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*Konstantina Rentzou*

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## A case study on preschool children's preferences of and perspectives on their male and female early childhood educator

Konstantina Rentzou <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Ioannina

### Abstract

Purpose of the study: The present case study aimed at exploring preschool children's perspectives on if and how early childhood educators' gender shapes the way they view their educators' pedagogical role and the extent to which children show a preference to an educator based on his/her gender. Similarities and differences between boy's and girls' perceptions about their educators' role were also explored. On the other hand, the study aimed at exploring whether children manifest different attitudes towards their educators at home. Method: Data from eight preschool-aged children were collected through children's drawings, photographs, and conversational interviews. Five parents also completed an online questionnaire with open-ended questions. Results, Implications & conclusions: The study revealed that children assign a playful role to the male educator and an educational role to the female educator. Both children's and parent's data indicate that the existence of a male educator meets children's, and especially boys', desire or need for a male figure in the feminized ECEC sector. In addition, the study accentuates the need to listen to children's voices for all issues affecting them, as well as to adopt a variety of methods to create diversified perspectives.

**Keywords:** Male educators, female educators, roles, children's and parental perspectives, early childhood education and care, Mosaic approach

### Περίληψη

Σκοπός της μελέτης: Η παρούσα μελέτη περίπτωσης είχε ως στόχο τη διερεύνηση των προοπτικών των παιδιών προσχολικής ηλικίας σχετικά με το εάν και πώς το φύλο των παιδαγωγών διαμορφώνει τον τρόπο που βλέπουν τον παιδαγωγικό ρόλο των παιδαγωγών τους και τον βαθμό στον οποίο τα παιδιά δείχνουν προτίμηση σε κάποιον από τους παιδαγωγούς τους με βάση το φύλο τους. Διερευνήθηκαν, επίσης, ομοιότητες και διαφορές μεταξύ των αντιλήψεων των αγοριών και των κοριτσιών για τον ρόλο των παιδαγωγών τους. Από την άλλη πλευρά, η μελέτη είχε ως στόχο να διερευνηθεί εάν τα παιδιά εκδηλώνουν διαφορετική στάση απέναντι στους παιδαγωγούς τους όταν είναι στο σπίτι. Μέθοδος: Συλλέχθηκαν δεδομένα από οκτώ παιδιά προσχολικής ηλικίας μέσω παιδικών ζωγραφιών, φωτογραφιών και συνεντεύξεων με τα παιδιά. Επίσης, πέντε γονείς συμπλήρωσαν ένα διαδικτυακό ερωτηματολόγιο με ερωτήσεις ανοιχτού τύπου. Αποτελέσματα & Συμπεράσματα: Τα αποτελέσματα δείχνουν

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Υπεύθυνος επικοινωνίας: *Κωνσταντίνα Ρέντζου*, [krentzou@uoi.gr](mailto:krentzou@uoi.gr), Επίκουρη Καθηγήτρια, Τμήμα Αγωγής και Φροντίδας στην Πρώιμη Παιδική Ηλικία, Πανεπιστήμιο Ιωαννίνων  
Correspondent author: *Konstantina Rentzou*, [krentzou@uoi.gr](mailto:krentzou@uoi.gr), Assistant Professor, Department of Early Years Learning and Care, University of Ioannina

ότι τα παιδιά αποδίδουν έναν παιγνιδιώδη ρόλο στον άνδρα παιδαγωγό και έναν εκπαιδευτικό ρόλο στη γυναίκα παιδαγωγό. Τα δεδομένα που προέκυψαν τόσο από τα παιδιά όσο και από τους γονείς δείχνουν ότι η ύπαρξη ενός άνδρα παιδαγωγού ικανοποιεί την επιθυμία ή την ανάγκη των παιδιών, και ιδιαίτερα των αγοριών, για μια ανδρική φιγούρα στον θηλυκοποιημένο τομέα της προσχολικής αγωγής και φροντίδας. Επιπλέον, τα αποτελέσματα αναδεικνύουν την ανάγκη να ακούγονται οι φωνές των παιδιών για όλα τα ζητήματα που τα αφορούν, καθώς και να υιοθετούνται ποικίλες μέθοδοι για τη δημιουργία διαφοροποιημένων προοπτικών.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** Άνδρες παιδαγωγοί, γυναίκες παιδαγωγοί, προοπτικές των παιδιών και των γονέων, προσχολική αγωγή και φροντίδα, μέθοδος του Μωσαϊκού.

## Introduction

Over the last decades the need to recruit and retain more male professionals in early childhood education and care (hereafter referred to ECEC) has attracted increased attention both at the research and the policy level (OECD, 2019; de Sousa, 2021).

