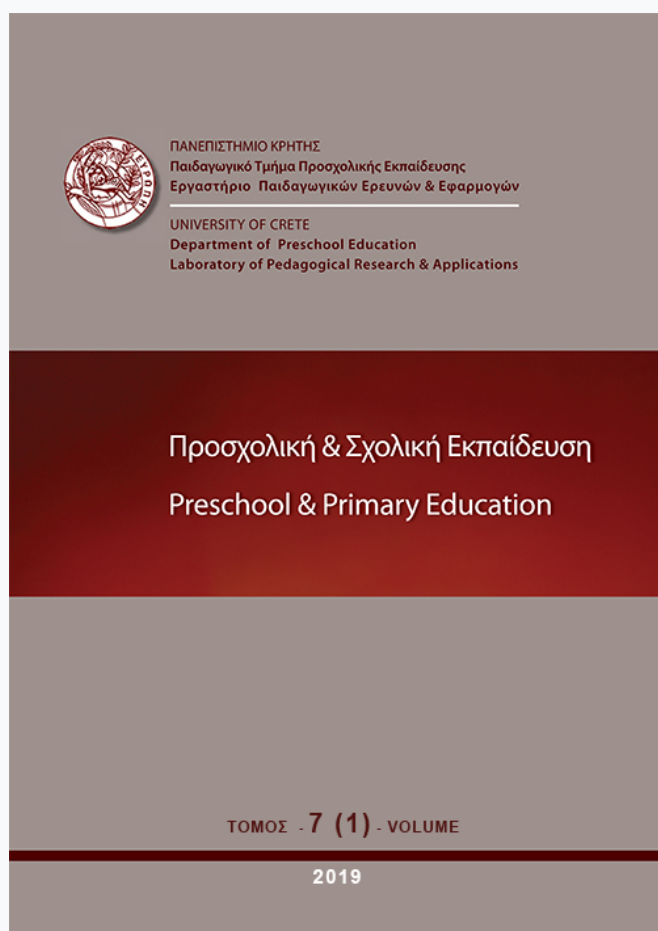


## Preschool and Primary Education

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Early view



«Οι γυναίκες ξέρουν να οδηγούν;» Μια έρευνα για τη συμβολή της θεατροπαιδαγωγικής στην αντιμετώπιση στερεοτυπικών αντιλήψεων για το φύλο

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# **‘Do women know how to drive?’ A research on how theatre pedagogy contributes to dealing with gender stereotypes**

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**Summary.** This research aims at investigating the effects of a drama/theater-in-education program on dealing with gender stereotypes; it also aims at creating or improving a culture of cooperation and communication among 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils of a Greek primary school. On the premise that drama/theater promotes play, free and creative expression, we attempted to bring out the pupils’ perceptions, subconscious thoughts, prejudices, emotions and fears regarding gender, through both qualitative and quantitative tools. The sociometric test analysis, the subject analysis of the data gathered by the student group interviews, the critical friend’s comments and the researchers’ reflective journals indicate a shift in the pupils’ stereotypical perceptions on gender, as well as a broadening of the social networks between boys and girls. The educational drama/theater practices of our program provided the students with a safe, free and creative environment that enabled them to talk about, negotiate and express, with all senses, their personal representations, values, views and gender stereotypes.

**Keywords:** theatre pedagogy, drama/theatre in education, educational drama/theatre, gender, gender stereotypes

## **Introduction – Theoretical framework**

Even in early childhood, a person, as an active subject, is called to determine his/her gender identity. The characteristics that the person attributes to gender are defined by what each society, era and civilization considers appropriate for a man or a woman (Fagot, Leinbach, & O’Boyle, 1992). In such a restrictive and suffocating environment, the child’s gender identity is shaped outwardly as an external imposition rather than a person’s own choice (Craig & Baucum, 2002).

