children’s
gender development, that affects all others. Participants asserted that the social expectations for males and females communicated through social media, are the standards of behavior that boys and girls in their classrooms see as expected and socially expected behaviors. Teacher 10 stated: “Many children have internalized what they see on YouTube and Hollywood, and come to school idolizing the grown-ups in their lives, the Disney princesses, superheroes, and icons of pop culture.” Assistant 7 added:

Boys come to school believing that they are super strong, can do everything without any help, ready to fight and save everyone. Nothing can hurt them. They are not supposed to cry or show any emotion. While girls come to school idolizing princesses. They are raised to be kind, polite, dressed beautifully, treated delicately, being nurturing and caring for others.

Teacher and assistant participants have noticed that when girls display traits traditionally expected of boys -such as being assertive and strong, social expectations were more forgiving and encouraging. But not so forgiving or encouraging if boys displayed traits that are traditionally seen as female; being sensitive, showing emotion, wearing nail polish or pink clothing and skirts. Teacher 2 shared:

Society tells boys it is not acceptable to cry. It’s seen as being weak. At the end, it comes down to the child and the grown-ups in their lives. With my own children, I encourage them to express themselves and their feelings. Regardless if they are a boy or a girl. “Cry if you need a cry. Whatever helps you feel better. It's okay to cry.” I think that's where I am. It’s interesting... Now that I think of it, with the children in our class, I encourage them to be a little stronger when I notice they are
too sensitive. Somehow, I tend to cater more to them. Maybe it’s because I just have my two boys at home.

Assistant 8 added:

Times are different now. Growing up, I knew people who belonged in one gender, but because of the societal expectations at the time, had to marry someone of the opposite sex to fit in. No matter what, to the world, you were either male or female. And we wouldn’t even think about speaking of your feelings or what you noticed regarding that matter. If we dared, we would get reprimanded and told “There is no such thing. Stop the nonsense”.

**Theme 3: Promoting Gender Inclusivity in Preschool Classrooms**

A third overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of collected data was promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms. Each of the participants shared their views on promoting gender inclusivity in preschool. Within the theme of promoting gender inclusivity in preschool, three sub-themes emerged from the collected data. The first sub-theme that emerged was gender flexible pedagogical practices. The second sub-theme that emerged was professional development. The third sub-theme was resources. Together, these three sub-themes encompass participants’ perceptions of promoting gender inclusivity in preschool.

**Gender Flexible Pedagogical Practices**

The first sub-theme to emerge regarding promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms from the collected data was gender flexible pedagogical practices. These allowed pre-k teachers to meet their students where they are and by assuming a strengths-based approach, helping them each reach their full potential. Participant data
showed that gender flexible pedagogy included the following practices: how they interacted with the children in their classrooms and their expectations, the language participants used, and the planning of a broad repertoire of play experiences.

When interacting with the students, teacher, assistant, and administrator participants prioritized on their socialization and social-emotional well-being, and independence. Admin. 3 offered his reasoning behind it:

Our goal in Pre-K is to focus on socializing children as much as possible. All children. Regardless if they are boys or girls. Preparing them on doing things and being on their own. Especially since they start school so young now. When we were growing-up, I don’t think our parents would ever think of sending us to daycare or even preschool. As a society, we are so much into technology, that we don’t have time to socialize, interact, and check-in with each other. If we don’t do it when they are young, it’ll be even harder as they get older. I know from my personal experience with my sons. Children need to learn how to function in society and be able to approach others to have a conversation. It is so sad that these days, children are not taught these skills. Not even at home. But when parents bring children to school, they want us to prioritize on academics. Not realizing that children learn best when they explore, experiment, and interact with their peers. What good is to be knowledgeable because of drilling and rote memorization of facts, but unable to communicate and collaborate with others?

When interacting with their students, teacher and assistant participants were present and intentional to get to know their children and ready to cease the teachable moments as an opportunity to learn in meaningful ways. Teacher 7 stated:
When interacting with children, we treat them all as people. I don’t think we consciously take into consideration gender. I treat them all the same and equal. I think that there are things that girls can do, that boys can’t do, and vise-versa, but at the same time, there are things some girls can-do, but other girls can’t do, and the same is the case among boys. We follow their lead when interacting and planning accordingly. Making sure there is always enough of materials and equal opportunities to explore.

Assistant 3 added: “We want them to have a memorable experience. To remember their time in preschool as a place where they had fun, with their friends and teachers.” Circulating throughout and monitoring their students’ engagement and well-being proved to be invaluable to the quality of their interactions. Teacher 8 stated: “We zone throughout the classroom, listening, observing, getting to know them, modeling, being there if they need help and just looking at their overall behavior and engagement.” Teacher 7 added:

We need to be observing all the time, and asking the right questions in the right manner, while remaining matter of fact and neutral. Being calm, checking-in, and building their self-confidence. How we interact with the children depends on the individual child rather than whether the child is a boy or a girl. Girls tend to be much more expressive with their feelings and affectionate. They like to hug you and tell you “I love you”. While boys like their space and tend to be focused on their tasks. Likely to seek your attention if they need help or acknowledgement for their accomplishments. Each of them are different.

Participants felt that by taking their time to get to know students well, they could then individualize their instruction through their interactions with each of the students. When
interacting with their students, they focused on building children’s communication skills, and supporting them holistically throughout the day’s activities. Teacher 11 stated:

Communication is key. No matter what activity we are doing. When interacting with children, we are guiding them through the thinking process, and address diverse perspectives. We often say to them that ‘we can’t control other people, but we can control our responses.’ At the end of the day, we all always have the choice to disengage. We try to help children see that they have the power within them to do so. They can choose to walk away and say ‘I’m just not going to respond’. That’s powerful!

Teacher 9 shared: “We take the time to know each of the children as individuals, encouraging them to do what they like, guiding them by asking open-ended questions, and building their confidence.” Teacher 10 added: “When interacting with the children, we support them in developing pro-social behaviors, negotiating and compromising skills to problem solve when engaging with others in a caring and respectful manner.” Teachers and assistants focused on building these skills by engaging with their students during transitions, joining them into play, getting to know them, setting goals, and encouraging them to get out of their comfort zones by challenging them to explore on their own.

Participants had observed that girls tended to play together in the dramatic play area, art, and writing center, while the boys preferred the building in the blocks and using the table to toys. Admin. 1 stated: “We have specific goals in mind for each of students. By creating learning environments that are inviting, comfortable, age-appropriate, child-centered, we encourage them to explore and learn through our intentional interactions. Assistant 4 stated:
This year we had a lot of boys who liked only the blocks area or the tabletop areas. They did not like the dramatic play area. To broaden their experiences, we encouraged them to go into the dramatic play area, just because it is an area they should explore. I would then join them because sometimes they're not sure what they're supposed to do in that area. Modeling washing the babies and being nurturing and caring to the dolls. I encourage them but don't force them into it. Another strategy I use, is “Hey, pick a friend. Let's go play there.” We explore cooking, having parties, and taking walks. The same applies for the girls. Encouraging them to go out of the dramatic play area and into the blocks center. Modeling for them building and where they can refer to for ideas. They shouldn't feel like boys do one thing and girls do another thing. We can all play together using our imagination.

Assistant 4 added:

We try to inspire, motivate, and challenge gender roles through our interactions. Supporting them in coming out of their comfort zone, and encouraging them to break social barriers. For example, one of the girls had chosen as favorite show to watch on screen on her birthday “My Little Pony”. One of the boys liked it, but came back the next day and said that his dad said “it’s for girls not for boys”. We told him that it’s ok if daddy doesn’t like it, but it’s also ok, if he does like it.

Teacher 1 shared:

When interacting with the children, we emphasize the fact of not having no real distinction of what girls should like and what boys should like. We say that it’s ok to like the same things. It’s ok if we want to play with the same things and ok if we
don’t want to play with just the things that we are ‘supposed to’. Meaning, the boys with cars, and the girls with dolls. It’s ok if girls playing with cars and Legos too.

In a culturally responsive way, through their individualized interactions with the children, teachers and assistants were encouraged by their administrators to focus developing their children’s communication skills by modeling active listening and using a range of language modeling strategies—such as self and parallel talk. Admin 2 stated:

We take time to get to know the children well—where they come from, the languages they speak, their interests, experiences, and academic levels. We then interact with them accordingly. Encouraging them to try everything. Especially when they always tend to go towards the same one play area, that they are really fond of. Knowing what they like, luring them towards the rest of the areas, and putting together an activity that might be exciting for them, based on their interests.

Admin.1 shared:

We always ask them ‘why’ they feel a certain way. Asking them to think for themselves, beyond just accepting things because their parents told them so, or we told them so as adults. Reassuring them that this is their classroom, everyone is welcome to be themselves and like whatever they like, instead of telling them whether they should or shouldn’t like something. Highlight that everyone is different in what they like and why, and that’s okay.

Additionally, teacher and assistant participants encouraged children to express their feelings, ideas, thoughts, wants, and needs when engaging with both peers and other adults. Assistant 3 shared:
I remember a long time ago, we had a student in the class, and the classmates used to ask me “Miss [Assistant 3] is so and so, a boy or girl?” The child they were wondering about was nearby. So instead of me answering, I said, “Well, your friend is right there. Why don’t you ask and see what they say?” And that was it. I wasn’t going to automatically answer for the child because I don’t know how they would like to respond I don't speak for anyone else in that regard. I always believe in giving children a voice.

Participants also focus on children learning to turn take, compromise, negotiate, stand up for themselves, and interact with others to solve problems. Teacher 1 shared:

When interacting with the children we try to make it as equal and fair as possible. Having a. Class jobs, b. turn taking, c. having nothing exclusively for boys or just for girls, d. having unisex bathrooms. In my case, I had to be even more intentional with my interactions, since this year, I only had just two girls in the class.

Teacher, assistant, and administrator participants felt that regardless, academic standards would be reached when children are ready, but life skills need to be taught early on and are invaluable for students’ future success. Admin.3 shared: “We focus on socializing children, to be able to function in society by being responsible members of a community.” Assistant 6 stated: “We want them to be well-mannered, follow directions, and just be happy little kids. No stress. I just want them to become respectful young adults.” A big focus of the learning in the classroom was the use of the tools of autonomy and particularly the feelings chart. Teacher 4 stated: “We put routines in place by using the tools of autonomy (calendar, job chart, attendance, flow of the day, feelings chart) to help function a unit by having norms in place.” Participants introduced them at the
beginning of the year and regularly referred to them throughout the day in context.

Teacher 2 stated:

In whatever we do, we work on building the children’s self-esteem and their ability to express their feelings. That’s very big for us. They need to become sure of themselves, because some kids come to us with anxiety. They come here with anger and frustration. When interacting with them, we try to help them acknowledge their feelings, and support them in finding other ways to support them in expressing and dealing with their emotions.

Admin 1 stated:

We want everyone to feel like their voices are being heard in the classroom. Focusing a lot on emotions and verbalizing them. More so this year, than before, since we are all wearing masks and social distancing. It’s hard to read expressions and interpret feelings. With a lot of repetition and modeling, by the end of the year, both boys and girls progress in their communication skills in expressing their feelings, ideas and thoughts with both adults and their classmates.

Using the job chart, each of the children had jobs and responsibilities that go with them. Regardless of whether they were boys or girls, they were all expected to help with whatever needed to be done throughout the day. Teacher 6 stated: “We use the job chart to teach children responsibility and working collaboratively with whatever needs to be done in the classroom. We do everything as a team and always encourage them to be independent.” All students were held accountable by referring to the job chart to help in knowing who is responsible for what. Teacher 4 stated:
A lot comes into play when interacting with children throughout the day. Among them, allowing them and encouraging them to have access to everything, to have and all class jobs, regardless if they are boys or girls. Highlighting that we are all part of a community and share same roles and responsibilities.

Teacher and assistant participants regularly reminded children to treat others as they’d like to be treated by referring to the class norms and expectations. Assistant 5 shared:

“We model empathy and inclusiveness and appreciate different points of view. We always say, ‘It’s okay if we don’t agree, but we can still be friends’” Participants at one school use the Sanford Harmony program to raise children’s social emotional awareness, as well as to develop their communication skills when interacting with others. Teacher 6 shared:

We have a lot of social emotional conversations using Z. Z is a gender-neutral alien puppet. We read stories about Z’s adventures on planet earth, and through their experiences help promote diversity and support in expressing one’s emotions. We discuss a range of topics- like family, friends, and disabilities, use social emotional game boards and cubes, as well as incorporate conversation starters and prompts that building on children’s prior knowledge, life skills and experiences.

Among the teacher participants, there were some outliners when it came to their interactions with boys and girls. Teacher 6 added:

Subconsciously, I might treat them differently, but then I realize it and snap back to reality. I realize that by doing that, I’m not helping them grow. For example, if I see a girl child climbing, I’m quick to run and step in and say ‘oops, just be careful’, but then if it’s a boy, I may not be as worried. I guess I need to let the girls be and
not allow my worrying that as a girl she is weak and needs protection, because that will be the message that she will receive and will be self-conscious and afraid to try new things.

Teacher 3 shared about her observed interactions with the boys in her class, and reflected on her own exchanges with them due to being a female:

Some boys might be a little more physical trying to make their own version of Minecraft in school. Boys enjoy more of a rough and tumble play that might not necessarily be safe. Sometimes I wondered how a male teacher would react when observing them. Would they get worried like me, or have classified this type of play as “normal” rough and tumble play for boys. Would they have stepped in to prevent the children from getting hurt, join in, or just allow them to be, yet remain nearby to make sure no one gets hurt and they are all safe?

Teacher 6 shared:

I praise all the children for their efforts. But I may tend to encourage girls more than boys, to build up their self-esteem. I guess because all these years, it was the boys who were strong and capable and expected to succeed. I find I am encouraging girls to try to engage more in the areas you’d traditionally find boys to excel.

Similarly, Teacher 9 shared:

I used to praise the girls for looking cute in little dresses when they dressed up in the dramatic play area. But I wouldn’t feel comfortable complimenting a boy who is wearing a dress. I’ll just let him experiment. I don't get upset by it. But I won’t say “‘oh wow, look how beautiful you look in a skirt” because 1. I don't want him to walk around thinking that it's okay for him to wear a skirt, 2. It is not something
that comes naturally and authentically for me to say. I'm not going to get angry with him and I'm not going to say “go take it off”. Just like I don’t just expect only girls to help clean and play in the dramatic play area, or let just the boys play with the trucks. Everybody is encouraged to explore where they want. Now we are told to be focusing on other things. Beyond their appearances when interacting with the children. Our interactions should be promoting higher level thinking.

Assistant 4 shared about her Montessori training and offered an example as to how an interaction with a student may look like.

I was trained in a Montessori environment. So, when a little girl is wearing a dress, we learned not to say, “Oh, what a beautiful dress. It's so pretty. You look so beautiful today”. No, instead you may comment on the color of the dress. “Today you are wearing a yellow dress”. It is a dress, it's yellow, and that's a neutral thing to say. The child’s self-confidence based on beauty should not be dependent on whether I think she is beautiful or not because of the dress. Instead, asking the child how she feels wearing that dress or any other feelings the child may have empowered them. We bring it back to their feelings, not how they look in response to someone else’s acknowledgement or attention. I feel that is something important for the children to learn early on about their self-worth, regardless of other’s opinions.

Two teacher participants with a special education background were particularly intentional with their observations and interactions when engaging with their students. Their concern was triggered by their knowledge that boys, more often than girls, have
developmental delays, but are traditionally overlooked if they are not picked up by a trained eye. Teacher 4 stated:

Because of my special education background and knowing that boys are statistically diagnosed at a higher percentage with autism, compared to girls, I would keep an eye out for boys that might have developmental delays sooner than I would do with the girls.

When addressing their students, most participants used gender-neutral language and vocabulary. Assistant 9 stated: “We call them all ‘friends.’ Things are different than when we were growing up. People identify in different ways, beyond just male or female. To be respectful of that, we are calling them friends or buddies.” Teacher 7 shared:

When interacting with children, I am intentional in using gender-neutral vocabulary instead of gendered language. Especially when talking about different occupations. Such as police officer, fire fighter, or mail carrier. Trying to be present to cease these opportunities and teachable moments to have these conversations as they arise. Especially when children have expressed gender specific preconceived notions about certain occupations.

Some participants addressed children by their individual names, preferred names, or as “friends,” “people,” or “class.” Teacher 11 stated:

We address children as “friends”. To help establish a sense of community. We emphasize that we may all be different but we are all friends. Regardless of what we like or if we are boys or girls. We are all unique, and hope that it all sticks with them when they grow up. Grow up to be accepting of others.
Teacher 5 added: “We call them over by their preferred name, for example, “Katherine” vs. “Kate,” “lovely children,” or one by one, like a game or a song. Participants have also called them by tables, or a catch phrases such as “friends, Romans, countrymen.” Teacher 7 shared:

We address them as a group. Like “class”, “scientists”, “learners”, or by their individual names. In general, using non-descriptive pronouns. Rarely as “boys” and “girls”. I also prefer to be called by my first name, versus miss. I want to send a message of equals and that we are all valued.