At the policy level, several European countries, as such Denmark, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, and UK, have invested in advocacy programs and national action plans to increase the percentages of the male ECEC workforce (OECD, 2019). At the EU policy level, in 2011 the European Union Communiqué on Childcare commented on the gendered nature of the sector and highlighted that there is a pressing need to make the ECEC sector more attractive to men in all EU countries (European Commission, 2011, p. 7). Thus, in the 2014 Quality Framework for ECEC (European Commission, 2014) there is reference to the need for the ECEC workforce to represent diverse backgrounds. Although there is not an explicit or implicit reference to the gender of the workforce, one could argue that the diversity of the workforce includes gender in addition to other characteristics such as cultural/ethnic background, experience, level of education, etc. Moreover, in 2019 the Council of the European Union (2019) has recommended that member states should work towards alleviating the gender imbalance in the ECEC sector, to improve the professionalization of the workforce.

At the research level, a bulk of research has been conducted that aimed to explore: 1) males' lived experiences in the ECEC field (e.g., Cameron, 2006; Erden et al., 2011; Grigoropoulos, 2020; Jones, 2016; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005; Shaham, 1991); 2) female ECEC professionals' attitudes towards males (e.g., Clyde, 1994; Lyons et al., 2005; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2011; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005); 3) parents' attitudes towards male ECEC professionals (e.g., Lyons et al., 2005; Rentzou, 2011); and 4) students' attitudes towards ECEC, as a career prospect (e.g. Anliak, & Sahin-Beyazkurk, 2008; Lyons et al., 2005; Rentzou, 2013). This research, which has focused primarily on the benefits of increasing the numbers of the male ECEC workforce, on the reasons why the percentages of their participation remain low and on the potential differences between male and female professionals, suggests thus far that the existence of males benefits all those who are included and who participate in ECEC (children, parents, female fellow workers, men themselves and the profession itself) (Cameron, 2006; Farquhar, 2005; OECD, 2006; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Sumsion, 2005). In addition, it is postulated that the gender diversification in the workforce is linked to the quality of ECEC (OECD, 2006), as male ECEC professionals support and promote the

holistic development of the children (OECD, 2019; Rentzou, 2017; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009) and they have the potential to improve process quality (OECD, 2019).

Yet, despite this volume of research, Huber & Traxl (2018, p. 453) maintain that research in the field "is still in its infancy". Specifically, literature review highlights that there is not a consensus about the reasons why the ECEC workforce composition should change to represent gender flexibility and what effects males have in children's development (Huber & Traxl, 2018; Sumsion, 2005; Warin, 2019). Thus, results about the effects of educators' gender in the interaction with children are also inconsistent (Van Polanen et al., 2017a; 2017b). Moreover, although research has extensively examined attitudes towards male ECEC professionals from different adult perspectives, scarce research has attempted to map and unveil children's perspectives on male and female educators (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018; Xu, 2020). Yet, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989) highlights that children have a right to be listened to, to express opinions and to make decisions on all aspects of their daily experiences that affect them.

The scant research that has explored children's perspectives on male ECEC professionals has positioned a variety of research questions including the potential differences between male and female professionals in terms of characteristics and of the roles they assume; whether children have a preference towards male or female educators; whether children's gender affect their preferences for and interaction with male and female educators; and if and how the presence of males differentiates the ECEC experience for children (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Sumsion, 2005). This research has revealed that children exhibit a preference for their same-gender educator (Huber & Traxl, 2018; Summers et al., 1991; Xu, 2020) as they identify more easily and develop closer relationships with them (Van Polanen et al., 2017b, p. 559). Summers et al. (1991) found that when asked who teaches, girls were significantly more likely to say that teachers were women while boys were significantly more likely to say that teachers were men. Huber & Traxl (2018, p. 452) also found that, although male and female professionals hardly differ on educational dimensions, girls react less obviously to an educator's gender whereas boys are drawn significantly more frequently to a man in the ECEC team.

## Research Context

Although several European countries have designed targeted interventions to recruit more male ECEC professionals, in Greece no attention has been given, at the policy level, to the under representation of males. According to the OECD stats, in Greece, the percentage of males working in pre-primary education was 1% in 2020 (as opposed to the OECD average that was 4%) whereas there are no available data about the percentage of males working in ECEC programs. Thus, limited attention has been given to males' underrepresentation at the research level as well. The scarce research that has been conducted in Greece has revealed that although men want to work in the ECEC field, they experience difficulties and mistrust of their choice (Grigoropoulos, 2020; Rentzou, 2011; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009) and that the gender stereotypes that still prevail in Greek society as well as the lack of support inhibit men from choosing ECEC as a profession (Grigoropoulos, 2020; Rentzou, 2013). Drawing on the need to listen to children's voices on issues that affect them and on the scarcity of research on children's perceptions and