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The term 'sex' has to do with biological and social differences between men and women. Chromosomes and specific features define a person's sex. As far as biological characteristics are concerned, men and women, girls and boys present many differences, mostly regarding physical development, strength, weight and skeletal development. However, the differences regarding the concepts of sociability, self-esteem or motivation for success, don't seem to be connected to a person's sex (Craig & Baucum, 2002). The psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the biological nature of sex and affirms that sexuality plays a central role and precedes knowledge on gender roles. The sexual organs anatomical differences and Oedipus complex or Electra complex, which refers to the sexual desire of the child for the opposite sex parent, play a key role in the development of personality characteristics that are different for each gender (Kantartzi, 2003; Laqueur, 1992).

Gender, on the other hand is used as a term to describe characteristics and behaviors attributed to both sexes, in other words masculinity and femininity (Aslop, Fitzsimons, & Lennon, 2002; Connell, 2002; Turner, 2006). In gender studies the term 'gender', according to Butler (1990), concerns cultural, not biological, differences.

Eliot (2009) agrees with the view that gender is a social construct. In her book *Pink brain, Blue brain – How small differences grow into troublesome gaps – And what we can do about it*, she analyzed studies concerning the brains of men and women and how they behave; she argues that people's behavior initially isn't differentiated by their sex; the characteristics and the choices based on gender are founded on a person's experiences. Elliot's opinion (2009) is in accordance with Beauvoir (2009), who states that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (p. 330), in an attempt to underline that a woman doesn't want to free herself from her sex, but rather from the social construction of her gender and oppressive femininity.

Butler (1990) in her book entitled *Gender trouble: Feminism and subversion of identity* suggests that gender isn't just a noun. In reality, it is a verb, since it is subject to change and expresses the predominant discourse of each era and society, while it is restricted by the imposed socio-cultural norms. Connell (2002), seems to be on the same track, since he claims that gender identities are socially constructed and that during this process a person forms his/her identity actively without being a passive receiver of mechanistic messages. Gender stereotypes are the result of an attempt on the part of the entire society to guide human behavior, which shows that gender is inherently political (Connell, 2002).

A person's self-perception of what gender, masculinity and femininity are constituting their gender identity (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Our world is based upon a dual gender dissection and a person is called to choose which category he/she is going to be integrated into, with the intent to exercise control over a specific environment (Kogidou, 2015). However, when people's identity (their social identity), is dysfunctional and rejects or judges anything that is different, the danger of potential stereotypes and racism phenomena emerge (Konstandopoulou, 2016).

More specifically, gender stereotypes (in other words sexist stereotypes) refer to rigid perceptions of what a man/woman is. These same oversimplified images function as normative behavior models and propagate gender inequity in society; their focus is on gender differences, not the difference among subjects. The differentiation in social reactions and the verbal references boys and girls are subjected to, create the differences between the two sexes; these differences concern both the initial conceptual perception of oneself, as well as the expressed behavior (Kogidou, 2015). Hence, depending on the civilization and the era in which children are growing, they very soon learn how to act, think and feel based on the gender category they have been registered under. The creation of a positive multicultural learning environment plays a key role in a child's life later on, (Lightfoot, Cole, & Cole, 2013), because it is during the childhood years

that it forms its self-image and develops thinking patterns and behaviors that are unlikely to change later.

According to research findings presented below, theater pedagogy and theatrical play can enhance the ability for both self-expression and acceptance of the other; we consider that, in this context, the cultivation of multicultural empathy and self-confidence, as well as the acceptance of different others, provides a framework within which gender stereotyped perceptions can be modified.

Theater pedagogy<sup>1</sup> creates “positive cultural experiences” (Lenakakis, 2015) and is multisensory, inclusive and multicultural by nature (see also Kondoyianni, Lenakakis, & Tsiotsos, 2013). Several of our studies on the development of multicultural empathy and communication in multicultural groups (Kompiadou, Lenakakis, & Tsokalidou, 2017) highlight the power that drama/theater-in-education practices have to create an environment of communication, where the objective is on the one hand to develop a critical view of the official language, culture and identity; and on the other to enable everyone to express themselves as someone who differs from others.