Assistant 4 added:

I like to address the children as “friends, Romans, Countrymen”- But first making sure, I explain to them it is a phrase. I also try to refrain from saying “guys” because I’ve seen people view it as being insensitive. I don’t make a distinction of adults and children from an authoritative figure perspective. But rather being inclusive since we are all a community of equals and everyone given the floor for their voice to be heard. I know some of my colleagues don’t feel this way. I attribute this mindset to doing a lot of spiritual work and keeping my ego in check. Instead of being a hothead and saying “because I said so”, instead, I say “let’s think about all this together and think it through”.

Clapping, counting down, or playing a game, was another way to get the students’ attention. Assistant 5 stated:

When we are lining up or gathering the class as a group, we try to make it all a learning experience. Instead of “boys” and “girls”, we usually call them by tables,
or the colors of their clothing, letters of their names, counting down or clapping, if they have siblings, or by what they like, and so forth.

Participants felt that it was important to use language that acknowledged what children were doing and encouraged them to explore through open-ended interactions and experiences. Teacher 11 stated:

I always use the language of “I like how you”, or, “Yes, that's one way of doing things. Can anyone else think of another method?” It’s open-ended, inclusive, and they don't get stuck thinking “Oh no, the teacher didn't like this. That's the only way we're supposed to do it.”. Always thinking about discovered different methods, and realizing we are doing all this together. It's not just one person that has all the answers. Putting protocols in place for all the voices to be heard- paying attention, turn-taking, listening, and waiting for their cue to speak.

Participants felt that using a range of language modeling strategies and being intentional of their gendered vocabulary, supported children in becoming comfortable in expressing themselves in terms of their needs, wants, and preferences. Teacher 10 stated: “We are giving them a voice, celebrating their interests, and incorporating each of their perspectives. Showing them that what they say is valued, diversity is beautiful, and installing in them a love for learning.”

A few participants shared that they still addressed the students as “boys and girls” or “ladies and gentlemen” when they wanted to get their attention. Some participants shared that although they know how to be mindful of the language they use, sometimes they forget, or it just didn’t come naturally to them since that is not what they became
used to growing up. One of the participants felt that her changed role within the classroom also affected her language. Teacher 3 stated:

The old-school way just comes out. I just say “Boys & girls” or “you guys”. I do try to catch myself, but it does slip. It’s interesting, when I was a subbing, I was more mindful about it. I used to address children as “learners” or “friends.” I guess because I didn't have the full-on role or responsibility of doing everything. But as a lead teacher now, I feel I am responsible for everything, and many times just do things intuitively. That also includes how children are addressed.

They also believed that it would be hard to expect older or veteran teachers to change their ways but easier to train the younger ones because they were trained differently in their teacher preparation programs. Admin. 3 stated:

I say “ladies” and “gentlemen”. I don't think I do it on purpose. I've always said “Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?” As an administrator, I'll tell my staff, “you guys”. Not “everyone”. I wouldn't say “male, female and others” like that. That's insulting. I cannot say, “class” or “friends”. It's not intentional. It’s just not ingrained in me. It’s how I grew up. This is my 30th year in education.

Teacher, assistant, and administrator participants highlighted the importance of not only being encouraging when interacting with children, but also being clear of what the expectations are within their classroom environment. Admin. 1 stated:

In the beginning, it’s the teacher’s role to create a welcoming and secure environment, where children feel free to express themselves, encourage all students to engage throughout the centers and having an array of materials available materials that meet the interests of the individual students beyond their gender, and
if there is a gender specific material, how can we introduce it, so it is not, so anyone can use it.

Teacher 9 stated:

Beyond letters and numbers, I think it’s important for the children to learn how to behave in an environment that has rules, and them following those rules as is expected by being part of a community. Being respectful of their peers and their teachers, as the latter are the authority or in charge when they are in school and not with their parents or caregivers. Playing with other children, communicating, being polite, using their words to ask if they want anything or to express their feelings, instead of crying.

Participants prioritized supporting children with being able to identify different types of feelings and being able to articulate them as well as having coping strategies. Teacher 3 shared:

Since the first day of school, we talk about how we treat each other, different kinds of feelings, and using the feelings chart to help articulate them. Without telling them what to think or what to say. But rather, giving them the space to be heard. Guiding them to reflect and think for themselves. I don’t believe children are born with mal intent or the scenario that they are manipulative. I don’t think they are savvy like that. We just need to help them find the words to express what they think and feel when interacting with others. Once they feel good about themselves, they can do anything.

Assistant 7 stated:
We do a lot of modeling by “thinking out loud”, using our words to communicate, as well as offer children other options, by incorporating different strategies to help manage one’s feelings. For example, taking deep breathes, taking a break in the cozy corner, reading a book, etc.

Participants felt that it was important for students to have clear expectations and to be consistent in following transitions and routines, as children engaging throughout the day’s activities independently. Teacher 2 stated:

No matter what activities, we support children in learning to work together with others by engaging in groups, and communicating with each other. During these times, we put protocols in place, practice our conversation skills, and do a lot of self and parallel talk.

Assistant 4 shared: “We always try to be inclusive, without singling any of the children out for any reason. Not telling them what they should think and do, but rather remaining neutral and supportive as they become emotionally confident”. Teacher 7 added:

We treat all children the same. We’ve had students over the years come in with nail polish- both boys and girls. One year we had a set of twins, a boy and a girl. The girl came in with her nails pink, cutesy and glittery. And the brother came in with blue nail polish. One of the friends saw the brother and started making fun of him and said “hey, you're not supposed to wear nail polish. That’s only for girls.” The boy must have gone home and told his parents, because the next day, the father came with his nails painted and the boy was showing off his father’s nails to the class.
Teacher 10 shared another anecdote of a boy pretending to be pregnant and then caring for the baby. She shared:

I played along, instead of correcting him. We talked about what we would you name the baby and if it has siblings. Other children tried to correct him and were surprised to see me playing along. I share that a dad also takes care of the baby. Just like a mommy, and made connections to their fathers and what they do for them-feed them, takes care of me, gives me a bath, read books, etc. And that was that.

Participants motivated children to help each other by highlighting their strengths and abilities while always reminding them that practice makes perfect. Teacher 1 stated:

When we are in the playground, we do not only develop our gross motor skills. We learn turn-taking, and challenge traditional beliefs that girls can’t play sports. We emphasize the importance of working as a team and helping each other. We hope that by doing so, children see their classmates as individuals rather than as boys or as girls.

Admin. 3 added, “We work towards creating classroom cultures that communicate that it’s okay to make mistakes. Acknowledging them and learning from them.” Participants promoted a culture of support and collegiality by functioning as a team, encouraging their students to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas and thoughts, and asking for help.

Teacher 3 stated:

We want them to be comfortable to approach others (both children and adults), to share their ideas, likes and dislikes, and to be proud and aware of who they are as a person. Speaking their truth, their likes and dislike, celebrating their differences,
having self-worth, and self-love, without confirming to certain standards and cultural and societal expectations.

At the same time, participants encouraged children to learn to speak up for themselves. Assistant 6 stated:

We give them the language and the tools to be able to express themselves. If they feel upset or scared, or to resolve any conflicts themselves with their peers, before going right away to the adults in the room. Standing up and advocating for themselves if something is bothering them. It is as important as having fun experiences in school, developing friendships, and completing tasks independently to build their confidence.

An assistant participant from one of the schools shared that another strategy they used, especially with students who may have been defiant or not responsive to redirection and positive reinforcement from adults, was the buddy system. Assistant 8 stated:

We pair children up with a classmate. They are to spend time together, get to know each other, and guide each other throughout the day’s activities. We found this strategy to be very effective and the children much more responsive to their peers, rather than just us, as adults, constantly redirecting them.

Teachers, assistants, and administrators felt rather than being limited or offered preferential treatment based on their gender; these expectations allowed all students to freely express themselves and encouraged them to be willing to try new things. All focused-on supporting children’s holistic development, yet respectful of what they were each curious about. Teacher 2 stated:
We encourage children to explore. Regardless if it is considered “gender appropriate”. We never say, “you’re a boy, you can only be a firefighter, and you are a girl, so you can only be a teacher.” We never do that. It is important for boys to spend time in the dramatic play area and experience caring for babies. Making children aware that it’s okay to have just a daddy, or a mommy, or two mommies and two daddies. Today, at least in our class, the children are not held back from exploring all that is available without any form of segregation by gender. In fact, they are encouraged to do so.

Assistant 4 stated that her classroom expectations for her students, were shaped by her spirituality and her training:

I was trained through Montessori and had done a lot of Reiki work. I treat and interact with students as equals. There are no power struggles of children vs. adults, and adults being the authority in the classroom. All perspectives are valued. Regardless of age, experience, or gender.

Admin. 2 shared his expectations:

When I’m going in the classrooms, I’m looking to see students in stations, playing nicely, and sharing. They are sitting and eating nicely during meals, and interacting with each other. I don’t necessarily look at them from a gendered-lens but rather them interacting with children of different nationalities. I believe that at such a young age, they don't understand, you know, they don't see color, sex, religion or ethnicity. They just see another little child to play with. If they see more than that, it’s because their parents planted those seeds in their heads and learned to segregate from each other. And in the same way, I believe they develop gender identities from
the activities they engage in their environment and the activities they have available in their environment. That’s why planning is so important.

Participants felt that having a broad repertoire of play experiences available for children was a key gender flexible pedagogical practice. Teacher 5 stated:

We plan for a variety of activities throughout the centers. A combination of activities that children can do on their own and some that might be challenging. But not so challenging that they may feel frustrated, but rather so that it will teach them persistence, and give them a sense of accomplishment in doing things, without giving up. We plan these to prepare them for life, since not everything is easy when trying new things. We emphasize on doing our best without having to be perfect. Intentionally making mistakes to show that even adults get mixed up, mess up, or make mistakes.

Assistant 3 added:

Regardless of the children’s gender, we try to engage them into play throughout the classroom without any limitations. I don't steer them one way or another, but I do encourage to them to go to every area and to try new things. If we see them always in the same area, we guide them to play in something else so they gain the experience and see what they like and what they don't like. Adding in the centers things that they like to catch their interest.

Teachers, assistants, and administrators, felt that during their time in Pre-K, children begin to make sense of their world. It is through their experiences that they develop their basic self-help, critical thinking, communication and leadership skills. Regardless of whether they were boys or girls. Assistant 9 stated:
We try to avoid gender specific things, and encourage children to explore and discover anything and everything through our interactions, discussions, activities, and stories. Challenging traditional roles, promoting empathy, and emphasizing inclusiveness. If a child challenges those messages, we interject and say it’s perfectly fine for everyone.

Teacher 1 added:

We plan for them to have opportunities to practice their independence skills. When they are ready, they will learn how to spell their first and last name, and identify primary colors and numbers. We model and encourage them to speak in full sentences and have manners… like “may I”, “please”, “thank you”, “no thank you”. These are the basics they need to be ready for kindergarten and life in general.

Assistant 2 added: “Consistently reinforcing being kind to each other and using respectful words.” Assistant 1 shared:

When planning activities, and setting up the classroom, we try to be more color neutral and encourage the students to engage throughout the centers. Boys not always going to the blocks area and the girls always to the dramatic play area. We try to incorporate more diverse pictures. Exposing them to different colors, mixing them to make new colors-including pink, and not making a big deal about it. It’s just another color. No need to feel shy or ashamed for liking it and using it.

Teacher and assistant participants focused on building students’ sense of responsibility and predictability through consistent daily routine activities and transitions.

Admin. 2 stated:
Our priority is for the children to feel comfortable and secure in our classrooms. Based on what we observe in terms of their experiences, interactions and behaviors, we adjust our instruction and planning of activities accordingly. Using different kinds of books, materials, dress up clothes and toys, or as simple as changing the lyrics to a finger plays.

Teachers focused on first introducing the standard available items in the centers, and then adding new materials and adjusting their instruction based on what they observe about their students and the current unit of study.” Assistant 3 stated:

Based on what children are curious about, and having overall goals in mind, we plan for activities that prepare them for the 21st century, are fun, help them become independent thinkers, and allow for each of them to have opportunities to have a voice.

Teacher 1 shared:

We plan for special events/activities for each day of the week (ex. Basketball on Mondays). It promotes inclusiveness and working together by making everything a game. It is not a competition or a race. We’re all one group, learning and supporting each other. Emphasizing that it’s okay to ask for help. We don’t generalize based on gender, but rather focus on the individual’s strengths, abilities and interests. Highlighting each other’s strengths to help each other grow.

Teacher 9 shared:

We plan for a lot of play-based learning. We try to make everything fun and interesting. For example, when we are experimenting with different kinds of lines in writing, children may use shaving cream on a tray. Encouraging them to write
with their fingers. Describing how it smells, feels, and looks. They think it's silly, but also fun. Their experiences not limited to just crayons, markers, and paper.

Teacher 4 shared:

It’s all about how you facilitate the different activities. Not necessarily the activity itself. For example, the available colors throughout, or when teaching the “Babies” unit, how do you create an interest area specific to the individual children. For example, washing or bathing the dolls, doing a diaper experiment, cooking baby food, researching how to care for a baby, and overall keeping a wider perspective about what’s possible.

Teachers incorporated students’ perspectives in the planning, and implemented learning experiences that were experimental (cause and effect science activities), encouraging problem solving, out-of-the-box thinking, creativity and teamwork. Teacher 7 shared:

It’s about finding an entry point and how you approach it. It’s not so much about the activity itself, but rather, how you are facilitating it, and how are children engaging with each other. Not just adults and children.

Teacher 10 stated:

When planning for activities, I think about how these activities lead them to “think outside the box” and be creative. Using pink to express feelings, thoughts and ideas, rather than getting stuck on what the pink signifies. These play experiences encourage group work, active listening to diverse perspectives of what others are saying and thinking. Exposing children to books and visual representations that
promote diversity. Beyond the binary figures, and creating a classroom culture of acceptance and inclusivity.

Participants wanted to give their students options and have available open-ended material to allow students to use their imagination and be creative in demonstrating their thinking and learning while acknowledging their diverse backgrounds. Teacher 5 stated:

Until we have more gender-neutral resources, we need to be mindful of the culture and dynamics of the classroom. There is no such thing a boy or girl thing, but something for everyone to use if they are interested in it. It’s all about how one approaches and presents things.

Teacher 4 stated: “Open-ended materials from Reggio are great. We also have multicultural toys and clothing and give children options to explore. Encouraging them, while honoring their interests.” Teacher 1 added:

Based on the how a child is raised and how they grew up, they might think that the kitchen is for the woman. If that’s the case, I try to broaden their experiences. Encouraging them to try new things and expose them to possibilities that they might not have considered. The children are curious and those seeds, or ideas that we plant in their heads, lead them to ask more questions and go home and continue these conversations. By exposing them to a broad range of experiences, it is my way of helping them think outside the box and get out of their comfort zone.

Teacher 7 added:

I am a big fan of pretend play. Having available diverse books to broaden children’s experiences, and then giving them the opportunity to role play. Children naturally
gravitate towards that. I think open-ended materials are great for children’s diverse interests, regardless of their gender.

Teacher and assistant participants challenged their students’ stereotypical beliefs by intentionally planning different types of activities throughout the day. Teacher 2 shared:

We look at curriculum very intentionally. Seeing to what extent it is gender inclusive and culturally responsive, and then plan for activities to explore accordingly. We incorporate a mix of open expression, daily living scenarios, like bringing pillows to blocks, as well as sensory play, which is also very important regardless of the children’s gender. Same with science activities that were experimental cause and affect types of activities. We tend to circulate throughout the centers, which helps in children gravitating towards them as well, since they want to play with us as we facilitated a lot of the play.

Assistant 6 added:

The playground is where we learn how to take turns going up and down the slide and playing games. We watch out for these things and we talk about these teachable moments and build on it. It’s not just specifically planned activities.

Some of the strategies used that were focused on developing children’s self-efficacy and thinking for themselves were flexible grouping, modeling, collaboration through team building activities. Assistant 9 stated:

I encourage them to choose a center that they may not choose on their own or maybe full if chosen by other children first. Particularly with children of the opposite
gender. I also join them children to facilitate play so they can have a good time, so next time they’ll be more eager to pick that center on their own.

Participants believed that during their time in preschool children transitioned from being children to students. Teacher 1 stated:

We want them to be “good students’… well behaved, smart learners- problem solvers, critical thinkers, and being kind. When they are with us, entering pre-k and getting ready to go to K, they transition from being children to becoming students. Yes, academics, like math, reading, and writing are important, but at their age, their social emotional skill development is a big area of focus. As educators, we are molding them for their future success.

Teachers prioritized planning activities that promoted children’s social-emotional well-being. Teacher 6 stated:

Academic skills are important in preparing them for kindergarten, but when planning for activities, more importantly, we prioritize on activities that support the children’s social emotional development, so they can be successful in life. To feel confident, take chances, and know that it’s okay to fail. Being able to relate to other people, both children and adults, and not to be afraid to voice their opinions respectfully.

Teacher 11 added:

When planning for activities, we prioritize in children feeling socially and emotionally comfortable. We focus on having conversations that support conflict resolution, negotiation, listening to different perspectives, turn taking by discussing a range of topics that come up, (besides the planned curriculum). Some of these
topics that children bring in the classroom may have to do with a transition due to a new baby, moving, and anything else going on in their lives outside the classroom that they “bring” with them and preoccupies them.