attitudes towards male educators, the present case study aimed at understanding children's "positioning" (Sumsion, 2005, p. 110) of their educators using a gender lens. The study had a two-fold aim: On the one hand, it aimed at exploring if and how early childhood educators' gender shapes the way preschool children view their educators' pedagogical role and the extent to which children show a preference to the educator based on his/her gender. Similarities and differences between boys' and girls' perceptions and attitudes were also explored. On the other hand, the study aimed at exploring whether children manifest different attitudes towards their educators discussing about school and their educators with their parents at home. Thus, the study explored parents' views about male educators and the benefits they see in males' presence at the setting their children are enrolled.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do children think that male and female educators participate in different activities with them?
2. What is the impact of educators' gender on children's perspectives of their educators' role?
3. Are there differences between boys' and girls' perspectives and preferences towards their male or female educator and if so, what are they?
4. Do children manifest preferences over an educator, according to his/her gender at home?
5. What are parents' views about male educators and what benefits do they see in their presence at the setting?

## **Design of the study: Research methodology and methods**

### *Methodology*

In this study we employed a case-study research method. According to Creswell (2014, p. 241) "case studies are a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time". Given that a case-study research method allows a researcher to understand real-life contexts and settings, but does not allow any generalizations (Yin, 2009), in the context of the present study the case-study design matches with the interpretivist tradition, which respects personal experiences, gives priority to understanding the meaning persons give to their experiences, and considers reality as a construction of the human mind (Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009). To fulfill our research objectives and respond to our research questions we studied one urban kindergarten. The selection of the setting was purposeful, as in order to respond to our research questions we needed a center in which a male ECEC professional was working. At the same time, it was a prerequisite to have both a male and a female educator in the same classroom, so as for children to reflect on their real and lived experiences and for us to children's preferences. To the best of our knowledge, no other center in the city where the research was conducted, employed at the same time a male and female educator in the same classroom. In the same line, given that we wanted to explore whether the participating children expressed at home any preferences towards

their male or female educator, it was a prerequisite to include only parents of the children who participated in the research.

### *Participants*

The present case study was conducted in a private kindergarten in a regional city of Greece over a two-week period. The setting was selected because in the same classroom a male and female educator were working. Data were collected from eight children. Their mean age was 5.66 years ( $SD = .57$ ). Of the children four were boys and four were girls.

In addition, five parents completed an online questionnaire. All parents were the mothers of the children. Three of the mothers were between 36–40-year-old, one 31–35 and one 41–45-year-old. Three of the mothers had a boy enrolled in the classroom and two of them had a girl.

### *Data collection*

Listening to children's voices requires refining research methods (Rodriguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). To research with children, the research process must be meaningful to children and give them the opportunity to express their views in many different ways, employing a mixture of methods/techniques which should be flexible, play- and arts-based and open-ended (Rodriguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). One of the most widely used approaches to listening to children's voices is the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) which starts from the viewpoint of young children as competent meaning makers and explorers of their environment and brings together a range of methods for listening to young children about their lives. The main elements of the Mosaic approach are the following:

- *Multi-method*: recognizes the different 'voices' or languages of children;
- *Participatory*: treats children as experts and agents in their own lives;
- *Reflexive*: includes children, practitioners and parents in reflecting on meanings, and addresses the question of interpretation;
- *Adaptable*: can be applied in a variety of early childhood institutions;
- *Focused on children's lived experiences*: can be used for a variety of purposes including looking at lives lived rather than knowledge gained or care received;
- *Embedded into practice*: a framework for listening that has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice (Clark, 2005).

The mosaic approach combines the traditional methodology of observation and interviewing with the introduction of participatory tools. In the context of the present study, data were collected using the following "pieces" of the mosaic approach:

1. **Children's drawings**: Drawings were the first of the methods used with children as according to research results (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Sumsion, 2005) can help mediate the unfamiliarity of the interview process. Children were asked to draw one drawing presenting their favorite activity with their male educator and one presenting their favorite activity with their female educator.