Inside the educational drama workshop, the player is given the opportunity to empathize with others, to walk in their shoes, to understand them through the embodiment of a role, within the safety that play provides (Lenakakis, 2004). A drama/theater-in-education project implemented in the villages of Xanthi, Northern Greece, by the University of Thessaly, came to the same conclusion, affirming the affect of drama/theater-in-education practices may have on negotiating and soothing prejudices (Kondoyianni, 2008). Another drama/theater-in-education program entitled “Bridging the gap”, implemented in New York, was created with the intention to give an opportunity to the members of different cultural communities to share their stories (Houseal, Ray, & Teitelbaum, 2013). This program came to similar research findings, concerning the realization and mitigation of stereotypical perceptions of the group members in relevance to participants’ age. In this program, drama/theatre provided the participants with a safe space of freedom; in this free space, they were taught to actively listen, see and at the same time observe themselves and others.

Furthermore, research has shown the contribution of theater pedagogy to the social development of children in middle childhood (Erbay & Doğru, 2010; Tsiaras, 2016a). Non-popular children often reproach others, feel lonely and have low self-esteem. Wright’s research program (2006), based on role playing games, confirms the contribution of theatre pedagogy to the personal and social development of the participants; in fact their self-confidence improved significantly. Moreover, Ramsay (2014) taking into consideration the fact that what is socially considered as suitable for a girl affects teenage girls’ behavior and the way they treat their body, implemented a research program for teenage girls. The program was based on drama/theatre in education, specifically on comedy. The research concluded that (educational) drama encompasses the power to liberate girls from the female image and constraints imposed by gender stereotypes, since it enables them to move and “experiment” with their bodies and to escape normative gender perceptions.

Inside the context of educational drama practices, a child is enabled to develop tolerance for the emerging contradictions based on dialogue and acceptance. This tolerance results in mutual respect to otherness as well as in the development of solidarity. As we know, these bonds (Cummins & Early, 2011) provide people with emotional support, social recognition and they empower self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence. In addition, research findings report that theater pedagogy can contribute to recognizing the identity of another and to correcting misinterpretations. In this case children’s learning is multilateral and leads to cognitive, social,

emotional and moral development on a variety of topics, in different subject areas (Carrol, 1988). In her research entitled "Boys in a dress", involving elementary school students, Terret (2013) suggests that the mantle of the expert, as drama-in-education practice, enables the child to reverse, or even go beyond, the stereotypical concept attributed to the categories 'man' and 'woman', without the fear of being stigmatized. On a similar basis, research conducted in an Australian school by Hatton (2013) studied how drama affects girls' reflections on gender issues, personal issues, relations and identity.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research objective and research questions***

In this study, we are investigating the contribution of theatre pedagogy to the negotiation of stereotypical perceptions on gender and to communication between the genders and among same age groups. During middle childhood impulsiveness, tension and conflicts are often a reoccurring phenomenon (Craig & Baucum, 2002). Through an specially designed drama/theatre-in-education program, our research team attempted to investigate these conflicts and inspect the efficacy of this program regarding the development of networks among students. Our assumption is that, these networks will provide a context for discussion among the group members on the basis of respecting each other's personal, not gender, differences. Based upon research findings of relevant studies we tried to determine the degree to which theater pedagogy can enable the communication between the genders and the degree to which it can contribute to dealing with gender stereotypical perceptions in middle childhood pupils.

### ***Participants***

The participant group consisted of 26 pupils attending the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school (Northern Greece). Fifteen of them were girls and 11 of them were boys. The average group age was 11.6 (standard deviation 0.001). The school in which the research was conducted was the only school in the area we were granted access to, which means that the data were collected through convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

### ***Research method***

In order to effectively explore and understand the subject of our research, we chose the Mixed Method; we used both quantitative and qualitative tools (triangulation). Our research was based on the Action Research model, firstly because it enabled us to make the necessary adjustments to our theater-in-education program and secondly, because it allowed us to collect qualitative data as well; the latter was important in order for us to live up to the nature of the gender stereotype social issue in question. The qualitative data analysis is based on Grounded Theory, with the aim of presenting the reader with the subjects' views, as accurately as possible.