Admin. 2 shared the same thoughts:

First and foremost, we want them to feel confident and good about themselves. Once they are confident, their chances of loving school and learning, and being familiar with school procedures and expectations (sitting in a circle, raising their hand, being a friend, and respecting each other, transitions) increase. They will learn to read, add, and multiply when they are ready. They pick it up automatically when they are developmentally ready in a year or two. We are not here to push next year’s academics on them.

**Professional Development**

The second sub-theme to emerge regarding promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms from the collected data was professional development. It allowed for self-reflection and one’s growth in their practice. Participants were guided by the New York State Prekindergarten Standards and referred to them during professional learning sessions. The sessions were led by their director, guidance counselor, and/or administrators. Admin. 1 shared:

During these sessions, teachers’ and assistants’ roles are clearly defined. Their responsibilities within the classroom settings are explained, and the expected best teaching practices are shared. Among them, knowing each student well and through a growths mindset together brainstormed how to best meet all children’s unique needs to ensure their holistic well-being and development.
Teacher and assistant participants attended professional learning sessions throughout the year, but most participants shared that they were not specifically dedicated to gender as the main topic of focus. Teacher 2 stated:

No. We have not had PLs specifically on gender. It would be helpful in raising our awareness and staying up to speed with the latest developments in research. In case I’m doing something that I might not necessarily be aware of. As they say, once we know better, we’ll do better.

Teacher 3 shared: “Honestly, not really. We did implicit bias training, but nothing about gender.” Assistant 9 added: “No PL comes to mind. I have not received any guidelines, training, or support at all. But I do think it would help. I mean, it wouldn't hurt.” Those who did receive some training, it was done in conjunction with other areas of focus or during general meetings. During these meetings, gender was mentioned as one of the areas of focus. They felt it was helpful, but not enough. Teacher 11 stated:

We’ve touched on the topic briefly during our staff meetings, and we were told that they are planning to do more next year. So far, we were told to be conscious of being gender neutral through the materials we have available in the centers and the language we use.

Teacher 8 stated:

During a morning staff meeting, the guidance counselor talked to us about gender and the children's feelings, and gave us a chance to ask questions. One of the questions was, “What do we do when we have boys that want to dress up as girls? We might not necessarily mind, but it could be a potential problem with other parents.” Another teacher shared that in her old school, she had a boy who put on a
tutu and for his culture, that was not acceptable. The father was very upset, and, he didn't want to hear or see his child do that ever again. She was asking for guidance about what to do under those circumstances. We don't want to take him on the side and say “you can't wear that because you're a boy” or “you can't do that.” But then, how do you respect the family who is saying, “I don't want my son doing it because if he does that again, he’s going to get reprimanded when he comes home. We didn’t get any answers, but we did have that opportunity to share our thoughts around gender.

Teacher 10 shared:

We had some form of professional learning through Sanford Harmony. The program includes Z, who is gender-neutral and is visiting from another planet. It is focused on developing children’s social emotional well-being by guiding Z in how to engage in conversations, experiences and interactions regardless of their gender.

Assistant 7 added: “I have not yet, but we had some conversations at meetings telling us to try to be gender-neutral and give children options, rather than steering them in one direction or another because of their gender.” Many participants felt that beyond using gender-neutral pronouns, they needed to have a better understanding of the topic, before they could change their practice and can have difficult conversations when they come up.

Teacher 4 stated:

We have received very little training. It was limited to just the vocabulary we should use. No guidance on how to engage with the students or how to facilitate conversations. We need more information and support. There is so much more to
consider that we are not aware of. Where do we begin to navigate that? We must get comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations.

All participants agreed that training and professional development sessions would be helpful if conversations needed to be had with parents who are trying to navigate or understand their children. Assistant 1 stated: “We need more training with that. We need more knowledge of how to approach the work beyond just changing our language or pronouns. We must better understand before we make a big shift in our minds consciously.” Assistant 5 agreed:

We had just one PD. But I don’t think we had enough of those. We need more professional learning sessions on understanding the biological and psychological aspects of gender. If you just tell it to me once, along with all other things I’m supposed to be doing, and let’s say I am old fashioned, it wouldn’t make sense to me. But if you explain it to me, I’ll understand it better, and will make it easier for us to apply it in our classroom.

Some of the teacher, assistant, and administrator participants had taken the initiative to build their capacity around gender independently, whether it was through their lead teacher, academic coursework, or staying up to speed on the latest research. Assistant 5 shared:

I was trained by the teacher I was working with. Everything had to be fair and equal, regardless of the children’s gender. The family psychologist was also helpful in understanding how hurt and sensitive someone can be who has recently come out but is not supported by family members, especially when they’ve known from a very young age.
Assistant 4 shared:

I was a psychology major and for one of my undergraduate courses, I had taken a class on gender. We had discussions on equality. It was then that the seeds were planted about the idea that we don’t need to put in children’s minds that you are a little girl or that you’re a little boy. It is not healthy for them. But rather always being inclusive when addressing them. Allowing them to be what they feel comfortable with, without pushing on them any belief. You just let them be and they’ll be what they want and feel they’ll be.

Teacher 11 stated:

Although we have not received professional learning sessions from the school, I’ve pursued them personally on my own. I’ve subscribed to a lot of different organizations and newsletters, but I rarely see anything along those lines for early childhood, or preschoolers. Isn’t that interesting?

Admin. 1 shared:

I’ve done my due diligence in doing more research on best practices regarding gender identity and gender expression. On the school level, however, we need more extensive training and guidance on the topic, beyond the standards. It is difficult to do so when religion is involved.

Admin. 2 felt that gender-related conversations are like any other conversations an educator may have with a child’s grown-ups.

I’ve been in early childhood for 40yrs in early childhood. I’ve had a lot of difficult conversations, not even difficult, but sensitive, that may not have to do with gender identity. What I’ve always tried to be is somewhat reflective with them. I might say
“I observed this in school. Have you noticed something similar at home?” Without putting any judgements. Just to get their reaction and see how they feel. I would then say “I was just curious if you had any questions or concerns for me?” Just being reflective, supportive, and positive with them to see if they had something to say, and then I would say…,” In school we noticed that….” One must approach it delicately to see if they have questions or concerns and reassure them that I am here to support them.

Teacher 6 agreed:

I don’t feel awkward talking with the families if a concern comes up. It always comes from a place of care. I try to explain to them that they’ve only been in this world for three years. Everything is new to them. Whether it's a princess costume or a cowboy, it's probably something new, fun and interesting to them. It’s not something to feel concerned about.

The respective administrators in each of the schools, planned the professional learning sessions. However, since they were private, parochial schools, they had the freedom to plan these sessions without any specific guidance or requirements.

Administrators did refer to the DOE guidelines as a reference regardless. Admin.3 stated:

As a private school, we don't receive any guidelines or support with professional learning sessions. Especially when it comes to gender. The only time we get professional learning support is when we order a new curriculum-like in reading or math. Private schools have the freedom to do what they want, and teach what they want, and how we want. It's up to us to plan our own. We follow the Common Core Standards and try to mimic the DOE as much as possible. We do this to help our
students smoothly to public schools and the real world without being culture shocked.

Admin. 2 added:

I usually refer to the DOE guidelines. Since they are working so hard to support all that work with the Pre-K and 3K initiatives, I trust that whatever they suggest is always inclusive, diverse and gender sensitive. It makes my work as a director much easier. Since I have a diverse group of educators, they each have their own expertise and knowledge base, that they share and learn from each other.

Teacher 6 stated: “Our pre-k director shares with us about the latest updates, and we adjust our instruction accordingly. We could go to her and to each other for support. We’re all diverse, so we could all bring in something beautiful to the mix.”

Participants believed that there needed to be clearer guidelines with specific practical examples of gender flexible pedagogical practices and a better understanding of the “why” for this work. Assistant 1 shared:

Gender identity has lots of different layers to unpack. More education and knowledge is needed to understand how it affects the child’s well-being, especially when people are deeply seeped to traditional gender roles. It makes it hard to debunk them from that thinking.

They’ve found that the professional sessions that they learned the most from were ones that were ongoing, built on each other, had follow-up opportunities, offered differentiated support in the classroom, and encouraged reflection. Assistant 1 shared: “Trained professionals needed to lead these learning sessions regarding gender, because just like with race, if not approached accordingly, can easily elicit negative feelings and a lot of
discomfort and resentment.” Teacher 10 shared: “The PLs that I learned the most from, were ones that embedded within them opportunities for different perspectives and voices to be heard, individuals to speak their truth, as well as opportunities to address misconceptions.” One participant believed that there is no need for such professional learning experiences. Regardless if they were available or not. Teacher 9 stated:

I’m sure they are out there, but at the end of the day, I do what I feel is needed for my class. I am not going to teach my kids something that I don’t believe in. I struggle with that because there are times that we have workshops and in these workshops, they say “well, how do you identify? He or she?” And I'm like, “What do you mean? I'm just a child of God”. I will not be doing that in my classroom. And if they asked me to do that, I think at that point I'm going to resign. I cannot teach something I don't believe in.

Most participants acknowledged that change takes time, and the more informed and educated we become on the topic, the better we can support our students and have these conversations, especially when it comes to the taboo topics of gender and sexuality and the generational differences within the teaching teams. Admin.3 added:

You can’t punish veteran teachers for not knowing. They have not been prepared that way when they went to school. Like the old saying goes, “it's easier to train a puppy than to teach an old dog new tricks”. You can't beat your dog because he can't change. That’s how we, old timers grew up, and the education we received. And I've been doing it for 30 years. When you get young teachers that are coming out of the system, they are learning the new ways in their coursework and applying it in their classroom. It doesn't mean they are better teachers than the veterans ones.
It’s just that they’ve been developed in that area of focus in their respective teacher preparation programs.

**Resources**

The third sub-theme to emerge regarding promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms from the collected data was resources. Participants shared that resources played an essential role in promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms. Most participants had available the basic required items in the centers. For each theme unit, they referred to the suggested ones in their respective curriculum and added their own depending on their class interests and needs. Teacher 8 stated:

We use the materials provided within the curriculum, but we also add our own that we’ve collected over the years. It’s based on what children are interested in. They vary depending on class dynamics and skill levels as outlined in the developmental benchmarks.

Assistant 2 shared:

The provided materials are getting better, but in many ways, are still gender-biased. We do have more of a section of books that challenge gender stereotypes. For example, we have a book about a girl who wants to be a construction worker and a boy who wants to be a ballet dancer.

Admin. 3 added:

Our resources depend on the needs of the specific class. What they like to do, their interests, shows, etc. We bring in what we have that we think will be beneficial to the students’ development and will enhance the curriculum, especially when it is something that is project-based. Making connections to their interests and
experiences, and encourages collaboration. It is not necessarily based on their
gender.

Teacher 5 offered an example:

I like to read books like “Tango Makes Three”. A children’s book with animals in
it. Children can relate to that. But more needs to be included in the pre-k curriculum.
Personally, going to school in the East Village and my older brother being gay, I
became an LGBTQ supporter early on. I try to stay informed and have
conversations about being inclusive and supportive with both adults and children.
That’s why books like these are a much-needed resource. They help have these
conversations with children.

Some participants highlighted the importance of teaching teams bringing in artifacts
reflective of themselves as a form of resource. Doing so allows children to begin to
appreciate the individuals in their classroom as people, rather than as boys or girls.

Assistant 4 stated:

In addition to the suggested curriculum resources, we try to bring in items that are
reflective of us. It gives the children the opportunity to get to know each other as
individuals and to celebrate our class’s diversity. For example, I brought in a
ukulele to sing a few songs and we had like a little jam session. The next day,
children who had other instruments at home, brought them in and we put together
our very own band. We bring in our favorite books, share about our favorite foods,
activities, families, and hobbies. Getting to know and appreciating each other by
being present and following the children’s lead.
Leader and teacher participants shared that as the years passed, they have become much more intentional with having a variety of resources to address the diversity in the human population in their classroom. They try to include as many gender-neutral materials and multicultural items throughout the centers, as well as items representative of the children’s and community’s cultures and interests. They developed a system for vetting prospective resources a committee of leaders and teachers was assembled in each school. Admin. 1 shared:

Our committee is made up of the leaders and teaching teams. It helps to have a diverse group of individuals when deciding on ordering materials. We meet as needed to suggest and discuss what we need and what we should order. Since our budget is limited, during these meetings, we have conversations about the criteria we follow in selecting items. For example, how are they related to the theme unit, help develop students’ skills across the domains, and are reflective of the backgrounds of the school community. Members can argue and share why they are requesting a particular item or why they do not approve of another.

Assistant 6 stated, “When selecting the materials for our classrooms, we wear two hats— as parents and as teachers. Keeping mind the perspectives of both regarding gender and culture and what is considered age appropriate.” Admin. 3 shared:

We get together and order as a team. Everyone gives their input. It’s never one teacher doing it for all. We do it as a team, and of course they each can order their own specific items for their class. We knew immediately that this is what we needed. Bouncing off ideas from each other. We follow the curriculum recommendations and look at the early childhood catalogs—like Lakeshore or the
other ones. They have available some items that are gender-neutral. We look for items that are in packs instead of individual ones. Whether it is books, dolls, or dress up clothes. We trust that the company itself has already thought this through. When available, items were purchased in packs from the school supply companies. Participants trusted the companies had done their research before adding the items in the catalogs, so they didn’t have to do it themselves. They offered age-appropriate packs of literature, dress-up clothing, and dolls that promoted diversity in terms of race, culture and gender. Admin. 2 shared:

For years, we were looking through catalogues. Teachers would select what they wanted, but before the order was processed, I vetted it myself to ensure it was aligned with school’s vision and mission. Now that they follow a specific approved curriculum, they refer to the recommended resources, as well as the references included. So, I don’t need to vet as much as I used to anymore.

Many participants incorporated in their teaching Sesame Street resources and the Sanford Harmony program. Admin. 1 stated:

We’ve found that Sesame Street has stayed abreast with the latest research in early childhood, was culturally diverse, relatable to the children, and over the decades has been addressed social justice issues in developmentally appropriate ways. Sanford Harmony was used to provide social-emotional support and to help develop children’s social skills. Teacher 5 stated:

We love the Sanford Harmony program and the puppet Z. Embedded in it is the buddy system. It helps children to get to know each other, managing transitions, and making better choices. It makes a big difference, as children are oftentimes
more receptive to other children than always being reminded by an adult. It helps
them to have a friend model appropriate behaviors, while respecting and keeping
each of their unique personalities in mind.

One of the challenges participants shared was the lack of available gender-neutral
toys. Teacher 3 stated: “Even though we try to buy gender-neutral colors for items and
materials, there were not many things that are gender-neutral. For the most part, they are
either just blue or just pink.” Assistant 2 shared:

Since having become aware of how color affects how objects get gendered, our
team has become even more intentional with our selection of resources. However,
we’ve found that often, there were not many, if any, gender-neutral colors or items
to choose from.

Admin. 1 shared:

There is a slow shift as more and more toy and game companies are becoming
cognizant of this and realizing how valuable resources are in enhancing the
children’s experiences in the classroom. You also start seeing it in some retail store
chains. We have a long way to go compared to Europe.

Another source of resources was the school community. Participants would send a
newsletter or announce the upcoming unit of study via social media. Based on the
children’s interests and the projects they’ll be working on in the classroom, families were
encouraged to send in items accordingly. This was very helpful since they were parochial
schools and could not participate in the Donors Choose non-profit programs. Admin. 3
stated:
Since we are a religious parochial Greek school, we are limited with our choices and where we can purchase things from. For example, we don’t have access to Shop DOE or are able to participate in Donor’s Choice like they do in my daughter’s school.

Admin. 2 added:

By connecting and including families in their children’s learning in different ways, we have access to many more resources. Doing so allows us to celebrate and incorporate their diverse perspectives throughout the classroom. We ask for donations of items that they’d like to share with us, that will enhance the learning related to the theme unit. It gives us access to more resources and helps highlight children as individuals. It celebrates their differences, as they see pictures of their friends’ favorite foods, clothing, photographs, and anything else about them that they bring in related to our study, or is open-ended and can be used for our projects. Local businesses have also been very supportive over the years. Donating and doing what they can for their future patrons.

Since participants did not have access to those extra funds, and to try to differentiate their instruction, they researched and made their own resources as needed to meet their students’ needs. Doing so enabled them to create more gender-neutral resources. Teacher 4 shared:

You can only avoid doing your own research, staying up to date, and creating relevant resources to a certain extent. Sooner or later you will have a family that requires that additional support. When I started teaching many moons ago, I had a child that had two mommies. There weren’t any available resources, like books, in
the school as part of the curriculum. It took the initiative, willingness, and a lot of time.

Teacher 10 stated:

Since there isn’t much out there, I became a little bit more creative. I use my own kind of resources. We do cooking lessons, animal puppets that are gender-neutral and fun, write our own stories, and make our own videos. Puppets help connect with children. We use these puppets as characters to make our own videos. They go on different adventures and have different experiences. They give children a voice, build their confidence and broaden their perspectives. Using loose parts and open-ended materials in creative ways for making resources that meet our needs.