2. **Conversations with children:** Upon finishing their drawings, children were prompted to present to the author what they drew and what is their favorite activity with their male and their female educator that they drew. In addition, based on the literature review, the author developed an interview protocol which aimed to record children's views about differences in the role of the male and female educators as well as potential preferences of children for their male or female educator. Questions included but were not limited to: what types of play/games do they play with their male and their female educator, what their male and female educators do in the classroom, if there are things that they are doing with the female educator and they do not do with their male educator and vice versa, whom of the educators help them during routine times, and if their male and female educators are "good educators" and why. Conversations with children lasted between 5-10 minutes. Children's responses were audio-recorded. Yet, because conversations with children took place outdoors, where competing environmental sounds were abundant, the author also jotted down children's responses verbatim.
3. **Children's photos:** Upon completing our discussion with the children, the author gave children her mobile phone and asked children to take one photo showing the place where they like to play the most with their female educator and one of the places where they like to play the most with their male educator. Upon taking their photographs, children were invited to describe what they photographed and why. Their responses were both recorded and jotted down verbatim.
4. **Parents' perspectives:** An online questionnaire was created by the author. The educators sent the link to the survey to all parents whose child was enrolled in the class. The questionnaire included eight open-ended questions that aimed at exploring: parents' views about the male educator; whether they notice in their child a preference towards one of the two educators, due to their gender; and whether children discuss at home potential different activities organized and offered by the male and female educator.

## *Data analysis*

### *Procedures*

Prior to the study a consent letter was sent to the director of the kindergarten and the two educators of the classroom. Upon receiving their consent to conduct the research, an informed consent form was sent to all parent whose children were enrolled in the classroom. Although parents' consent was received, the researcher, also asked for children's own consent. Before each interview, the researcher explained to children the aim of our discussion and asked them if they want to discuss with me. To assure their free will to participate, children were invited to start the recording button in case they wanted to participate in the study and whenever they were feeling ready to start the discussion. In addition, children were free to choose whether they wanted to take photos of the

places they prefer to play with their male and female educator. Only five out of the eight children agreed to take a photo of their favorite place.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions with children took place at the yard of the school. The author ensured that the educator was away from the place the discussion was taking place so as for the children to feel secure that they were not listed to by their educator, and they could speak freely. Yet, given that it was summer, and all children were outside playing, at several instances, discussions were disrupted by other classmates who were curious to see what is happening.

## Results

### *Children's perspectives*

#### *Children's interviews*

When children were asked to describe their drawings and to elaborate further on what they do and what they like to do with their male and female educators, analysis showed that children assign a playful role to their male educator and an educational role to their female educator. Specifically, only two children mentioned playful activities that they do with their female educator, for whom the pseudonym Mrs. X is used (e.g. Mrs. X plays with the slide· with Mrs. X we play board games), whereas the analysis revealed 10 quotes in which children described the games they play, and they like to play with their male educator, for whom the pseudonym Mr. Y is used. As maintained by some of the children

*"I like to take of Mr. Y's shoes (we are making funny things)" (B2<sup>1</sup>).*

*"With Mr Y I like to play in the swing" (G2).*

*"With Mr. Y I like to play hide and seek" (G3).*

On the other hand, analysis revealed only four references to the educational role of the male educator (e.g. "with Mr. Y I like doing crafts and talking about nature· we are reading fairytales and we are doing other things· I like to draw with brushes· I like to do activities") and 11 references to female's educational role. In their majority references were made to activities, experiments, and crafts that children do or like to do with their female educator.

Although children referred indirectly to different activities that they do or they like to do with their male and female educators, when asked if they do different things with their educators, the analysis indicated that not all children pinpointed that difference. Specifically, five references indicate that children do the same things with their male and female educator and that there is not something that they do with the one and they do not do with the other. Yet, another five references highlight that the male and the female educator have a different role in the classroom, and they do different things. As put by G1:

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<sup>1</sup> In the parentheses we use the pseudonyms assigned to participating children. For boys we use B accompanied by a number to discern among them and for girls we use G accompanied by a number.



*“Mrs. X and Mr. Y do completely different things in the classroom. Mrs. keeps the order in the classroom, she is the captain, and she is doing completely different things, such as experiments. Mr. swings us and so I like those activities too... With Mrs. X we are doing more activities (lesson), with Mr. Y we are playing more”.*

This different perception of the role and the attitude of each of the educators is also evident in children’s reasoning why their male and female educators are good teachers. Specifically, when children were asked if their male educator is a good teacher and why, apart from referring to the fact that he is caring and he is reading to them mythology, three children highlighted that their male educator is good because he is funnier (than the female educator), he is not as strict with keeping the order and he allows them to play with what they want.