### ***Measurements-Tools***

The participants were given a four-question sociometric test to fill in before and after the completion of the drama/theater-in-education program. The students were asked to name, spontaneously and secretly, up to three students they would choose to work with and up to three students they wouldn't choose to work with; they were also asked to explain the reason why they

would or wouldn't: (a) In the case of a school project, ["of all your classmates, who would you choose (not) to work with for a school project assigned by your teacher, and why?"] and (b) during leisure time ["of all your classmates, who would you (not) chose to spend your leisure time with, and why?"]. The qualitative tools used to collect data were the researchers' personal journals that included reflective conversations of the group during the drama/theater-in-education program, the group interviews of the children, before, during and after the program and the critical friend comments. We would like to note that the students' teacher served as the critical friend of the research, being present during all the group meetings. The data collected from qualitative tools were analyzed on the basis of Grounded theory during the research phase; this fact not only enriched the research, it also helped us update and shape the intervention program and the analyzing process. The data analysis encompasses three types of coding. Initially we attempted open coding, in order to allow for the emergence of concept-codes and their traits. The constant data comparison of this phase supported the inspection of the created concept categories. Axial coding took place during the second phase; each time our focus was on one of the categories that emerged during open coding and on breaking this category down into subcategories. Lastly, the third phase concerned selective coding, during which our target was to consolidate the core categories (see Straus & Corbin 1996).

### *Data collection*

In order to collect the quantitative research data, we implemented a quasi-experimental design. After having been granted access to the school by the school principle and the teachers involved, we proceeded to inform the students and their parents about the research. They agreed to take part in the research and we, on our part, affirmed that we would conform to the code of conduct as far as students' personal data was concerned. The data collection started prior to the drama/theater-in-education program, through the discussions we had with the critical friend, who gave us crucial information on the group dynamics. The group conversation with the participating students and the data obtained by the first sociometric test configured the initial thematic axes of our intervention. However, our research team also collected data throughout the duration of the program, during reflective conversations after each exercise/game and lastly, after the conclusion of the program.

### *Program implementation*

The program was implemented from January until April 2017 and during this time, 15 two-hour meetings took place. Based on the action research model (Somekh, 1995), every intervention was designed taking into consideration the research questions and the group traits. More specifically the content of our drama/theater-in-education program was shaped by the initial group conversation with the students, the teacher's comments and the first analysis of the sociometric test. This first analysis revealed that the student social network was weak and that there were stereotypical perceptions about the opposite gender. Therefore, our drama/theater-in-education program was shaped with the aim of creating conversations on the topic of stereotypic gender perceptions and on dealing with them through the creation of a safe communication and interaction context. The first phase of the meetings consisted of exercises and games that promote communication, movement, rhythm and the development of group dynamics. Our goal was to create a safe, trusting environment among the group members and to cultivate respect for otherness. During the second phase, meetings were focused on role-playing inspired by students' everyday life. Images, objects and autobiographic stories inspired short

plays. The third and last phase of the group meetings comprised expression/representations through improvised still/dynamic images and short performances.

The basic principles we based our program upon were the continuous observation of the overall context and the participants' personal pace and the process of reflection after each intervention (also see Carr & Kemmis, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007; Grundy & Kemmis, 1988). The critical friend reflective comments and the students' comments were very valuable; they guided us through the next steps of the program. For example, after the completion of the first meetings phase, we had to make a few changes on the activities we had planned and we had to spend more time on exercises and games promoting trust, security and group coordination.