Admin.1 added

When we think about resources, we don’t necessarily think of the materials based on gender, but rather how you utilize any resource at hand to facilitate learning based on the individual child and the strategy being used. Supporting them in becoming strong individuals by always being respectful of their preferences and personalities without putting them on the spot.

Beyond physical items, participants mentioned having access to human capital resources such as guidance counselors, communicating with other early childhood professionals, and creating an organic learning community of educators. All teacher, assistant, and administrator participants expressed an interest in receiving ongoing updates regarding recommended resources to help them grow professionally, and enable them to differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students.
The artifacts of student records shared by the teacher participants, included work samples, photographs and anecdotes of students engaging in a range of activities and projects throughout the classroom and their day in school. Each of the artifacts provided a glimpse of the children’s experiences, and were focused on their holistic development as outlined by the domains of the New State Pre-Kindergarten Standards. The five domains of the New York State Pre-Kindergarten Standards are:

- Domain 1: Approaches to Learning
- Domain 2: Physical Development and Health
- Domain 3: Social and Emotional Learning
- Domain 4A: Communication, Language, and Literacy
  - Part A: Approaches to Communication
- Domain 4B: Communication, Language, and Literacy
  - Part B: English Language Arts and Literacy
- Domain 5a: Cognition and Knowledge of the World: Mathematics
- Domain 5b: Cognition and Knowledge of the World: Science
- Domain 5c: Cognition and Knowledge of the World: Social Studies
- Domain 5d: Cognition and Knowledge of the World: The Arts
- Domain 5e: Cognition and Knowledge of the World: Technology, Computer Science, and Digital Literacy

Each of the collected artifacts was annotated with a date as well as low inference notes of what the children were doing. Also included were dictations of what the students said during these experiences. The artifacts along with dictations and annotations, provided background information and the context for each of the documented experiences and
exchanges. When sharing the artifacts, teacher participants had them organized by the 10 themes of the monthly units of study, the specific part of the daily schedule on the Flow of the Day, and the corresponding centers where the experience/exchange took place. The 10 unit themes were:

- Unit 1: Welcome to Pre-K
- Unit 2: My Five Senses
- Unit 3: All About Us
- Unit 4: Where We Live
- Unit 5: Transportation
- Unit 6: Light
- Unit 7: Water
- Unit 8: Plants
- Unit 9: Babies
- Unit 10: Transformation

The schedule on the Flow of the Day was organized as follows:

- Arrival/Greeting Routines
- Breakfast
- Large Group Meeting
- Centers/Free Play
- Clean-Up, Handwashing, and Toileting
- Gross Motor Play
- Lunch
- Clean-Up, Handwashing, and Toileting
• Rest/Quite Time
• Closing Meeting
• Dismissal

The classroom centers were:

• Blocks/Construction
• Dramatic Play
• Art
• Science/Discovery
• Toys and Games/Math Manipulatives
• Sand Water/Sensory
• Library
• Computer/Technology
• Writing
• Music and Movement

The shared student records corroborated the themes that emerged from what each of the teacher, assistant, and administrator participants had shared during the one to one and focus group interviews. For instance, children were encouraged to engage in a range of activities throughout the day based on their interests, and without any limitations due to their gender. As evidenced in the collected artifacts, teachers’ personal and professional identities, as well as the leadership and policy in place in their respective schools, was revealed in the types of activities they planned for their students, and the established classroom culture and expectations. The shared student records for this study were also identified by the teachers, as their collected data for
each of their students. By engaging in this ongoing cycle of data collection, it allowed them to get to know their students well and to plan their instruction accordingly. The collection and organization of the collected data was also instrumental in using them to build the individual student profiles. The teachers and assistants utilized these profiles to tell the story for each of the students’ progress, from the beginning of the year, and in the months to follow.

The data included in the profiles, helped in scaffolding their students’ learning across the domains of the New State Pre-Kindergarten Standards, tracking their progress, and adjusting their instruction as needed to support their students in reaching each of the benchmarks along the way. Regardless of whether the students were boys or girls, the work samples, photographs and anecdotes revealed children engaging in a range of individualized experiences and interactions throughout the day’s activities. Based on the human diversity in their classrooms, teachers and assistants were present to the student’s backgrounds, experiences and interests, and by assuming a strengths-based approach, supported their students, in reaching their individual goals. These goals were set based on the guidance of the New York State Pre-Kindergarten Standards, the collected data, and the results of the respective developmental screenings administered by the teachers, with each of the students, at the beginning of the school year.

The artifacts of anecdotes and photographs also provided a snapshot of children’s stages of gender development and their willingness to explore with cross-gender experiences, when interacted with the adults in their lives and with their peers. The collection and interpretation of the collected anecdotal notes and photos also revealed
the observers’, in this case, teachers’ and assistants’, understandings of gender development, as well as those of the children’s families. Teachers’ and assistants’ understandings of gender development and their focus in promoting gender inclusivity were depicted in the shared student records, by providing an insight to the teachers’ and assistants’

- planning,
- exchanges with the children,
- how they observed and interpreted children’s experiences,
- their use of available resources, and
- how they connected and applied their learning from professional development sessions to their everyday work with their students.

The family’s understandings of gender development were evidenced by what they disclosed about their children to the teachers in the questionnaires completed in the beginning of the year, as well as what they shared during their daily exchanges with the teachers. Families regularly communicated with the teachers their expectations for their children, along with the experiences they exposed and encouraged their children to engage in, both in and out of school. These exchanges were documented by the teachers and shared as part of the student records. The analysis of the shared student records of work samples, photographs and anecdotes, affirmed the emerging themes of this study. The connection of themes and sub-themes to the three research questions of the study, are depicted in Table 4.
Table 4

*Connection of Themes and Subthemes to the Research Questions*

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Conclusion

This chapter focused on the main thematic components that result from the case study data. Through the data analysis, three overarching themes emerged, and three subthemes were raised for each. Table 4 shows the connection of the themes and subthemes to the research questions.

- The first research question in the study investigated pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender. The analysis of the data found that teachers’ personal and professional identity, the human diversity in the classroom, the leadership and policy in place in their respective schools, as well as their professional development influenced teachers’ perceptions of gender.

- The second research question in this study investigated how do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning. The analysis of the data revealed that when planning their instruction, participants were guided by their own personal and professional experiences of gender, the human diversity in their classroom, and the leadership and policy in place in their schools. Teachers’ knowledge about agents of gender development, such as biology, peers, teachers, and families, as well as societal expectations, were also considered when curriculum planning, and adopting gender flexible practices.

- The third research question in the study examined how do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity. The analysis of the data found that pre-k teachers promoted gender inclusivity through their gender flexible pedagogical practices, professional development, and their access to resources. Also of importance when
promoting gender inclusivity, was teachers’ personal and professional identity, and their knowledge of agents of children’s gender development.

For a more detailed discussion on the connection between the themes and subthemes to the research questions, please refer to Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will provide the reader with an interpretation of results, the relationship between results and prior research, limitations, implications for future research, and implications for future practice.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study was an exploratory case study of pre-k teachers, assistants, and administrators from three Greek Orthodox parochial schools from the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. The study examined how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender exploration and expression. This study addressed three research questions.

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
2. How do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?
3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

The data was collected with two focus groups of teacher and teacher-assistants, seven individual interviews of teachers, six individual interviews with teacher-assistants, three individual interviews of administrators, as well as a content analysis of student work samples, and photos of students engaging in different activities in preschool related to play.

An analysis of the data collected revealed three key findings that emerged across the teachers, assistants, administrators, and content analysis.

- First, teachers’ perceptions about gender were shaped by their personal and professional identity. They each had unique and individual life experiences in terms of where they grew up, their family dynamics, and their intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs. The human diversity in each of their classrooms over the years, where teachers worked, as well as with whom,
and the guidance received in terms of policy from their respective leaders, also played a role in shaping their perspectives about gender.

- Second, teachers believed that there are different agents of children’s gender development. The ongoing interactions with the individuals in the children’s lives, such as their family, teachers, and peers, provided the contexts and models children used to form their gender schemas. It is through schemas that children begin to interpret their world and what their memories are based on. Social expectations of how boys and girls should be were being communicated to children through the messages they received from a range of media, such as books, television shows, and toys. Biological considerations, such as hormones and chromosomes, were also viewed as contributing agents to children’s gender development.

- Third, teachers promoted gender inclusivity in their classrooms by implementing gender flexible pedagogical teaching practices. The data showed how teachers interacted with the children in their classrooms, their expectations, the language they used, and the planning of a broad repertoire of play experiences were some of the gender flexible pedagogical practices used to promote gender inclusivity. Receiving professional development, as well as sharing and accessing resources during collaborative planning time, was helpful in enhancing and equitably differentiating their instruction in each of their classrooms.

Chapter two included descriptions of Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning and cognitive learning theory as the primary theoretical framework to explain gender, and Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2006) microsystem level on understanding how children’s
family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers affect their development. Chapter three presented the study’s methods and procedures. Chapter four explored the data analysis, which yielded the themes through cycles of coding, and discussed the study’s findings. This chapter contains the interpretation of the findings from the analyzed data discussed in Chapter 4. It addresses each of the three research questions, and the relationship of the findings to the existing literature that was reviewed in chapter two. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion statement.

**Implications of the Findings**

Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning and cognitive learning theory was the primary theoretical framework to explain gender, while Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) microsystem level on understanding how children’s family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood and peers affect their development, underpinned this study, and were used to describe the implications of the findings herein. The theoretical frameworks presented provide important insights into how early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender explorations and expression. For this undertaking, the pre-k teachers served as the main actors, while the assistants and administrators were the supporting actors.

**Research Question #1**

The first research question in the study investigated pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender. The analysis of the data found that teachers’ personal and professional identity, the human diversity in the classroom, as well as the leadership and policy in place in their respective schools influenced their perceptions of gender. Pre-K teachers’ personal life
experiences in terms of family dynamics, parents’ roles in the household, when and where they grew up, and their intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs shaped their traditional or more progressive gender perceptions. These findings were also supported by what was shared by the assistant and administrator participants. The theoretical framework of Kohlberg’s (1966) social learning and cognitive learning theory, highlights how social interactions play a fundamental role in children’s overall development, and how economic, social and cultural factors impact how children grow and develop across the cognitive, social, physical and emotional domains. The type of family children grow up in, such traditional, single parent, gay and lesbian parent homes, and the presence of siblings, also affect children’s perceptions of gendered behaviors (Blakemore et al., 2009).

Early in their development as children, through direct instruction and differential reinforcement, most of the teachers’ parents encouraged gender-appropriate activities and discouraged cross-gender activities. Through the framework of Kohlberg’s (1966) cognitive environmental approach, the personal, behavioral, and environment factors in children’s lives interact with each other, and influence their behavior. Children observed, imitated and followed the behavior of individuals who were of the same sex, and became increasingly aware of gender stereotypes. Teachers who grew up with more traditional views of gender, expressed discomfort with its more expansive definition, and understood how directly and indirectly, religion and working in a parochial school, might influence their pedagogical decisions throughout the day’s activities. There were differences in the individual beliefs and practices of the educators. Prior research into this topic corroborated the understanding that gender is a complex area, with a wide range of
opinions on how it is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society (Chapman, 2016).

By seeing the individuals in the culture in which they lived, and the gender-typed behaviors within it, pre-k teachers constructed representations about that which defines males and females (Bem, 1981). Referring to Kohlberg’s (1966) theoretical framework, participants learned about gender by observing their world, and internalizing others’ responses to the same gender real-life models and symbolic models when they engage in gender-type behaviors. They sought out and embarked upon an active search for evidence of gender-appropriate role models to identify with and imitate. Affirming, that gender development occurs through the interactions and relationships with individuals in one’s immediate circle, communities and wider society. Abiding by each of the respective expectations, was imperative, or as Sullivan (2009) posited, “in our society, individuals who deviate from the economic, religious, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation norms are frequently unsupported, ridiculed, discriminated against, ostracized, and/or physically harmed” (p. 36). Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) theoretical framework of microsystem level, highlights and guides the finding that participants’ families, schools, religious institutions, neighborhoods and peers, were part of the microsystem level factors, of five levels that affect gender development. This finding is constant with Little’s (2001) assertion that a person’s behavior and how socially acceptable it is, can affect the extent to which they of their sense of belonging, membership, inclusion, agency, or marginalization in a particular group or community.

Teachers and administrators agreed that professional experiences, such as where one worked and with whom, affected their gender perceptions as well. Over the years,
due to the human diversity in their classrooms, participants’ gender perceptions evolved. Both teachers and administrators emphasized the importance of leadership and policy in shaping one’s attitudes towards gender perceptions. The leadership structures in place helped to bridge the theoretical aspect of their teacher training programs into practice. Both teachers and administrators highlighted and emphasized the importance of ongoing self-reflection on one’s gender perceptions and adjusting curriculum planning and instruction accordingly, based on the most current provided guidance, policy, and individual student needs. This is supported by Bryan’s (2012) prior research, who made the analogy of the individual functioning as a barometer who regularly check-ins with one’s self, and stays informed through professional development (p.128). Participating in different stages of professional development can help change educators’ behavior and practices. However, before that can happen, they first need to raise their awareness by engaging in an ongoing reflection cycle of - teach, self-assess, consider, practice, teach.

Research Question #2

The second research question in this study investigated how do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning. The analysis of the data revealed that when planning their instruction, participants were guided by their own personal and professional experiences of gender. As Teacher 6 and Admin. 3 shared, over the years, participants have grown both personally and professionally, as they’ve adjusted their classroom practices and curriculum planning based on students’ backgrounds, experiences, individual needs, and interests, and the increasingly diversified leadership and teaching teams. Admin. 3 shared the following: “We’ve been doing a lot of work around ceasing the teachable moments, answering children’s questions, and addressing
students’ wonderings in a reflective manner.” While teacher 5 added: “We have been focusing on incorporating within our instruction aspects of children’s experiences, language, culture, race, and artifacts, as well as being inclusive of genders and different abilities, and sharing more about ourselves.” The finding supports the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) microsystem, which argues that when engaging with students, to best meet their needs and support them in reaching their full potential, teachers play a vital role in investing in getting to know each of their students’ holistically, and understanding how each aspect of their lives affects their learning in the classroom.

Early childhood educators’ individual beliefs and practices influenced their social environment, choices, and interactions with their students within each setting. This is supported by the existing research literature that pointed to the understanding that when teachers enter the classroom, they bring themselves with them. Their personal feelings, early childhood memories, prejudices, values, beliefs, and attitudes, all accompany them, as they struggle to gender young children to become future citizens of a world; a world that is developing more rapidly than we can imagine (Jacobson, 2011, p. 11). Consequently, “while unintentional, a teacher’s inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices” (Aina & Cameron, 2011).

Cognizant of what they learned over the years, early childhood teachers, curriculum planned to best prepare their students with the skills needed to be successful in life. They started by first investing in getting to know each of their students holistically, and by analyzing the collected data and observations, developed
individualized goals. The student goals were aligned to the New York State Pre-Kindergarten Standards and the guidance received from their administrators regarding the latest policy. By having a better understanding of their students’ lives, backgrounds, experiences, individual needs, interests, behaviors, and abilities, many educators adjusted their curriculum planning accordingly. They were supporting their students in progressing towards reaching each of the benchmark goals, and achieving the expected outcomes. Rather than limiting them based on whether they were boys or girls (Bandura, 1986), participants demonstrated Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) microsystem theory by differentiating their instruction to best support their students’ needs, and helping them each reach their full potential.

When developing curriculum goals and determining areas of focus, pre-k teachers viewed their students as individuals, and from a gender expansive lens. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) maintain that human development takes place through complex interactions between an active and evolving human organism and the persons and objects in their environment. The nature of these interactions influenced children’s development, and varied based on each of their individual attributes and character traits. Gender conscious educators committed in creating classroom environments that promote gender flexible pedagogy, the willingness to resist potential gender bias, or being gender blind. Gender-related information and play experiences impacted the way children responded to their social world (Bigler et al., 2013). Pre-k teachers examined the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in children’s lives, and how they each interacted with each other, and how they each influenced their behavior. Curriculum planning, interactions, and experiences were then tailored to meet students’ individual learning needs. Since
children’s development of gender identity was shaped by their experiences, changes in their thought process, and perceptions of gender behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 2006), pre-k teachers believed that through their curriculum planning, they played a vital role in their students’ gender development.

Kohlberg’s (1966) theoretical framework of stages of gender role development, argued that knowledge of gender and gender-related behavior constitutes a cognitive category, and develops in the same way as a knowledge of any cognitive category. Based on age-related changes, children’s self-efficacy and self-regulatory control (Kohlberg, 1966), results in children responded differently to the planned curriculum for each of the day’s activities. Seeing children’s responses, pre-k teachers differentiated their curriculum planning and instruction accordingly to best support their students’ individual needs, and help them each reach their full potential.

Pre-k teachers’ knowledge of children’s gender development also influenced their curriculum planning. They regularly reflected and collaborated with their peers, assistants, and administrators, to consider how the planned activities affected students’ experiences, attention, memories, attitudes, and behaviors in making sense of their world. In doing so, these experiences helped children become driven by their own individual motivation to acquire their knowledge about genders and sought information to form their gender schemas (Bem, 1981). In his framework, Kohlberg (1966) argued that children go through three stages of gender development- gender identity, gender stability, and gender consistency. The theoretical framework can be used to further understand the connection.