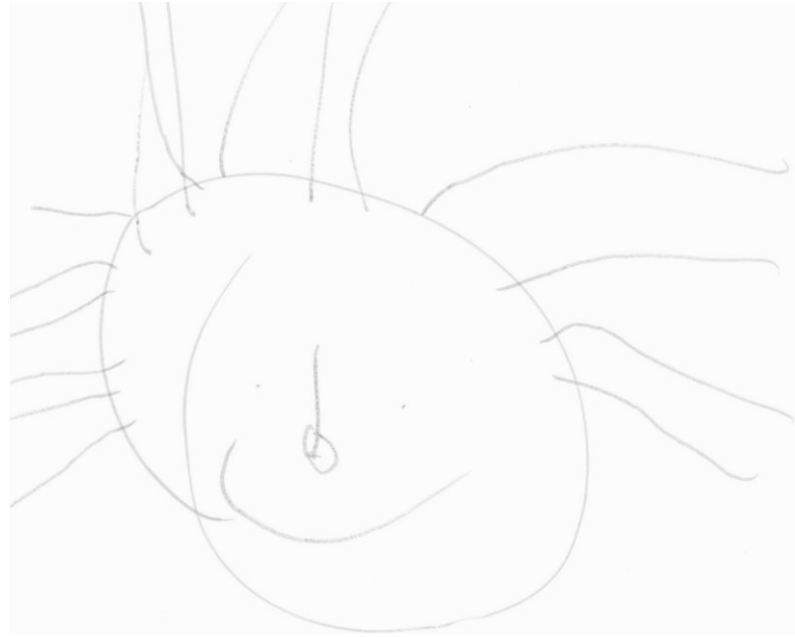
*“Mr. Y is a good teacher because he is letting us go to the toilet in a queue, but we can return in couples” (G1).*

*“Mr. Y is a good teacher because he lets us play what we want and to do whatever we want” (G4).*

On the other hand, when asked if their female educator is a good teacher and why, children mentioned that their female educator is a good teacher because she allows them to play outside, to draw, and to read fairy tales.

#### *Children’s drawings*

Although all children were asked to draw what they like most to do with their male and female educator, three out of the four boys drew faces. On the other hand, all four girls drew the activities they like to do with each of their educator. Children’s drawings convey messages about how they view their educators. All boys drew their male educator smiling, whereas only two of them drew a smile to their female educator. Thus, one of the boys drew sun in the drawing with the male educator but rain in the drawing with the female educator (Figures 1 and 2). When asked to explain why the one drawing has rain and the other sun, the child did not verbalize his thought and he replied that “it just happened”.

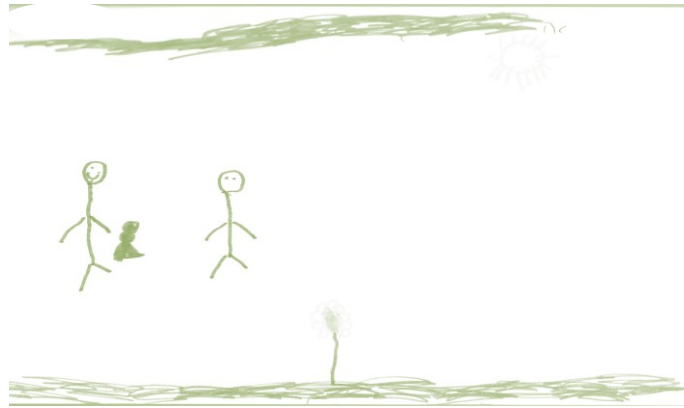


**Figure 1**  
*Male educator (B4)*



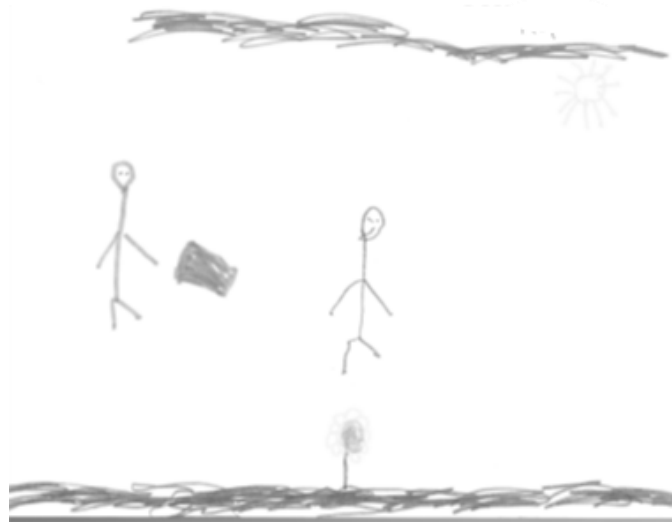
**Figure 2**  
*Female educator (B4)*

In addition, when looking at the drawing of the boy who drew an activity with each of his educators, we notice that there is a bigger distance between the child and the female educator and a smaller one between the child and the male educator (Figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 3**

*Mr Y and I are making magic filters (B3)*



**Figure 4**

*Mrs X and I are making a craft (B3)*

In addition, children's drawings highlight how children differentiate males and females in terms of their physical appearance. For example, one of the boys drew a round face for his female educator whereas for his male educator drew a square face. Thus, although girls' drawings were colorful, one of them drew the male educator with darker colors (brown and black) instead of vivid colors that characterize the children and the female teacher in her drawing. Another girl used only one color (dark green) to draw

herself and the male educator in the swing, whereas she used vivid colors to draw the female teacher and the girl-classmates. Yet, a male classmate was drawn with the same color used in the drawing with the male educator (Figures 5 and 6).