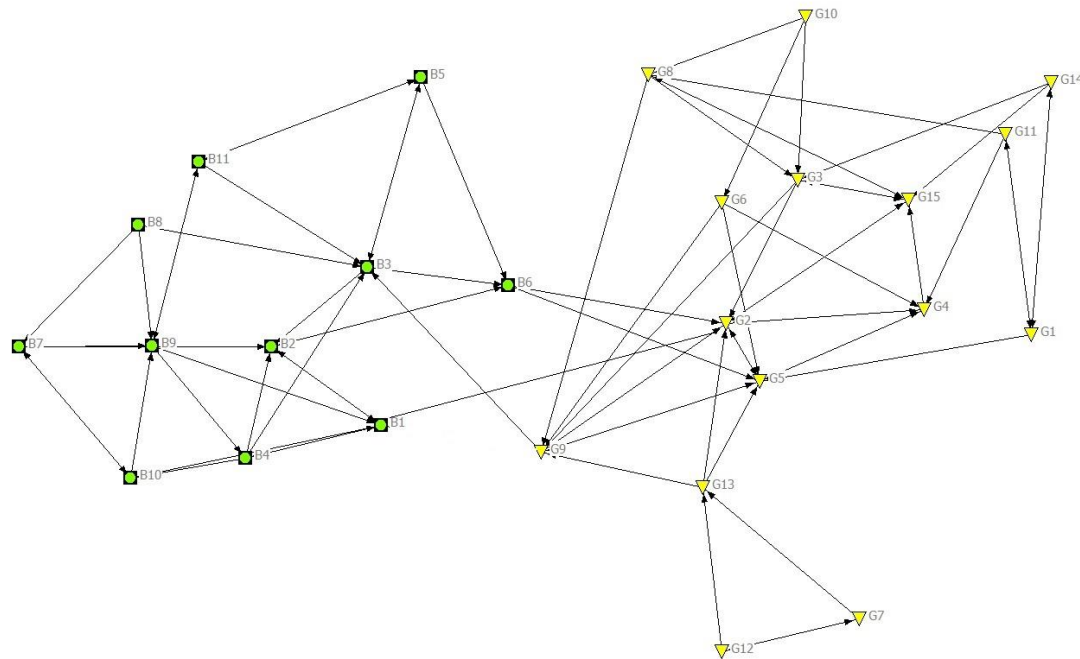
## **Research Results**

### ***Relation networks of group members, on the basis of the sociogram***

In this section, we will present the sociometric test results the group members took before and after the drama/theater-in-education program. Due to the fact that our sample is very small we cannot proceed to statistical control and detect statistically significant differences. Furthermore, the two questions referring to students' choices and the two respective questions concerning their rejections were not analyzed separately, since the students' answers on the two axes above seem to converge.

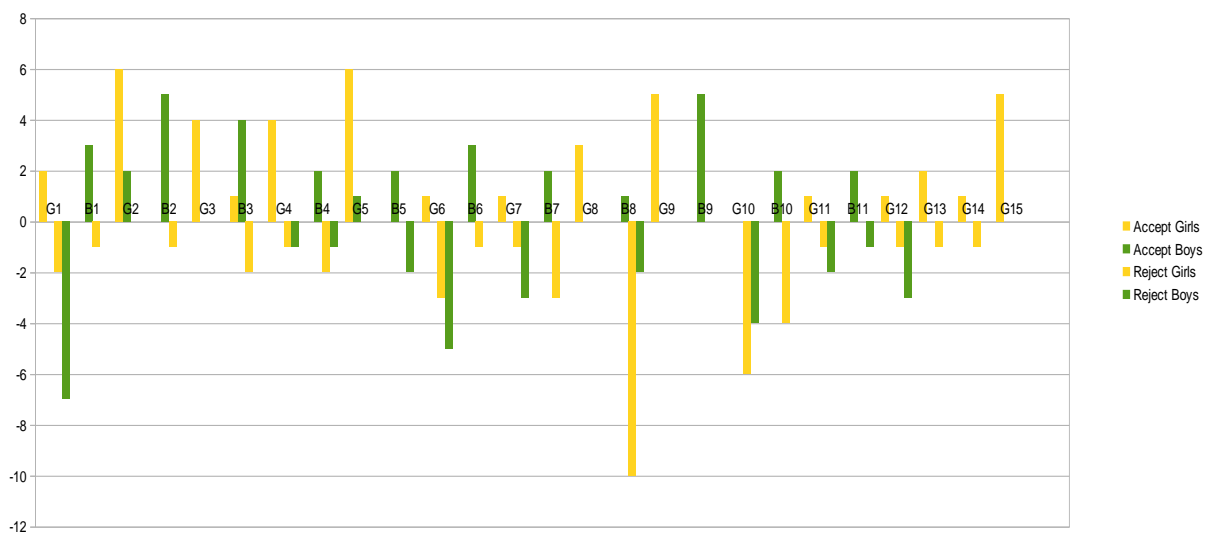
#### ***Group analysis – before the intervention***