During the gender identity stage, participants noticed that children first became aware of their gender and labeled their own and others as a boy or a girl, by relying
heavily on external appearances, such as hair and clothes. For example, children would say, “she is a girl because she had long hair,” while the girl with short hair was thought to be a boy. Not realizing yet that gender is fixed over time and situation, during the gender stability stage, early childhood educators observed how children saw their gender as fixed across time for themselves. For example, a boy believed he would become a man, and a daddy, but did not yet understand that the same applied to his peers. During the gender consistency stage, despite external appearance changes, time and situation, participants found that their students perceived gender as being fixed for everyone. Meaning a boy saw his dad as a male, identified as him, and began to imitate his dad’s behaviors, such as pretending to be shaving when playing in the dramatic play area. He was then curious and wanted to find out all about what other men and boys do, and went out of his way to try and find what gender behaviors their gender does.

It alludes, that depending on which stage of gender development each of the children was in, it affected their interactions and engagement in the planned activities. They begin to exercise their preference for gender-typed toys or activities, and look for same-sex models, such as an individual from teachers and older siblings to media personalities. Children select and organize gender-related information and the information gets stored in their memory for future reference. As children go through each of the stages and are exposed to social influences, they develop schemas, mental processes, perceptions, thinking, and thought patterns associated with gender development. Their diverse experiences and schemas help them make in the moment gender behavior decision-making to become easier and quicker (Bem, 1981). It is during this time, that children developed a concept of gender, and embarked upon an active
search for evidence that confirms that concept (Kohlberg, 1966). Similarly, once children recognize their own gender groups and begin to build schemas, they can only be one or the other, with little flexibility. For instance, boys showed greater resistance to opposite sex activities than girls, which are likely to be social in origin, as dads were more likely to punish them for doing boys’ activities (Slaby & Frey, 1975).

As demonstrated by Kohlberg’s (1966) gender development theoretical framework, once these gender concepts were developed, it was hard to change them. In addition, Bem (1983) argued that traditional gender roles are restrictive for both men and women, and can have negative consequences for individuals as well as society. Keeping this in mind, to support their students in reaching their full potential, when curriculum planning, early childhood educators considered children’s agents of gender development—1. biology, 2. family, teacher and peer influences, 3. social expectations. This major theme corroborated with the elements of Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) microsystem level of ecological systems theoretical framework. It is analogous to each of these agents contributing to children’s gender development and perceptions. The interconnections within the microsystems and interactions between the family and teachers, as well as the relationships between the child’s peers and their family, made up the mesosystem. Children’s families, schools, religious institutions, neighborhoods, and peers were part of the children’s microsystem, and served as agents of their gender development.

When curriculum planning, pre-k teachers felt that they could intervene in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach. As Kambouri-Danos & Evans (2019) alluded, “when young children are learning to understand gender from the world and adults around them, the literature has shown that it
can be hard for them to avoid absorbing and internalizing the gender stereotypes that dominate society” (p.39). By adopting gender flexible teaching practices, they can interfere at the very beginning of an individual’s educational trajectory and earliest experiences, and consequently create spaces that promote gender inclusivity and exploration. The research literature supports this by highlighting that “educators who adopt a commitment to gender egalitarianism and thus promote cross-gender interaction, expose pupils to counter-stereotypic models, and discuss and teach challenges to gender stereotyping and harassment optimize their pupils’ developmental outcomes” (Bigler et al., 2013, p.3).

**Research Question #3**

The third research question in the study examined how do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity. The analysis of the data found that pre-k teachers promoted gender inclusivity through their gender flexible pedagogical practices. These included how pre-k teachers interacted with the children in their classrooms and their expectations, the language they used, and the planning of a broad repertoire of play experiences. By pre-k teachers setting the tone of expected behaviors, it allowed students to rotate independently throughout the day’s activities and for teachers to be able to interact, actively engage, scaffold, and differentiate their students’ learning to promote gender inclusivity. These findings were also affirmed by the assistants’ and administrators’ responses, as well as what was shared in the student artifacts.

When interacting with their students, most pre-k teachers promoted gender inclusivity by addressing their students using gender-neutral and inclusive language and focused on building their communication skills—supporting children in being able to
independently express their ideas, needs, and wants, as they began to advocate for themselves. The experiences shared and findings described bear witness to Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) ecological systems theory. The theory points to the understanding that children’s interactions with their immediate environment, their individual relationships, and connections within their communities, as well as the wider society and the societal factors within it, affect children’s development. Through their interactions and experiences, children were intrinsically motivated to understand the social world around them and sought information as active agents in their gender socialization. It is through the interactions between an active and evolving human organism and the persons and objects in their environment that human development takes place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The quality of teacher–student interactions in these environments depended on the degree to which personalized learning can take place and whether a student’s characteristics, such as living situation, and stage of development, were part of their personalized learning plan (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children did not only engage in these interactions, but also observed and monitored how others interacted and reacted to the modeled and gender-normed behaviors (Kohlberg, 1966).

To promote gender inclusivity, along with intentional interactions and using gender-neutral language, pre-k teachers prioritized planning for a broad repertoire of differentiated play experiences. They used open-ended materials and adjusted their instruction accordingly to meet students’ individual needs. Knowing that a child’s nature depends on the context they grew up in and everything that is in their surrounding environment, pre-k teachers differentiated their instruction, as guided by their awareness
of the student diversity in their classrooms and children’s respective agents of gender
development- 1. biology, 2. family, teacher and peer influences, 3. social expectations
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These were taken into consideration when pre-k
teachers met students where they were developmentally and by assuming a strengths-
based approach. By following children’s lead and interests through their differentiated
and individualized play experiences, pre-k educators helped their students reach their full
potential holistically, regardless if they were boys or girls.

Most pre-k teachers, as affirmed by the assistants and administrators in the study,
emphasized the importance of professional development and collaboration to promote
gender inclusivity. This subtheme is supported by the research literature of Robinson and
Diaz (2006), who highlighted how imperative it is for early childhood teachers to engage
in professional learning sessions that build their capacity to understand gender identity
and expression. Since, just like their students, teachers’ perceptions of gender were a
result of their socialization, many participants stressed the importance of engaging in
professional learning sessions with a focus on understanding the difference between
biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression, and being mindful not to use the
terms interchangeably. As Paechter (2007) posits, “unlike biological sex, which develops
in utero, gender identity and gender expression are learned, constantly reworked and
reconfigured, and enacted to the self and others” (p. 14).

It was during these collaborative common planning and learning sessions that pre-
k teachers shared and discussed ideas, engaged in informal professional development,
and brainstormed how to enhance the quality of their curriculum and instruction. The
exchange of ideas during these collaborative planning and professional development
sessions helped promote gender equitable and inclusive preschool classroom environments. A common sub-theme that emerged in promoting gender inclusivity was also the need for resources and professional development that is focused on gender. Participants appreciated and valued the site-wide practice of coming together as a committee for the sharing, requesting, and ordering of materials. It gave them access to a broader range of resources from the diverse perspectives of each of the educators and increased the chances of them meeting the broad needs and interests of the student population. Although the committees sought and intended to purchase gender neutral learning resources, many pre-k teachers expressed frustration with the limited amount of available such items. For instance, they had found that much of the available merchandise from the school supply vendors and overall toy industry market were gender categorized.

To address the need for gender neutral resources, pre-k teachers made their own resources. It allowed them to differentiate their instruction and enrich their students’ experiences. Additionally, to enhance their collection of available resources and to help bridge the home-school connection, pre-k teachers reached out to the school community. Pre-k teachers would send a newsletter and announce via social media the upcoming unit of study. Based on the children’s interests and the projects they’d be working on in the classroom, families were invited to send in materials accordingly. Families were also welcomed to join the class virtually, as guest speakers- to share their expertise as they relate to the unit of study. At the end of the unit, pre-K teachers celebrated the learning that happened across the weeks by sharing with the families the culminating activity, and thanking them all for their ongoing support and donations. Beyond the physical and diverse materials and resources received, participants
highlighted the value of having access to human capital resources and communicating with other professionals, such as the school guidance counselors, and joining remotely learning communities of like-minded educators. Many pre-k teachers incorporated in their teaching Sesame Street resources and those of the Sanford Harmony program, while they all expressed an interest in receiving ongoing updates regarding the latest recommended resources. Not only to help them grow professionally but also to enable them to differentiate their instruction in meeting the diverse needs of their students.

**Relationship Between Results and Prior Research**

The study provided connections between the prior research discussed in Chapter 2, and the current results based on the data, data analysis, and findings. These connections have been explored within the context of the three primary questions investigated throughout this study.

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
2. How do pre-k educators’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?
3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

**Teachers’ Personal and Professional Identity**

The first major finding of the study was that pre-k teachers’ perceptions about gender were shaped by their personal and professional identity. They each had unique and individual life experiences in terms of where they grew up, their family dynamics, and their intergenerational cultural and religious family values and beliefs. The human diversity in each of their classrooms over the years, where participants worked, as well as with whom, and the guidance received in terms of policy from their respective leaders,
contributed in shaping their professional identity and consequently their perspectives about gender.

Pre-k teachers grew up within the parameters of their respective cultures and religions. For some it was the path they would like to follow when they had their own families, while others insisted on living differently than how they grew up. Early childhood pre-k teachers, from patriarchal male and female traditional households, were exposed to very distinct gendered roles. This discovery affirmed prior research literature which showed that “gender is learned [within the early years] through the observation an internalization interactions of how certain behavior from the child is received and rewarded” (Massey, 2013, p. 12), and through everyday interactions, individuals develop gender roles and identities consistent with the stereotypical expectations of society and by their interactions with familiar adults (Browne, 2004) in their lives.

Pre-k teachers’ perspectives were also influenced by where they grew up and lived. Although participants may have come from the same country, there was a range of intercultural and intracultural similarities and differences. Those who grew up in the cities had more progressive gender role expectations, while those who grew up in the villages abided to ones that were more stereotypical. The finding is supported by the existing literature that states the type of family children grow up in, such as traditional, single parent, gay and lesbian parents, and presence of siblings, also affect children’s perceptions of gendered behaviors (Blakemore et al., 2009). Participants’ gender, birth order and personalities also affected the type of activities and experiences they’ve had. First born participants had to assume more stereotypical responsibilities, while younger ones engaged in activities usually attributed to the opposite sex. This study also affirmed
existing research literature by revealing that females tended to express beliefs stronger in
gender congruency than do males when it comes to occupations and activities (Baker et
al., 2016). Partaking in counseling sessions with family members who were LGBTQ, or
hearing the perspectives of the younger generation by having conversations with their
own children about gender, helped participants see gender as being a more fluid and
expansive lens. Those who grew up with strong intergenerational cultural and religious
family values and beliefs struggled with society’s current liberal mindsets.

Professionally, pre-k teachers were shaped by the norms, expectations, culture
and traditions of their respective school communities realizing that regardless of their
ethnic backgrounds there were a lot of cultural similarities regarding their upbringing and
respective gender expectations. Pre-k teachers’ work was guided by the directives
provided by their school administrators and program directors, and in the case of co-
teachers and teachers’ assistants by the beliefs and attitudes of the lead teachers in the
classroom. The human diversity in their classroom, both in terms of students and
teachers, allowed participants to be exposed to perspectives, experiences, and points of
view different than their own. Most felt confident in their abilities to create classroom
environments that are inclusive, promote acceptance, and encourage students to be
independent.

As experienced the pre-k teachers may have been, they still questioned
themselves, and felt uncomfortable having conversations around the topic of gender.
They found it to be complicated and very delicate to discuss both professionally and with
their students’ parents. Administrators did not believe it was their responsibility to have
conversations with families related to gender unless a concern came up. If something
came up, they would consult and work with the appropriate adults— the school guidance
counselor and the students’ families. Administrators felt that they were not equipped to
have these conversations since they were not trained in it and at times felt that their hands
were tied by the religious dogmas of the Greek parochial schools.

Having the opportunity to connect and regularly collaborate with their colleagues,
allowed pre-k teachers to problem solve, share best practices, and better understand the
multiple layers of gender. By working with a diverse team of educators, it helped build
their capacity when working with students of diverse backgrounds, and advocating for
them by being sensitive to their unique needs. The finding is supported by previous
research which asserted that as educators, if we want to create a more equitable learning
environment, we need to engage in examining the curricula materials available to the
students, to ensure they are representative of the student population we serve (Weiler,
2009). Furthermore, “no matter their race, gender, family constellation, or financial
situation, they are reflected in our curriculum and have a mirror in which to see their
reality reflected…What is a mirror to one child, is a window to another” (Bryan, 2012, p.
151).

Agents of Children’s Gender Development

The second major finding of the study showed pre-k teachers’ beliefs on
children’s agents of gender development. Biological considerations, such as hormones
and chromosomes were viewed as the main contributing agent in determining if a child
was a boy or a girl. The individuals in the children’s lives, such as their family, teachers
and peers, and their ongoing interactions provided the contexts and models children used
to form their gender schemas. Social expectations of how boys and girls should be were
communicated to children through the messages they received from a range of media, such as books, television shows, and toys. The finding is supported by the existing research literature that explores gender development through the lens of biology, nurture, and culture. Gender is a complex topic, with a wide range of opinions on how it is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society (Ehrensaft, 2016).

Early childhood pre-k teachers believed that when children first come to school, their gender is determined by their biology. They are too young to think they are any different. Meaning that if they were born with a vagina, they are girls, while those with a penis are boys. There were a few outliers whose views differed from the rest regarding biology. They attributed their progressive views to one or more of the following reasons: academic coursework, having family members who had come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual over the years, or whose own children had raised their awareness of biological considerations that affect individuals’ gender identity.

The individuals in children’s lives, such as family, teachers, and peers contributed to their gender development. Pre-k teachers believed that since the time children were born and before they came to their pre-k classrooms, they have been engaging with their families. The children’s family members and primary caretakers were their first teachers. Consequently, children’s behaviors mirrored the expectations about gender they’ve experienced and have been taught directly or indirectly from home. Past research by Zosuls et al. (2009) concluded that the acquisition of gender labels starts in infancy, and how children come to school already with gender perceptions based on their interactions and perceptions from home (Blakemore et al., 2009). What children internalize through their experiences with their families, becomes evident when they play and engage
throughout the day’s activities in the classroom. Students’ family perspectives continued to shape and affect children’s understandings and outlooks long after children had entered school.

Teachers and assistants kept children’s diverse backgrounds and experiences in mind, and by assuming a strengths-based approach, and were supportive in pushing their thinking and scaffolding them out of their comfort zone. Brown and Irby (2011) highlighted the importance of teachers being aware of the changing student demographics in their early childhood environments, and adjusting their practice accordingly based on their understandings of their students’ diverse needs (p.174). The gender perspectives that children brought from home and their parents’ support, varied based on parenting styles, the location of each of the schools, and the community demographics. Very few of the pre-k teachers had met parents who challenged traditional social expectations regarding gender or had adopted gender creative parenting. Although many pre-k teachers understood why parents might choose to conform to the more traditional societal gender expectations, they felt that in many ways limited children’s experiences. The belief of these early childhood teachers is supported by the literature review which highlighted the value of children exploring, without being limited based on societal standards of acceptable gender behaviors. By encouraging them to explore and develop self-identity and giving them access to all opportunities that would typically be out of reach in a heteronormative, straight or cisgender world, will be like starting their own sort of gender revolution (Kyl, 2020). Pre-k teachers felt that since they may not be aware of the parents’ gender perspectives, they felt challenged as to how to proceed if a situation arose with a child who may not fit those boxes or categories. At times, they’ve found
themselves in a difficult position trying to manage what they believed was their teaching philosophy, and what the students’ family expectations were.

Early childhood educators were in the unique position to serve as agents of children’s overall and gender-specific development. Acknowledging their role and responsibility in preparing their students for the future, in distinct ways, they were intentional in the tone they set in their classroom and the messages they sent to their students of what is possible. When teachers enter the classroom, they bring themselves with them. They are accompanied by their personal feelings, early childhood memories, prejudices, values, beliefs, and attitudes. They all serve as their compass in planning and creating a roadmap in how to gender and support young children in becoming future citizens of the world (Jacobson, 2011).

Just like the children’s families, pre-k teachers exposed children to experiences that they felt would be beneficial for the children’s future success. Although they each had unique beliefs and practices as educators, they had similar views in terms of overall student goals. Early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influenced children’s experiences in a gender fluid manner. Students were given the freedom to be and do as they liked, as long as they were respectful of everyone within their classroom community, and acted within the parameters of the class norms and expectations. The results of the study aligned with the literature which highlighted the value of ongoing reflection for educators who had committed to gender consciousness in their practice, and focused on countering gender stereotypes (Bigler et al., 2013). Based on what they noticed happening in their classrooms, they adjusted their interactions, and implemented activities that acquainted children to cross gender roles activities in their own ways, to
challenge gendered practices rooted in implicit gender beliefs (Solomon & Henderson, 2016). Past research concluded that the individual differences in the beliefs and perceptions of educators emerge in their practice and are thus transferred to the children. These views also affect educators’ roles, engagement, involvement, and facilitation of children’s play—where they play, how they engage in play, and what they play (Chapman, 2016, p. 1271). Many pre-k teachers view children’s play experiences as forms of children’s knowledge production and thinking (Garcia et al., 2021).