**Figure 5**

*Mr Y and I on the swing (G1)*



**Figure 6**

*Mrs X is reading a fairy tale to us*

Two girls did not draw their male educator. One of them, although she drew her female educator and herself dancing, she drew a colorful butterfly for her male educator. When asked to explain what and why she drew a butterfly she mentioned that she does not know how to draw something else. The other girl drew herself and a friend of her on the swing, but she did not draw the educator. She mentioned that the male educator is not seen in the drawing because he swings them. In addition, in girls' drawings there are hearts drawn where the female educator is presented but this is not the case in the drawings for the male educator (or hearts are far fewer) (Figures 7 and 8).



**Figure 7**

*Mrs X is reading a fairy tale to me (G2)*



**Figure 8**

*Mr. Y swings me and my friend A (G2)*

### *Children's photos*

Children were also asked to take a photo of their favorite place to play with each of their educators. For two children (one boy and one girl) their favorite place to play with their male educator was outdoors (climbing equipment and swing) and indoors (circle and kitchen learning center) with their female educator (Figures 9 and 10). Two other children (one boy and one girl) indicated that they like to play with both educators outdoors. The learning centers photographed by those two children indicate some differences in terms of the extent to which the activities are active/energetic. Specifically, both children indicated that they like to play less boisterous activities with their female educator (gardening, music, and sand pit) whereas with their male educator they like to build (a castle) and to climb. Turning to the child (girl) who indicated that she likes to play with

both educators indoors, she photographed a craft as her favorite place to play with her female educator and the circle where they read mythology with her male educator.



**Figure 9**

*My favorite place to play with Mrs X is in the circle (G3)*



**Figure 10**

*My favorite place to play with Mr Y is in the swing (G3)*

### *Parents' perspectives*

#### *Parents' views about male early childhood educators*

When asked how they feel with the existence of a male educator in their child's classroom, three out of the five mothers expressed positive feelings, one indifference and one mentioned that in the beginning she was hesitant and cautious, but after months she realized that the existence of a male educator offered many positive things both to the interaction between the two educators and to the interaction among children. Two of the parents mentioned that what matters the most to them is the personality of the educator and not his/her gender.

Three out of the five parents mentioned that more male early childhood educators should be working in this field. The reasons why more males should exist are according to them the need to battle stereotypes (N = 2) and for children to be educated in a broader and a more holistic approach (N = 2), the belief that the existence of male

educators brings balance to children, as males enrich activities due to the nature of each gender (N = 1), and the belief that their existence improves the quality of ECEC (N = 1). On the other hand, two of the parents mentioned that it is not necessary to have more males in ECEC, as, according to one of them, what matters the most is not the gender of the educator but the knowledge and the zest he/she has for his/her profession.

When asked if they believe that there are any differences between male and female educators in terms of their pedagogical work and/or their interaction with children, one parent mentioned that there are no differences. Two parents mentioned that they do not think that there are differences in terms of their pedagogical work, but they believe that there are differences in terms of interaction. The other two parents did not discern between pedagogical work and interaction, but they believe that males and females adopt a different approach. When they justified their responses, two of the parents referred to the characteristics of the female gender and that females may be more sensitive and tender to children due to their maternal instinct.

*"Female educators may be a little more accessible in their interaction than men due to the maternal model" (M2).*

The other two parents emphasized primarily the interaction between male educators and boys and their belief that male educators may offer more opportunities for rough-and-tumble play which boys like most.

*"These differences do not stem from the educators themselves but from the children, in the sense that children, and especially boys, feel more intimate to male educators and indirectly or directly seek more opportunities for active play" (M5).*

Two parents highlighted that the existence of both male and female educators can ensure balance both for educators and for children.

*"Children learn to coexist and respect both genders, and play more games (which boys may like more)" (M1)*

*"For example, I think a woman can be more tender and sensitive to certain issues while a man can be calmer. I think they can beautifully complement each other" (M3).*

Turning to the benefits they see in the existence of a male educator in their children's classroom, three key themes emerged. Parents mentioned that the existence of a male educator can help combat gender stereotypes (N = 2) both related to the profession and to playing and cooperating with children of both genders. As one of the parents mentioned, the existence of a male educator "stimulates the concept of equality in the eyes of children" (M1). In addition, two parents referred to a "different role model" that should also exist, as the combination of male and female role models has advantages for children. Thus, parents referred to the different approach of the male educator (N = 4). Specifically, one parent mentioned that there was a wider range of games available that suit better boys' character whereas another parent mentioned that she noticed that a "unique code of communication has been developed between the boys and the male educator" (M5) and that there are "more opportunities for 'madness'" (M5). Thus, one of the mothers (M5) mentioned that she noticed a better emotional bond of her child with the male educator than with the female.