The group relations network, before the intervention, appears in Figure 1. The G symbol in yellow color stands for girl and the B symbol in green stands for boy. Each child of the group was given a number; the serial number after the symbol indicates that number. The most dominant characteristic in Figure 1 is the fact the students' positive choices concern same sex classmates, while in Figure 2, it appears that the rejected classmates belong mostly to the opposite sex. Hence, in their relation networks what mostly appears is that boys choose boys and girls choose girls. Out of a total of 15 girls only 6 chose boys and out of 11 boys, only 3 chose girls.



**Figure 1** Choices network before the intervention

Figure 2 describes the choices and the rejection before the intervention. The great number of rejections of opposite sex classmates mostly indicates that the interaction between boys and girls is poor. The group interaction before the drama/theater-in-education program was limited and was mostly among the boys' group and among the girls' group, as shown in Figure 1. This fact combined, with the data collected from Figure 2 –the fact that there were students who did not include opposite gender classmates, either in their choices or in their rejections– confirms low interaction between girls and boys. Lastly, we would like to note a very important finding: the analysis of Figure 2 concluded that 13 (7 boys and 6 girls) out of 26 students were rejected more than they were chosen.



**Figure 2** Choices and rejections before the intervention



### *Students justifications before the intervention*

In Table 1 and Table 2, we can observe the students' reasons for choosing or rejecting a classmate before the intervention. Friend networks and getting along during school projects were dominant in students' choices.

**Table 1** Reasons for choosing a classmate prior to intervention

Friendship	54%
Getting along / No fighting	30%
He/she is funny	10%
Good kid	6%

Meanwhile, among the reasons for rejecting someone: lack of or difficulty with cooperation during school projects, a student's personality or behavior, while an important percentage, 19.4%, referred to gender.

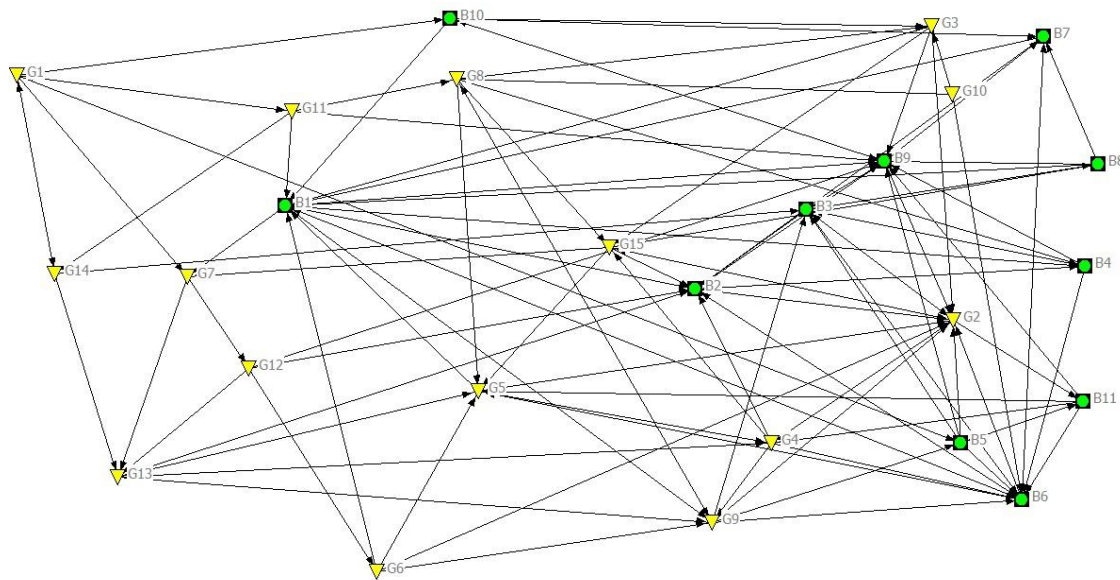
**Table 2** Reasons for rejecting a classmate prior to the intervention