Once early childhood educators commit to engaging in this work of gender consciousness, they can then make interventions in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach through gender flexible teaching practices by intervening at the very beginning of an individual’s educational trajectory. Before educators can make interventions in the social reproduction of gendered practices and behaviors of those they teach, they must first raise their awareness and then engage in reflective practice. This was affirmed by existing literature that revealed how teachers engage in reflective practice by becoming aware of their implicit knowledge base and learning from their experience (Schön, 1984, p.50)—reflecting on a “past performance and searching for new perspectives and new solutions” (Yip, 2006, p.779).

Along with family and teachers, pre-k teachers believed that the peers in children’s lives could positively or negatively impact their gender development. Throughout the day’s activities, and particularly during play, when children engage in new activities and experiences with their peers, they develop their gender identity. By engaging with their peers in and out of school, children developed social skills, and pro-social behaviors, such as using manners and forming relationships were also reinforced.
Before children became aware of their gender, they explored independently in each of the centers and with all friends, regardless if they were boys or girls. As they become aware of their gender identity, they stay within their comfort zone, and interact with friends who had common interests, were of the same sex, and in activities that would be considered gender-stereotyped. Boys prefer more physical activities, while girls enjoy more domestic ones. As they got older, they became more willing to engage with peers of the opposite sex and in a broader range of activities. The findings affirmed existing research literature, which showed that both boys and girls teased their respective peers, when engaging with members of the opposite gender, and tended to gravitate towards those who engage in same interest and gendered play experiences (Blakemore et al., 2019, p. 377).

The findings revealed what existing research had shown in terms of early childhood settings being quite gendered when it comes to the children’s gendered perceptions and behaviors. Girls gravitated towards the art center and dramatic play area, pretending to be mommies and princesses. The boys engaged in more aggressive and physical play pretended to be superheroes. Assuming leadership and mostly seen in the building corner (Barea & Martin, 2020). Interestingly, the similarities between boys and girls far outweighed the differences. The largest and most consistent differences are in verbal, language and certain spatial skills. Verbal skills favor girls, while spatial skills favor boys. Girls perform better on tasks involving flexibility and fine motor coordination, while boys show relational and physical aggression. These are also dependent on their individual personality traits. There were no consistent differences in prosocial behaviors or emotions.
Having playmates or friends of both genders, as well as of other cultures, ethnicities, and abilities, leads to a broader set of experiences. These will consequently influence the quality of their relationships, interactions, and sense of belonging.

Children’s holistic development is enhanced when engaging with peers of both sexes (Blakemore et al., 2009). Individual behavior and how socially acceptable it is can affect the extent of their belonging, membership, inclusion, agency, or marginalization in a group or community (Jacobson, 2011). In a study conducted by Hilliard and Liben (2010), children were observed engaging in play with their peers. After two weeks of peer play observations, under high salience conditions, children showed significantly increased gender stereotypes, less positive ratings of other-sex peers, and decreased play with other-sex peers. Children's own activity and occupational preferences, however, remained unaffected. They are highlighting the importance of creating gender-flexible spaces that are free of gender bias.

Pre-k teachers found that the social expectations children are exposed to since they are born to impact their gender-stereotyped preferences and behaviors. They believed that when children are born, from the moment they are identified as a boy or a girl, and based on social expectations, they are labeled and begin to follow two separate paths. These messages of social expectations are commutated throughout the popular culture and found across all outlets of the media—television, movies, games, books, songs. By default, social expectations, as the one agent of children’s gender development, were viewed by participants as the main one that affects all others.

When children expressed stereotypical ideas or perspectives, pre-k teachers felt that children were not expressing them because they were mean, or because they didn’t
know how to be good friends to each other, but because they had all these ideas
internalized from their families, the media and the world around them in terms of what it
means to be a specific gender. Children had learned to function within a binary
framework- they are boys, there are girls, and there’s nothing else. At the same time,
acknowledging that just because these children may have had misconceptions about
gender identity and expression, it did not mean that these perceptions were necessarily
wrong. One would never want to tell a child that their ideas about their own gender are
wrong, especially when that’s the way a child feels they want to express their gender.

Pre-k teachers wanted their students to feel affirmed in their identities. At the
same time, knowing that their sense of self was still developing, they didn’t want them to
have to be boxed into certain roles and ways of being based on their biological sex and
the social expectations that go with it. They were intentional about the types of stories
their students were exposed to and felt that it was their way of interrupting the patriarchal
narratives internalized across the interpersonal and institutional levels of systematic
oppression. They used literature to encourage conversations about diverse topics of
interests, identities, assumptions, and stereotypes, while at the same time ceasing the
teachable moments to celebrate similarities and differences. By exposing children to a
different set of stories and possible realities, pre-k teachers challenged the gender binary
and social expectations for males and females and began working towards creating an
inclusive and equitable world for all children. (Garcia et al., 2021).

Early childhood teachers believed that the social expectations for males and
females communicated through social media are the standards of behavior that boys and
girls in their classrooms see as expected and socially expected behaviors. They noticed,
however, that when girls display traits traditionally expected of boys—such as being assertive and strong, individuals in children’s lives were more forgiving and encouraging of this behavior. But not so forgiving or encouraging if boys displayed traits that are traditionally seen as female—being sensitive, showing emotion, wearing nail polish or pink clothing and skirts. Interestingly, “the findings are congruent with theory from other research which found in several cases parents were often more liberal and allowing of their daughters to play with either gender toys than their sons” (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.42). Seeing these responses, children may have felt out of place or as if they don’t belong. Keeping this in mind, most of the early childhood teachers of this study, encouraged children to explore and experiment with whatever they were interested in and were curious about. They did not want their students to be limited for fear of being judged or not fitting in due to social expectations. To help their students make this shift, participants were intentional in creating safe, nurturing and inclusive classroom environments.

**Promoting Gender Inclusivity in Preschool Classrooms**

The third major finding of the study showed that participants promoted gender inclusivity in their classrooms by implementing gender flexible pedagogical teaching practices. In gender-flexible spaces, there is a willingness to resist potential gender bias, and an explicit focus on developing gender consciousness through gender activism. Early childhood educators promoted gender inclusivity through their interactions with their students and the setting of expectations, the language they used, and the planning of a broad repertoire of play experiences. Receiving professional development, as well as sharing and accessing resources during collaborative planning time, was helpful in
enhancing and equitably differentiating participants’ instruction to promote gender inclusivity in each of their classrooms.

The emphasis on gender inclusivity and gender neutrality in classroom environments is supported by Emilson et al. (2016) who found that participants did not believe in gender differences but rather in the individuality of all children, free choice, and equality in their opportunities, as sex differences were irrelevant. Practitioners also believed that it is the preschool’s responsibility to ensure gender neutrality, by making a “conscious effort to exert influence on the parents, the language used, and the classroom environment” (Emilson et al., 2016, p. 234). How educators set up the physical and social environments and their level of involvement plays a pivotal role in supporting and encouraging gender stereotypes and children’s understanding of their gender roles (Chapman, 2016, p. 1282).

When interacting with their students, pre-k teachers prioritized on their social emotional well-being, socialization, communication, and independence. They focused on supporting children holistically throughout the day’s activities. The practice is consistent with prior research that showed the value of being supportive of children’s development, encouraging individualization, and being a role model during different types of teacher-child interactions (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009, p.21). These interactions were closely linked to teachers’ certification status, their teaching philosophy, and implementation of developmentally appropriate practices that take into consideration children’s perspectives and interests (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009, p. 21).

Pre-k teachers supported children to develop their communication skills by using a range of language modeling strategies—such as self and parallel talk, and engaging in
active listening. Early childhood teachers reinforced turn taking, compromising, negotiating, problem solving, and empowering children to stand up for themselves when interacting with others. Using the language previously modeled by the teaching team, children learned to express their feelings, ideas, thoughts, wants and needs when engaging with both peers and other adults throughout the day’s activities.

Ongoing observations and interactions allowed pre-k teachers to get to know their students well, and worked towards creating an inclusive classroom environment. They were intentional and strategic when joining them into play to model expected behaviors and interactions. Early childhood educators socialized children to be able to function in society by being responsible members of a community through their expectations. Participants felt that academic standards would be reached when children are ready. However, life skills, such as managing their emotions, practicing conflict resolution, and handling stress, need to be taught early on, as they are invaluable for students’ future success. Pre-k teachers supported their students in becoming independent and responsible by implementing the use of the tools of autonomy (calendar, job chart, attendance, flow of the day, feelings chart), regardless if they were boys or girls, each of the children had class jobs. All children were expected to help, with whatever needed to be done throughout the day as a team. They were not limited or offered preferential treatment to the types of jobs they did based on their gender.

Children were regularly reminded to treat others as they’d like to be treated by referring to the class norms and expectations. The belief is supported by the literature review that emphasized the importance of having clear rules and consequences as an important part of a classroom environment, before any learning can take place (Lara-
By having clear expectations in place and being consistent in following transitions and routines, allowed children to engage throughout the day’s activities independently, be comfortable to explore, express themselves freely, be willing to try new things, and develop holistically based on what they were curious about.

The language participants used when interacting with students, was another way that pre-k teachers promoted gender inclusivity in their classroom. The results of the study aligned with previous research which showed that using gender inclusive language when addressing children as individuals, or a group, challenges stereotypes and does not exclude anyone. This means being gender neutral and avoiding gender pronouns that are based on gender assumptions and stereotypes (Jacobson, 2011), especially when talking about professions and careers and exposing children to different role models. Most early childhood educators used gender-neutral language to address children by their individual names, preferred names, “friends,” “people,” “class,” “lovely children,” by tables, one by one, playing a game, singing a song, or giving directions and prompts.

When children expressed gender-stereotyped notions about occupations, through their words or behaviors, early childhood teachers were present to seize these opportunities of teachable moments to have conversations around gender as they came up. The finding is supported by previous research, which showed that language could shape our cognitive understanding of the world around us, and social stereotypes about gender. “By being self-aware of gendered practice and actively promoting gender equality, educators can train children to be less accepting of traditional stereotypes while also offering further opportunities by encouraging learning without any gender bias” (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019, p.44). This is particularly true with students who are
easily impressionable and their gender perceptions and understandings are shaped by their experiences and interactions. Until more countries "actively reform their languages to reflect a more genderless outlook" (Freilino et al., 2011, p. 269), just like in Norway, we each need to do our part to ensure that when interacting and communicating with our students to be gender-neutral (Freilino et al., 2011).

Program leader participants found it unrealistic to expect older or veteran teachers to change their ways and use gender-neutral language, but easier for the younger ones, as they were trained differently in their teacher preparation programs. This is supported by previous research which showed how people can shift mindset in using gender-neutral language beyond their sexist beliefs in and out of the classroom. Repetition is an intervention that can be implemented to help with gender-inclusive word usage becoming habitual, and highlights the importance of investing in building individuals understanding of the implications of failing to use gender inclusive language (Sczesny et al., 2015).

In pre-k classrooms that promoted gender inclusivity, children were acknowledged as individuals. They were seen for who they were and assured that they were valued in any way that they chose to identify or express themselves. Those expressions were celebrated and appreciated, as children felt proud of their identities. When children knew that they were respected for who they were, and that there is no prescribed rules for them to follow, in terms of their identities, they felt affirmed in their self-expression, and were accepting and respectful of the way others around them identified (Garcia et al., 2021). By taking their time to get to know each of their students well, pre-k teachers could then individualize their instruction in culturally responsive ways. Exposing children to a broad repertoire of play experiences was another example
of gender flexible pedagogical practices. This is supported by existing research literature which emphasized the importance of investing in getting to know each of the students and their families well, and implementing culturally responsive practices to meet their diverse needs. Additionally, highlighting the need for teachers to be gender conscious, and using a gender sensitive curriculum to model and expose students to alternate forms of masculinities and femininities. (Warin & Adriany, 2017, p.378).

The culture and dynamics in each of the classrooms, determined the strategies to be used, and the types of available activities that focused on developing children’s self-efficacy and thinking, regardless if children were boys or girls; participants felt that it was through these experiences that pre-K children began to make sense of their world, developed their self-help, critical thinking, communication and leadership skills. The findings are consistent with a study that showed teachers focused on individual children reaching their developmental milestones through play, and relied on developmental ideologies to guide their understanding of their students (Prioletta, 2020, p. 243). When children engaged in free play, they explored and learned about their world, while teachers engaging in different forms of play, such as guided play with their students to disrupt traditional “gender binaries” and “gendered power imbalances”. If these go unaddressed, they can result in limiting their students’ learning opportunities (Prioletta, 2020, p.250).

Pre-K teachers incorporated students’ perspectives in the planning, and implemented learning experiences that were experimental (cause and effect science activities), encouraging problem solving, out of the box thinking, creativity and teamwork. Having access to open-ended materials, allowed children to use their imagination and be creative in demonstrating their thinking and learning. Pre-K teachers
challenged students’ thinking by planning and intentionally exposing them to different types of activities throughout the day and giving them options by keeping children’s diverse backgrounds in mind. This is supported by literature which showed that when educators are aware of the connection between play, gender roles and stereotypes, they become more intentional in planning for each experience, so that it is inclusive of children of both sexes (Chapman, 2015, p.1281).

Some of the strategies used were flexible grouping, modeling, and collaboration, and activity orienting. Activity orienting is defined as teachers previewing with the students the available activities throughout the centers, and clearly explaining how the activities are organized. Doing so helps norm expectations, allows for smoother transitions, and more time to differentiate instruction through meaningful engagement based on individual student characteristics and needs. Children can then apply their prior “knowledge, independence, and emerging regulatory skills” (Cameron & Morrison, 2011, p. 621) to engage in the presented activities autonomously and make sense of the world around them (Cameron & Morrison, 2011). Early childhood educators believed that by engaging in a broad repertoire of play experiences to make sense of their world during their time in preschool, children transitioned from being children to students.

Professional development allowed for self-reflection and one’s growth in their practice. Pre-k teachers were guided by the New York State Prekindergarten Standards and referred to them during professional learning sessions. Teacher and assistant participants attended professional learning sessions throughout the year, but most participants shared that they were not specifically dedicated to gender as the main topic of focus. Participating in different stages of professional development can help change
educators’ behavior and practices. However, before that can happen, they first need to raise their awareness by engaging in an ongoing reflection cycle of - teach, self-assess, consider, practice, teach. Bryan (2012) provided the analogy of the individual functioning as a barometer who regularly check-ins with one’s self, and stays informed through professional development (p.128).

Many early childhood educators felt that beyond being asked to use gender-neutral pronouns, they needed to have a better understanding of the topic, before they could change their practice, and be equipped to have difficult conversations when they come up. The finding aligned with previous research that found educators can gain insight into their thought process, feelings, and perspectives similarly to “peeling off the layers of an onion, go deeper, reflect, and start being consciously aware of one’s performance, to critically assess their ideology and belief behind their thinking and feeling in action” (Yip, 2006, p. 778). All pre-k teachers agreed that training and professional development sessions would be helpful if conversations needed to be had with parents who are trying to navigate or understand their children.

Professional learning sessions were planned by the respective administrators. However, since they were private parochial schools, they had the freedom to plan these sessions without any specific guidance or requirements. Pre-k teachers believed that there needed to be more clear guidelines with specific practical examples of gender flexible pedagogical practices and a better understanding of the “why” for this work. They’ve found that the professional sessions that they learned the most from were ones that were ongoing, built on each other, had follow-up opportunities, offered differentiated support in the classroom, and encouraged reflection. Most pre-k teachers acknowledged that
change takes time, and the more informed and educated we become on the topic, the better we can support our students and have these conversations, especially when it comes to the taboo topics of gender and sexuality and the generational differences within the teaching teams. Some participants had taken the initiative to build their capacity around gender independently, whether it was through their lead teacher, academic coursework, or staying up to speed on the latest research.

Resources played an essential role in promoting gender inclusivity in preschool classrooms. Most pre-k teachers had available the basic required items in the centers, and for each theme unit, they referred to the suggested ones in their respective curriculum. Depending on their individual class interests and needs, they added their own. Toys that are more open-ended in their use, allow children to use their creativity and engage in meaningful play. Based on their ongoing observations, teachers can rotate the toys throughout the year to best meet their individual students’ needs, help them stay engaged, and interested in their learning as they develop across the domains and reach trajectory benchmarks. Past research had concluded that “children who play with different kinds of toys reap different cognitive, emotional, and social benefits (Weisgram & Dinnella, 2018) Early childhood educators highlighted the importance of teaching teams bringing in artifacts that are reflective of themselves as a form of resource. By doing so allowed children to begin to appreciate the individuals in their classroom as people, rather than labeling them solely as being boys or girls. Leader and teacher participants shared that over the years, they have become much more intentional with having a variety of resources to address the diversity in the human population in the classroom. They tried to include as many gender-neutral materials and multicultural items throughout the centers,
as well as items reflective of the children’s and community’s cultures and interests. A system for vetting prospective resources was developed by assembling a committee made up of the leaders and teachers in each school. The finding is consistent with existing research that showed how invaluable it is for children’s gender typing process, to develop a vetting system for available resources such as toys, books, games, and television shows (Cha & Lo, 2017). When available, items were purchased in packs from the school supply companies. Administrators trusted the companies had done their research before adding the items in the catalogs, so they didn’t have to do it themselves. The bundles offered age appropriate packs of literature, dress up clothing, and dolls that promoted diversity in terms of race, culture and to some extent gender. Their toy selection criteria considered how the selected toys exposed children to play activities that inspired for both boys and girls, as well as keeping in mind children’s diverse backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and socioeconomic status (Weisgram, 2016).