### *Children's preferences over male educator: Parents' views*

When parents were asked if they have noticed their children behaving differently towards the male and female educator in their class, three out of the five parents replied negatively. One of the parents (M5) mentioned that although her son does not verbalize any preference, she sees her son to manifest more feelings of love / sympathy towards his male educator. Another mother mentioned that her daughter changed her attitude towards the male educator in the course of the year. According to the mother:

*"My daughter treated both educators as the "teachers" of the class. In the beginning, she told me that the male teacher is just an assistant, then she went on to discriminate both genders (that he [the male educator] came to help the boys) and at the end I think she referred to him as the class teacher as she did with the female teacher" (M2).*

When asked if their child shows a preference over one of their educators, two of the parents replied negatively. One of them replied that her daughter showed a somehow increased preference towards her male educator. According to the mother, "towards the end of the school year she mentioned several times the pedagogical work of the male educator and any other interaction they had (e.g. the jokes they made with the male educator and their interaction)" (M2). Lastly, two mothers who had a son, mentioned that they noticed a preference of their son towards the male educator. One of them attributed this preference to the fact that the male educator was reading mythology to children and her son likes mythology (M3). The other one attributed her son's preference to the male educator to the fact that they are doing different things together.

Finally, when asked if their children mention that they do different activities with the male and female educator four of them replied negatively. One of them (M1) mentioned that her son does not focus on the gender of the educator but on the activities, they do at school. Yet, one of the parents (M3) replied that her son mentions the mythology they read with the male educator.

## **Discussion**

Addressing the research gap on children's attitudes towards male and female educators, the present study provides novel evidence on if and how early childhood educators' gender shapes the way preschool children view their educators' pedagogical role and children's views considering differences on the types of activities offered by their male and female educator. The work is novel in two distinct ways. First, it addresses the need to compare children's positioning of male and female educators in one setting (Sumsion, 2005). Secondly, to the best of our knowledge this is the only study aiming at exploring whether children manifest their preferences and gender related differences of their educators not only at the ECEC setting but also at home. Although this is a case study and data cannot be generalized, the study gives an insight on children's views and attitudes towards male and female educators.

From our data emerged that children assign a playful role to their male educator and an educational role to their female educator, as only two children referred to games, they play with her. On the contrary, children, both boys and girls, when referring to their male educator they described and drew playful activities, both indoors and outdoors. Our findings do not confirm previous results which revealed little differences in the roles the

children assigned to their male and female educator (Harris & Barnes, 2009). Thus, our results contradict the results of the study conducted by Sumsion (2005) who explored children's attitudes towards their male educator and found that monitoring and regulating roles and teaching were the largest categories of children's responses. Future research should explore further if, when both a male and female educator work in one classroom, male and female educators assume different roles and if there is a difference in the approach a male educator adopts when he is the sole educator in the classroom and when he is working with a female coworker in the same classroom.

Thus, children, and especially boys, referred to the funny character of these activities and of the male educator, whereas none of the children referred to funny activities, while talking about their female educator. The funny character of the activities and of the male educator is also revealed by children's drawings, as boys drew a smile in the male educator but not on the female educator. Warin (2019) also found that males are seen as inclined to creating a relaxed and often fun, atmosphere, which is mentioned as a "lively energetic pedagogy" (Warin, 2019, p. 300). In addition, our results are substantiated by the study conducted by Summers et al. (1991) who found that from the children who responded to the question what makes a person a good teacher, the majority cited ability to convey subject matter, personal characteristics of the teacher, the teacher's interaction with the children and discipline factors. Children in the present study referred to interaction and personal characteristics (funny) and discipline factors (more permissive) for the male educator, and to subject matter and discipline factors for the female educator.

Turning to the funny character of the activity, Xu (2020) found that what matters the most to children is not the activity per se and with whom children will do what, but whether the activity is regarded as fun and enjoyable by children. In our study, children seem to link the funny activities with the male educator, and they seem to prefer to do different activities with the male and female educator. Considering this, future research, with larger sample, should explore whether the same activity is considered funny in the same degree when it is offered by a male and a female educator and whether educators' gender affects the degree to which an activity is considered funny.

Although children drew and mentioned that they do and/or like to do different activities, when asked explicitly if they do different things with their male and female educators two patterns were revealed. On the one hand, as in the study conducted by Harris & Barnes (2009) there were children who mentioned that they do the same activities with both educators. On the other hand, there were children who mentioned that the male and the female educator have a different role in the classroom, and they do different activities. Elaborating further, children highlighted that the female educator keeps the order and rules in the classroom, whereas the male educator is more permissive as he is letting children play what and with what they want. This is in line with the results of the study conducted by Huber & Traxl (2018) who found that although males and females do not differ significantly in their educational dimensions, males were adopting a more relaxed approach.