Children select new toys to play with based on the information children receive from their environment related to gender, their gender schemas and individual interests (Weisgram, 2016). Their preference for gender-typed toys is supported by the research that showed that in today’s contemporary world, children’s development is best served by exposure to moderately stereo-typed toys (especially moderately masculine toys, but to some extent moderately feminine toys also) and gender-neutral toys, rather than to strongly gender-stereotyped toys. Children of both genders would benefit from play with toys that develop educational, scientific, physical, artistic, and musical skills. Both boys’ and girls’ development could be enhanced by learning domestic skills, as well as by learning to build with construction toys (Aina & Cameron, 2011).
Limitations of the Study

The researcher would have liked to observe student interactions during play experiences throughout the day’s activities. Due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, circumstances seemed to be changing on an hourly basis. With many educators working from home and teaching remotely, along with the potential of another lockdown, the researcher had to remain flexible when conducting the proposed research study. The researcher could not gain access to enter each of the participants’ schools to observe students’ play experiences, and the interactions between students and educators, as well as between students related to gender. Instead, to provide a deeper and richer analysis, the methodology of collecting data for this case study, including one to one interviews, focus groups, and a content analysis of student work samples, and photos of students engaging in different play related activities in preschool.

Since the researcher was employed by the NYCDOE as an early childhood instructional coordinator, to avoid any potential conflict of interest resulting from her current position, she was limited in terms of the educators that she could have recruited participants for this study. Additionally, due to the researcher’s similar background as the participants, she may have had bias within the analysis of the results, and the extent to which the findings, degree of objectivity and neutrality were maintained.

Another limitation is that the sample was chosen through purposeful and deliberate sampling. All participants worked as teachers or administrators in districts that the researcher was not employed in or supported. The participants were assured that they were not going to be penalized or disciplined for their responses, their anonymity would
be maintained throughout, and the sole purpose of the study was to inform the practice of
future educators.

As with all qualitative studies, the results may not be generalizable to the entire
population, which in this case includes preschool educators. The results, instead, provide
an insight into the experiences and perspectives of three administrators, eleven teachers,
and nine assistants from three parochial schools. Although the pool of participants was of
diverse ethnicity, race, language, and country of origin, the participants were all
cisgender and came from culturally similar school settings. The latter characteristics of
the participants may serve as a limitation of this study. Perspectives of others with a
different sexual orientation and coming from diverse school cultures may result in a
wide-range of implications of how gender is defined and expressed.

Lastly, given the context of the setting, both cultural and religious,
one would expect that religious dogma played a big role in the day to day activities and
interactions, as well as the language used by the participants, as it relates to gender and
gender expression. Surprisingly, however, based on the overall participant responses, the
findings showed that except for one teacher and one administrator participant, it was not
the case.

Some additional considerations that may be viewed as limitations of the study
were:

1. Giving participants all the questions at the beginning of the session to preview,
   may have eased the participants’ nervousness and helped to keep the interview
   focused. But, giving them extra think time for the responses, might have led to
   them vetting of their initial thoughts and responses.
2. Being mindful not to be overly reliant to the questions to keep the conversations going, but finding a balance of being present to what is shared with what needs to be addressed with little or no lag time.

3. Providing additional background information on the participants might be needed to help give an insight of what might influence their perspectives.

4. Controlling for how many participants the researcher would have access to in the data collection process to help reach saturation and more ideas and themes related to the topic will come up.

5. Finding a balance when conducting the face-to-face interviews and the researcher following her instincts of how much more she should probe for further clarification without fearing that she is putting the participants on the spot, pushing them or making them uncomfortable by asking them to elaborate on their responses.

6. Population size may be viewed as a limitation for the study

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

This qualitative case study investigated gendered play in early childhood settings by examining how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that support gender exploration and expression. Based on the results of the study, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

**Anti-Bias and Gender Education: A Priority**

Over the course of the last few years, there has been a shift towards anti-bias education in early childhood classrooms. Educators can bring social change by engaging in an ongoing reflection in their practice, and implementing a range of teaching strategies.

Ongoing reflection on anti-bias education is recommended. Anti-bias education needs to be integrated throughout the day’s activities, in family interactions and engagement, and community outreach. It takes into consideration children’s intersecting identities of race, language, and gender (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020, pp.15-17). Knowing how children construct and develop their knowledge base and schemas in the world around them through their experiences, educators can become more informed on the topic of gender so that when questions arise, we will be prepared to cease those teachable moments to have these conversations as the opportunities arise. Together, all working towards creating a culture of acceptance and inclusivity, rather than a society in which individuals who deviate from the economic, religious, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation norms are frequently unsupported, ridiculed, discriminated against, ostracized, and/or physically harmed (Sullivan, 2009, p. 36).

Although there may be policies in place, there is no one uniform way that schools have used to ensure equality and anti-biased practices related to gender systematically. One can see this as a positive, as it allows each of the local or individual school settings to do what works best for them when implementing the policies in their own unique ways. A study conducted in Nordic preschools provided as a reference, five aspects of the work that seemed to emerge when viewing boys and girls as equal learners, both intellectually and emotionally. 1. Having an epistemological understanding of gender knowledge, 2. Management support from administrators and politicians who believe in
the work, 3. Goal setting for gender equality work, 4. Organization around the work to be carried out, and lastly 5. Development of climate through dialogue and collaboration among all stakeholders (Heikkila, 2020). The current systems and policies in place around the world regarding gender and anti-bias education, along with the findings of this research study, can serve as reference points of how to move forward in creating equitable, safe, and nurturing, and inclusive spaces for all students.

Examine Teacher Training Programs & Professional Development

Gender stereotypes are passed down in society from generation to generation, and transmitted across a range of factors to the children. By being aware of these shortfalls, we can begin to break this cycle of sexist stereotypes, starting with ensuring equitable early childhood centers (Barea & Martin, 2020). Gaining a better understanding of gender through a gender expansive lens, rather than it be limited to the gender binary. Meaning, the socially constructed definitions of biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression provide an individual with one of two gender options: male or female (Page & Peacock, 2014). Maleness is defined by phenotypic characteristics such as facial hair, masculinity, and the presence of a penis (Gardiner, 2013). Femaleness is defined phenotypically by a lack of facial hair, slenderness, and the presence of breasts and a vulva (Cook-Daniels, 2010). Understanding that unlike biological sex, which develops in utero, gender identity and gender expression are “learned, constantly reworked and reconfigured, and enacted to the self and others” (Paechter, 2007, p. 14).

Cahill and Adams (1997) highlighted how early childhood teachers’ beliefs towards adult gender roles impact their attitudes about children’s gender role behaviors in the classroom—concluding that it is important for teacher preparation programs to build
teachers’ capacity in reflecting on their own gender attitudes, and phobias, and becoming comfortable to encourage cross-gender play, for both boys and girls, regardless if they challenge traditional and socially acceptable gender roles—training them in using gender neutral pronouns, and preparing them in implementing anti-bias gender education in their classrooms. If we want to proactively change mindsets, we need to move beyond just identifying teachers’ beliefs, and rather focus on their preservice training, and ongoing professional development, once they are in the classroom.

In their book, Pastel et al. (2019) offer practical steps in how to build inclusive early childhood classroom environments. Their recommendations were based on the latest research on child development, gender health, trauma informed practices, and the science of adult learning, as well as the voices and shared experiences of children, families, educators, and trans adults. They encouraged the implementation of practices that celebrate gender diversity, engage all stakeholders, and view children from a gender-expansive lens. Doing so can help dismantle “gender stereotypes” that may perpetuate in the classroom, raise their awareness, and encourage them to regularly engage in self-reflection in their practice (Gansen & Martin, 2018). This ongoing practice of self-reflection, will determine their students’ cultural group membership, as well as influence their social acceptance, inclusion, agency, or marginalization (Garrett & Segall, 2013; Little, 2001) within their classrooms and beyond.

**Access to Resources and Supports**

Having access to resources affects the quality of one’s work and the ability to overcome potential barriers in bringing about pedagogical change. Administrators can begin by Investing in building teachers' capacity to meet the needs of all students by
providing them access to a range of resources at their fingertips. Having enough materials for activities, and allowing time for revision and discussion is necessary for systematic changes within the school community. Thinking critically about the available curriculum and instruction and ways to overcome potential barriers that may impede social change and incorporating a pre-, post, and ex-post evaluation to assess the effectiveness of resources used to support and enrich learning, and adjust accordingly and collaborating with vendors and vocalizing their request for more gender-neutral materials to meet their students’ learning without any limitations and supporting educators’ work and professional growth by subscribing them to publications such as NAYCE’s and other organizations that will keep them up to speed with the latest research and available professional learning sessions.

**Need for Ongoing Professional Development**

Over the years, a lot has changed when it comes to gender, gender perceptions, gender stereotypes, and gender norms in our society. Consequently, the more informed and aware we are as educators on the latest research on the difference between biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression, the more equipped we will be in creating spaces that promote gender inclusivity by supporting gender exploration and exploration. Leaders play a vital role in supporting their teachers to create spaces that promote professional growth, and change. When planning for professional learning experiences, administrators are called within each of their school settings, to keep in mind the teams’ teaching experience, previous training received, and overall student population and expectations. Training can then be differentiated to prepare teachers to engage in self-reflection and use appropriate interventions and supports to ensure the best student
outcomes, regardless of the impact of potential bias. Some of the suggested practices include exposure of students to role models of both genders, being intentional in giving all students equal voice (regardless of their gender), and taking advantage of teachable moments that bring students’ attention to social justice issues that might arise in the required curricular material used (Sadker et al., 2009). A simple shift can be as simple as intentionally encouraging girls to engage in interdisciplinary science activities through intentional grouping that is student-centered and will consequently develop their self-efficacy and love for science through a more inclusive curriculum (Baker, 2013).

Based on the content presented in professional learning sessions, they encourage team members to become reflective practitioners. They are regularly thinking about their work and its impact on social change, implementing practices, and adjusting accordingly based on implications and findings. They are doing so by developing a new awareness of gender fluidity and the portrayal of gender in society, as well as staying up to speed with the latest research. Since gender stereotypes in early childhood are flexible and malleable, yet quite damaging if one considers their long term social effects, educators can begin to “prevent or mitigate their establishment in the early years” (King et al., 2021, p.113) by investing in understanding the factors that affect children’s development of gender categories in early life. Teachers’ own learning opportunities and training were “deemed important” in preparing children for kindergarten by exposing them to a range of “play, hands-on, small group, and one-to-one activities” (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009, p. 22). Ongoing professional development can support teachers in working towards creating inclusive early childhood settings that provide children with access to a range of opportunities and experiences, regardless of their gender.
**Parent Workshops**

Investing in planning parent workshops can help build parents’ capacity in understanding gender from a gender-expansive lens. During these workshops, the grow ups in children’s lives, can be provided with opportunities that encourage reflection in how they were raised, what they were told about aspects of their gender identity, who they are and what they’ve become, and how each of these aspects have affected their parenting style, and their children’s daily experiences (Garcia et al., 2021). Having the opportunity to share, connect, and learn, parents and teachers can get to know more about each other’s backgrounds, core values, beliefs, and experiences, in spaces that allow for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard. Parent workshops can be helpful in exposing participants to real-life diverse people, and making ideas such as gender, gender expression, and gender perceptions more meaningful and relevant. Failing to do so, can easily result in seeing the topic of gender as something distant, rigid, and only discussed on a political level.

Exposing parents to the latest research about gender and gender spectrum in early childhood, and the respective social justice issues, can help raise awareness, gain a better understanding of the topic, and appreciate the value and relevance of this work. Pre-k teachers, can begin by sharing with parents how the gender differences in children’s toy preferences go beyond just individual behaviors and interests. Since children spend so much time playing with toys at home, by parents becoming aware of the biological, cognitive, and social consideration of children's play experiences, they too will then be more intentional with the toys they expose their children to. Doing so, will reinforce the learning happening in school, support their children’s holistic skillset development,
regardless of their gender (Dinnella & Weisgram, 2018), and empower them to be who they truly are.

By teachers becoming comfortable to have these potentially difficult conversations during parent workshops, they can begin to model to families what to expect of their children, and advocate for what is right for the children. Helping parents name what’s concerning them and what their gender biases are, so that they can be best prepared when engaging and supporting their children. Working towards understanding and accepting the reality that they cannot change who their children are in terms of their gender identity and expression. By moving away from the gender binary views, and assuming a gender expensive lens, they can best support their children to be who they truly are, and help be mentally healthy and emotionally well.

Acknowledging the spectrum of gender is essential to children’s early mental health and emotional well-being. During the parent workshops, communicating with families that if we are expecting our children to become able to function and bring their full selves to whatever they do, we have to acknowledge and accept that they will create their own gender identity. Emphasizing the need and importance to be there to support them along the way, as they discover who they are along the gender spectrum, and in terms of stages of development. Always see them as individuals within a group. This means that the discussions around gender, gender expression and gender identity will vary a great deal from year to year based on the changing dynamics of the groups (Garcia et al., 2021).

Although there might be a disconnect between each of the stakeholders’ experiences and beliefs around gender, they are all connected in terms of having
children’s best interests at heart. During these parent workshops, parents and teachers can begin to peel the multi-layers of gender. Together, working towards understanding the difference between biological sex, gender identity and expression, gender spectrum, and the range of factors that affect gender socialization—possibly realizing that it may require them to unlearn a lot of what one might know or has been socialized to think, and believing that their children can change the world (Garcia et al., 2021). Everyone working together towards creating inclusive school cultures, and learning environments that are invested in ensuring children feel safe, valued, respected, and cared for.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research into preschool teachers’ perceptions of gender towards creating spaces that support gender exploration and expression could replicate the methodology and protocols from this study with participants from different school districts, including public schools, and include other non-Greek American parochial schools and institutions, to produce a larger body of research on the topic.

Another suggestion for future research would be to incorporate the methodology of this study with quantitative data that measures student growth across the domains of the New York State Pre-Kindergarten Standards using authentic assessment tools, such as Work Sampling, Teaching Strategies Gold, or COR Advantage. On that note, researchers can see to what extent does the quality of the pre-school programs and teaching staff, based on the CLASS and ECERS-3 assessments, impacts children’s heteronormative behaviors in the classroom. A mixed-methods study would be able to expand the available data and allow for the researcher to see if the findings from the study are transferable.
Future research and related projects may focus on developing a set of recommended teaching strategies that educators could implement to promote gender inclusivity in their classrooms. While at the same time, realizing that from year to year, these practices are flexible and organic, based on the changing dynamics and demographics of the student population in each class. Conducting a parent survey can help gauge how parents felt regarding gender exploration and expression, and to what extent the findings aligned to the teachers’ interpretation of what they thought their students’ parents felt and believed. A final suggestion would be to acquire more descriptive information regarding gender perceptions in different countries, exploring the extent in which early childhood educators are provided with guidance regarding gender equitable play experiences in the respective countries. It would be interesting to see if there is a correlation between stereotypical social gender expectations in a particular country, and preschool educators’ perceptions of gender towards creating spaces that support gender exploration and expression.

Conclusion

The study indicates that pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender are shaped by their personal and professional identity. The factors that contribute to the establishment of their identity are participants’ life experiences, the human diversity in their classroom, and the leadership and policy in place in their respective schools. Biology, family, teacher, and peer influences, and social expectations are agents of children’s gender development. Pre-k educators promote gender inclusivity in their classrooms by implementing gender flexible pedagogical practices. To enhance each child’s development, throughout the day’s activities, pre-k teachers focus on how they interact
with their students, the language they use, and having specific goals in mind when planning for a broad repertoire of play experiences. Professional development opportunities focused on gender, and collaboratively planning and sharing of resources, are elements that develop and strengthen the skills of pre-k teachers in creating spaces that support gender exploration and expression.
Dear Dr. [Name],

I am currently a Doctoral student at St. John’s University in Queens, New York. I am writing to request your support in conducting a research study that I believe will have an impact on early childhood education. As an Early Childhood Instructional Coordinator with the New York City Department of Education, it is my goal to ensure that every child in our Pre-K classrooms has the opportunities and supports needed to reach their full potential for future success, regardless of their gender. The current body of research indicates that teachers’ perception of gender, influences their everyday decision making when engaging with their students throughout the day’s activities in their classrooms. A gap in the research exists when examining how preschool educators’ perceptions of gender create spaces that are inclusive in supporting gender exploration and expression.

I will be investigating prekindergarten teachers’ and assistants’ perceptions towards gendered play, and how they impact their everyday decision-making when interacting with their students and planning activities to create inclusive classroom environments.

I am reaching out to you to request permission to conduct focus groups and individual interviews of early childhood teachers, assistants, and administrators during the 2020-2021 academic school year. If permission is granted, you will be provided with a copy if the invitation to participate in the research study, which will be sent electronically, to the non-NYCDOE Pre-K for All contracted prekindergarten teachers and assistants of the Greek Orthodox Parochial schools in New York City. During the collection of the qualitative data through focus groups and individual interviews, the teachers and assistants will be given a pseudonym to main confidentiality.

Copies of the focus groups and individual interview questions protocols are available upon your request if would like to preview.
My success depends on your support, and that of your administrators, teachers, and teacher assistants. As such, I will do everything I can to give back to the Greek Orthodox School community. Starting by providing a summary of the findings to inform future professional development sessions, and by offering my services in facilitating professional training sessions as needed, to help the teaching teams grow in their practice and in reaching their individual professional goals.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. If you would like to grant permission, please email the approval [email protected]. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [email protected]. Or my mentor, Dr. [email protected]. For questions about rights of research participants, you may contact the University’s Human Subjects Review Board, St. John’s University [email protected]. The results of this study will inform educational leadership of the connection between educators’ gendered perceptions, how it affects their everyday interactions and decision-making in their classrooms with their students, and the long-term impact it may have in the children’s future success, regardless of their gender.

Respectfully,

Eleftheria Tzannetis
APPENDIX B : DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
(TEACHERS/ASSISTANTS/ADMINISTRATORS)

Participant ID: ________________________________ Date: ______________________
Interview Location: ______________________________

Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the questions below.

Age: __________

Race/Ethnicity: ____________________________

How do you identify yourself in terms of gender? __________

Where were you born? ____________________________

Where did you grow up (or have lived)? ____________________________

Highest level of education? ____________________________

How many years have you been teaching? __________

What grades have you taught? __________

How many years have you taught pre-k? __________
Hello,

My name is Eleftheria Tzannetis, and I am a Doctoral candidate at the School of Education- Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership, St. John’s University. My mentor is Dr. [Redacted], SJU School of Education-Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership.

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. Before deciding whether to participate or not, please take as much time as you need to read this form, and let me know if you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, I will ask you to sign this form and will provide you with a copy. Also, attached, please find a brief demographic questionnaire. Please complete it and return it with the consent form. Thank you in advance for considering to participate during these unprecedented times. I truly appreciate your support, as it will be invaluable to the successful completion of my research.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of the study is to better understand how do preschool educators’ perceptions of gender impact their pedagogical decisions- how they plan activities throughout the day, and how they interact with children to create spaces that are supportive for gender exploration and expression.

STUDY PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate, I will ask you to complete a questionnaire about your background (age, gender, education, etc.), and then ask questions about your perceptions of gender and how they impact your planning and interactions with your students during the interview. The interview may take about 30-60 minutes, and everything will be confidential.
The interview will take place during a pre-arranged date and time virtually via Zoom or Facetime. Before the interview, I will review your rights as a participant and ask to audiotape the interview. I will be the only individual to listen to the recording for my class project, and it will be kept on a password-protected computer and a password-protected phone. You may review the recording and request that all or any portion of it be destroyed. Audiotaping is optional. At any time during the interview, you may decline to answer a question.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**
There are no potential risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this research.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**
Although you will receive no direct benefits, the ultimate goal of this class research project is to help better understand gendered play in pre-k classrooms, and how it’s impacted by the educators’ perceptions of gender in creating inclusive classroom environments.

**PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION**
The researcher will provide a summary of the findings to inform future professional development sessions, and will offer her services in facilitating professional training sessions as needed, to help the teaching teams grow in their practice and in reaching their individual professional goals.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
Any identifiable information obtained from the interview will remain confidential.

The data will be stored on my password-protected laptop computer and password-protected phone. All transcribed interviews will be kept on my computer. During transcription, all identifiers such as names and places will be removed. I will code the transcripts by a number, not name. The number will correspond to your name but will be kept in a separate Word document.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using codes or keeping consent forms separate from data to make sure that the subject’s name and identity will not become known or linked with any information they have provided. All personally identifiable information will be removed and a pseudonym will be assigned to ensure privacy. In other words, there will be no way to identify you. When the results of the research are presented for my class project, no identifiable information will be used.

The researcher will make every attempt to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant.
PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this class project research study is voluntary. You may choose to be in this study or decline participation. If you volunteer to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time during the study without any consequences. Your lack of participation will not affect any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

INVESTIGATOR’S CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Eleftheria Tzannetis by phone, text, or email.

Eleftheria Tzannetis
St. John’s University
School of Education
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, NY 11439

Or my advisor

Dr. [Redacted]
Director NP School Leaders Programs
and Higher Ed Doctoral Cohorts Adviser
St. John's University School of Education
Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership (DAIL)
8000 Utopia Parkway
Sullivan Hall, Room 511
Queens, NY 11439

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the St. John’s University Institutional Review Board (IRB) directly, at the information provided below. If you have questions, concerns, complaints about the research and are unable to contact the research team, or if you want to talk to someone independent of the research team, please contact the University IRB (IRB) at [Redacted] or Dr. [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], St. John’s University.
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

☐ Do you agree to participate in this study?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

☐ Do you agree to be audio-recorded?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

☐ Do you agree to be video-recorded?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

☐ Do you agree to be photographed?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

☐ Do you give permission for the research material to be used in the dissertation?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

____________________________________
Name of Participant

_____________________________________               ______________
Signature of Participant                                                              Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

____________________________________
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

_____________________________________                    ______________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent                                         Date
Hello,

My name is Eleftheria Tzannetis, and I am a Doctoral candidate at the School of Education- Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership, St. John’s University. My mentor is Dr. [REDACTED], SJU School of Education- Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership.

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. Before deciding whether to participate or not, please take as much time as you need to read this form, and let me know if you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, I will ask you to sign this form and will provide you with a copy. Also, attached, please find a brief demographic questionnaire. Please complete it and return it with the consent form. Thank you in advance for considering to participate during these unprecedented times. I truly appreciate your support, as it will be invaluable to the successful completion of my research.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of the study is to better understand how do preschool educators’ perceptions of gender impact their pedagogical decisions- how they plan activities throughout the day, and how they interact with children to create spaces that are supportive for gender exploration and expression.

STUDY PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate, I will ask you to complete a questionnaire about your background (age, gender, education, etc.) and then ask questions about your perceptions of gender and how they impact your planning and interactions with your students. The interview may take about 30-60 minutes, and everything will be confidential.

The focus group will take place during a pre-arranged date and time virtually via Zoom or Facetime. Before the interview, I will review your rights as a participant and ask to...
audiotape the interview. I will be the only individual to listen to the recording for my class project, and it will be kept on a password-protected computer and a password-protected phone. You may review the recording and request that all or any portion of it be destroyed. Audiotaping is optional. At any time during the interview, you may decline to answer a question.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are no potential risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this research.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
Although you will receive no direct benefits, the ultimate goal of this research project is to help better understand gendered play in pre-k classrooms, and how it’s impacted by the educators’ perceptions of gender in creating inclusive classroom environments.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION
The researcher will provide a summary of the findings to inform future professional development sessions, and will offer her services in facilitating professional training sessions as needed, to help the teaching teams grow in their practice and in reaching their individual professional goals.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Any identifiable information obtained from the interview will remain confidential.

The data will be stored on my password-protected laptop computer and password-protected phone. All transcribed interviews will be kept on my computer. During transcription, all identifiers such as names and places will be removed. I will code the transcripts by a number, not name. The number will correspond to your name but will be kept in a separate Word document.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using codes or keeping consent forms separate from data to make sure that the subject’s name and identity will not become known or linked with any information they have provided. All personally identifiable information will be removed and a pseudonym will be assigned to ensure privacy. In other words, there will be no way to identify you. When the results of the research are presented for my class project, no identifiable information will be used.

The researcher will make every attempt to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant. However, due to the shared nature of focus groups, the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. As a participant, please respect the privacy of fellow participants.
PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this class project research study is voluntary. You may choose to be in this study or decline participation. If you volunteer to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time during the study without any consequences. Your lack of participation will not affect any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

INVESTIGATOR’S CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Eleftheria Tzannetis by phone, text, or email.

Eleftheria Tzannetis
St. John’s University
School of Education
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, NY 11439

Or my advisor

Dr.  
Director NP School Leaders Programs
and Higher Ed Doctoral Cohorts Adviser
St. John's University School of Education
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SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

- Do you agree to participate in this study? □ Yes □ No
- Do you agree to be audio-recorded? □ Yes □ No
- Do you agree to be video-recorded? □ Yes □ No
- Do you agree to be photographed? □ Yes □ No
- Do you give permission for the research material to be used in the dissertation? □ Yes □ No

____________________________________
Name of Participant

____________________________________
Signature of Participant               ______________

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

____________________________________
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

____________________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent               ______________

253
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL  
(TEACHERS/ASSISTANTS/ADMINISTRATORS)

Interview Protocol

Today, I’d like to ask you a few questions about gendered play in pre-k and educators’ perceptions of gender. Is that ok? Before we begin, I want to walk you through the consent form you signed, so you are aware of your rights and my responsibilities [go through form]. Do you have any questions? Is it ok if I audiotape this interview?

I’m going to ask some simple questions. You don’t have to answer them if you don’t want, but they may help me make sense of all these interviews. Remember, all answers will be confidential and anonymous.

Could you tell me a little about yourself? If I asked your colleagues, students and/or their parents, to describe you as an educator, what would they say?

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?
   
o People may apply many different meanings to the word “gender”. When you hear the word “gender” what comes to mind?
o Have you thought of gender in terms of gender biology, gender identity, and/or gender expression?
o What has been your experience growing up when it comes to gender roles?
o What has been your experience, both personally and professionally when it comes to having conversations around gender?
o What factors do you feel shape children’s gender identity and gender expression?
o How do you ensure your classroom environment reflects diversity in gender roles?
o How intentional are you in encouraging students to explore a broader range of activities that may challenge traditional gender roles, and support students in developing their skills holistically? (ex. types of activities they engage in, grouping).
o When engaging with your students, what is some of the language that you use to address them? (ex. gender neutral pronouns-friends, learners, scientists, etc.)
2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?

a. What are your expected outcomes or goals for your students by the time they leave pre-k?
b. What are the different activities that you plan for on a typical pre-k day to meet these goals?
c. When planning these activities, what are the factors that you take into consideration for these experiences? How do your perceptions of gender manifest themselves in your curriculum plans?
d. Do you have a system of vetting the materials (books, music, games, toys, color choices, etc.) that you use to support your teaching in promoting unbiased, non-stereotypical gender development and challenge traditional gender roles?
e. Have you received any support, guidelines, or professional learning in planning lessons that are free of gender bias?
f. What are some practices/strategies you use when engaging with your students of different genders?

3. How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?

o What have you observed in your classroom when it comes to gendered play?
o Can you recall of a particular incident or experience of gender stereotypes students “bring” from home when engaging into play in the classroom?
o Did you ever have students who may have behaved outside the traditional male or female roles or in gender non-confirming ways?
  - Can you provide an example and share how you responded?
  - What were you thinking when you engaged in that interaction with the particular student and the rest of the children that might have been involved?
  - How did you feel during that experience?
o Do you feel comfortable challenging gender stereotypes?
  - If so, how? (discussions, read aloud, everyday life experiences, etc.)
  - If not, why not?

Is there anything that I didn’t ask that you’d like to share with me?

Ok. Thank you. These are the end of my questions.
APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL (TEACHERS/ASSISTANTS)

Focus Group Protocol

Today, I’d like to ask you a few questions about gendered play in pre-k and educators’ perceptions of gender. Is that ok? Before we begin, I want to walk you through the consent form you signed, so you are aware of your rights and my responsibilities [go through form]. Do you have any questions? Is it ok if I audiotape this interview?

I’m going to ask some simple questions. You don’t have to answer them if you don’t want, but they may help me make sense of all these interviews. Remember, all answers will be confidential and anonymous.

Could you tell me a little about yourself? If I asked your colleagues, students and/or their parents, to describe you as an educator, what would they say?

1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?

   o When you hear the word “gender” what comes to mind?
   o What has been your experience growing up when it comes to gender roles?
   o What factors do you feel shape children’s gender identity and gender expression?
   o How do you ensure your classroom environment reflects diversity in gender roles?

2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?

   o What are your expected outcomes or goals for your students by the time they leave pre-k?
   o When planning these activities, what are the factors that you take into consideration for these experiences? How do your perceptions of gender manifest themselves in your curriculum plans?
   o Have you received any support, guidelines, or professional learning in planning lessons that are free of gender bias?
3. **How do pre-k teachers understand gender inclusivity?**

   o What have you observed in your classroom when it comes to gendered play?
   o Did you ever have students who may have behaved outside the traditional male or female roles or in gender non-confirming ways?
     - Can you provide an example and share how you responded?
     - What were you thinking when you engaged in that interaction with the particular student and the rest of the children that might have been involved?
     - How did you feel during that experience?
   o Do you feel comfortable challenging gender stereotypes?
     - If so, how? (discussions, read aloud, everyday life experiences, etc.)
     - If not, why not?

Is there anything that I didn’t ask that you’d like to share with me?

Ok. Thank you. These are the end of my questions.
APPENDIX G: RECORDS AND ARTIFACTS PROTOCOL

Participant ID: ________________________________ Date: ______________________
Interview Location: ______________________________

Records and Artifacts Protocol

1. Gather student work samples and teacher student records
   a. Art projects
   b. Photographs
   c. Anecdotes

2. Develop a system to organize and manage the data collected

3. Make copies of originals and then scan into OneDrive

4. Find out about the document/records and its context by asking:
   a. What it is about? What is the student doing?
   b. Background information about the student
   c. Possible low inference notes and dictation/annotation
   d. What notice about data?
   e. What does the data tell us about student learning and thinking?
   f. What knowledge/skill is gained by activity
   g. Connection to overall curriculum goals
   h. Connection to The New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards
   i. Connection to individual student goals

5. Explore content through multiple rounds of coding
## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

### Table 5

*Interview Protocol Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Participant Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender?</td>
<td>a. People may apply many different meanings to the word “gender”. When you hear the word “gender” what comes to mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Have you thought of gender in terms of gender biology, gender identity, and/or gender expression?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. What has been your experience growing up when it comes to gender roles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. What has been your experience, both personally and professionally when it comes to having conversations around gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. What factors do you feel shape children’s gender identity and gender expression?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. How do you ensure your classroom environment reflects diversity in gender roles?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>g. How intentional are you in encouraging students to explore a broader range of activities that may challenge traditional gender roles, and support students in developing their skills holistically? (ex. types of activities they engage in, grouping).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>h. When engaging with your students, what is some of the language that you use to address them? (ex. gender neutral pronouns-friends, learners, scientists, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do pre-k teachers’ perceptions of gender influence curriculum planning?</td>
<td>a. What are your expected outcomes or goals for your students by the time they leave pre-k?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What are the different activities that you plan for on a typical pre-K day to meet these goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. When planning these activities, what are the factors that you take into consideration for these experiences? How do your gender perceptions manifest themselves in your curriculum plans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Do you have a system of vetting the materials (books, music, games, toys, color choices, etc.) that you use to support your teaching in promoting unbiased, non-stereotypical gender development and challenge traditional gender roles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Have you received any support or guidelines in planning lessons that are free of gender bias?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The table contains the following questions related to gender inclusivity in early education:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>What are some practices/strategies you use when engaging with your students of different genders?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>What have you observed in your classroom when it comes to children displaying gender roles during play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h.</td>
<td>Can you recall of a particular incident or experience of gender stereotypes students “bring” from home when engaging into play in the classroom?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| i. | Did you ever have students who may have behaved outside the traditional male or female roles or in gender non-confirming ways?  
   - Can you provide an example and share how you responded?  
   - What were you thinking when you engaged in that interaction with the particular student and the rest of the children that might have been involved?  
   - How did you feel during that experience? |
| j. | Do you feel comfortable challenging gender stereotypes?  
   - If so, how? (discussions, read aloud, everyday life experiences, etc.)  
   - If not, why not? |
Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Apr 26, 2021 10:23:10 AM EDT

PI: Eleftheria Tzannetis
CO-PI: Rosalba Del Vecchio
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-372 Gendered Play in Early Childhood Classrooms: A Case Study Of Teachers' Perceptions

Dear Eleftheria Tzannetis:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for Gendered Play in Early Childhood Classrooms: A Case Study Of Teachers' Perceptions. The approval is effective from April 26, 2021 through April 25, 2022.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator
Dear Ms. Tzannetis,

We are delighted that you have chosen our schools to conduct your research. I am honored to grant you permission to conduct participant outreach for your upcoming study. I understand that you will be contacting teachers, assistants, and administrators from the three schools listed below.

1. St. Demetrios School, Queens
2. Fantas School, Brooklyn
3. The Cathedral School, Manhattan.

Please feel free to contact me if you require any further assistance.

Kind regards,

Mr. Anastasios Koularmanis Ed.D
Director of Greek Education
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
8-10 East 79th St. New York, NY
Tel.
REFERENCES


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