Children's photographs of their favorite place to play with their male and female educator also reveal some differences in terms of the activities linked to each of the educators. Specifically, the centers/activities that they prefer to play with their male educator are more active/energetic, as opposed to the ones they like to play with their

female educator. Harris & Barnes (2009) also found that the female teacher was associated more frequently with play that involves toys and resources whereas the male educator as playing more with physical sports and games.

In addition, children's drawings convey messages about gender stereotypes, and imply that children and especially girls have "picked up the gender binary thinking of men's and women's stereotypical differences" (Xu, 2020, p. 336). Girls' drawings of their female educator are colorful, the educator and the girls are wearing skirts and there are hearts. On the other hand, to draw the male educator and the boys in their classroom, they use only one or two dark colors. Thus, boys drew round the face of the female educator and square the face of the male educator. Future research can explore how children depict gender differences and gender stereotypes in their drawings of males and females either they are their educators or their parents and friends.

Turning to our research question about whether children manifest any preferences at home, results are somehow inconsistent as three parents replied negatively and two parents indicated that there are non-verbal signs from their children. Yet, three out of the five parents replied that they noticed (verbally or nonverbally) a preference to the male educator. However, when it comes to the activities that their children do in the classroom, four parents mentioned that when their child discusses at home about the activities, they emphasize on the activity and not on the gender of the educator. Given that the sample size is small, future research should explore further if children manifest a preference towards male or female educators when discussing with their parents at home.

As far as parents' views about male educators are concerned, confirming previous results (Warin, 2019) data revealed that parents acknowledge the different perspective a male can bring, as males can help battle stereotypes and ensure balance and gender flexibility in the activities offered to children but also in the ECEC environment. In addition, parents highlighted the need for different role models for boys and girls. Thus, four out of the five parents acknowledge that there are differences between male and female educators either in terms of their interaction with the children or in terms of their pedagogical work and the role they assume in the classroom. Gender stereotypes were prevalent in parents' responses, as female educators are considered as being more sensitive and tender to children due to their maternal instinct, whereas males are considered as more playful and boisterous. As a result, two parents highlighted that the existence of both male and female educators can ensure balance both for children and for educators. Here it is important to stress that confirming previous results (Huber & Traxl, 2018), one of the parents mentioned that these differences do not stem from the educators but from the children, and specifically boys, themselves.

## Conclusions

Our results provide support to the argument that children exhibit a preference for their same-gender educator. Huber & Traxl (2018, p. 465) highlight that although it is not clear why exactly "this 'man-boy effect' occurs [...] boys more frequently seek and maintain contact to male educators". In fact, although we need to interpret our results with caution, due to the small size of the sample, we could maintain that, although girls "react less obviously to the gender of the educator" (Huber & Traxl, 2018, p. 465), they

also manifest a need for having a male educator. In addition, both from participating children's and parents' perspectives we could draw the conclusion, though not definite due to the limitations of the study, that according to children, both boys and girls, the presence of a male ECEC educator offers them opportunities for fun. Thus, participant parents argue that the ECEC practice would also be benefitted, given the flexibility and balance males can offer in the field and their complementarity with their female co-workers. Our study substantiates previous research results (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Sumsion, 2005) which highlight that the presence of male ECEC educators does not necessarily challenge gender stereotypes. As Warin (2019) positions expecting males to be 'male role models' rather than positive role models, as females should also be, contributes into a "re-gendering of society [which] emphasizes the assertion of a tradition gender binary [rather than] a de-gendering of society [which] implies moving beyond this" (Warin, 2019, p. 295).

The present study does not come without limitations. A case study research design does not allow the research to generalize the findings of the case studied and it is difficult to be replicated. Thus, the number of the participating children and of the parents is small. Despite these limitations, the study provides some valuable insights about how preschool children differentiate male and female educators' roles in ECEC. In addition, the author has not collected any demographic data on the two educators and has hypothesized that they had equal roles in the classrooms. Possible differences in their roles and division of work may have affected the results of the study. The fact that the male educator has been identified as playful and the female educator as educational, as well as parents' ascertainment that their child tends to show a preference to the male educator further substantiate the call for alleviating the gender imbalance in the ECEC sector and for ensuring that the ECEC workforce comes from diverse backgrounds, including their gender. In addition, the study further accentuates the need to listen to children's voices for all issues that affect them, as well as to adopt a variety of methods in order to create diversified perspectives and to listen more effectively (Clark, 2005).

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