Never worked with him/her before	28%
Dislike	22,2%
He/she is a boy/girl	19,4%
Difficulty in working together	18%
I have fought with him/her	6,2%
He/she is naughty	6,2%

Tables 1 and 2 prove that most children chose classmates that belonged to the same network of friends, while they rejected those they disliked, had trouble working with and those who belong to the opposite sex. Generally, their choices or rejections seem to be based on general and stereotypical characteristics, which either facilitate or impede cooperation and communication within the group. The communication among the group classmates and the group dynamics seemed poor, although the children had been classmates for five months, since the beginning of the school year, while some children had been classmates in the five previous years of primary school.

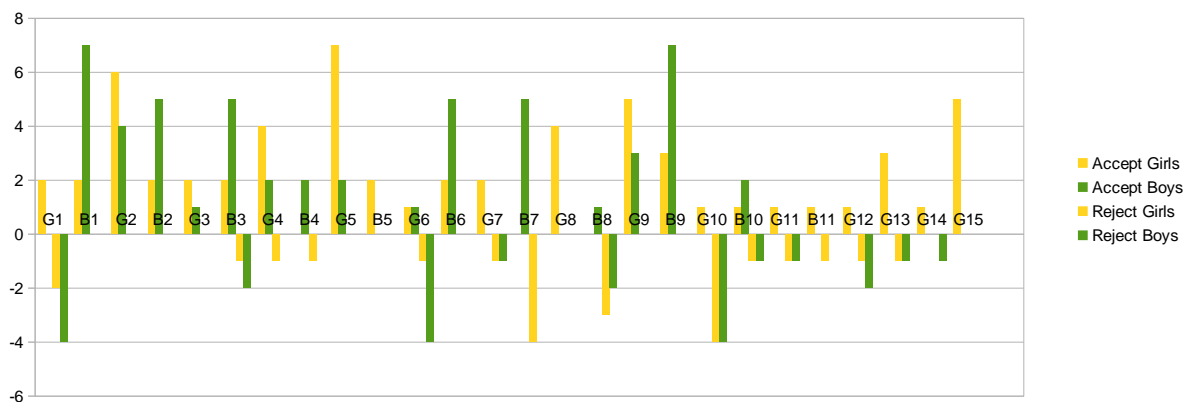
### *The group – analysis after the intervention*

In this section, we will describe the relations network that emerged, as well as children's choices and rejections after the drama/theater-in-education program. Figure 3 describes mostly students' choices after the intervention. The most striking characteristic of the group now, is that students are not limited to same gender choices. One can easily observe that the boys' network developed relations with the girls' network and vice versa, although the girls' network seems less assertive as far as interacting with boys is concerned.



**Figure 3** Choices network after the intervention

By looking at Figure 3, it is obvious that the group relations network is now richer, more dense and dynamic. Students' mutual positive choices rose and thus, the group coherence increased. This statement is reaffirmed by the students' choices in Figure 4. On the topic of rejections, it seems that the rejection network of boys and girls seems diminished. More specifically 11 out of 26 students noted zero rejection, while 4 only had one rejection each. On the other hand, there was no student that did not have at least one choice.



**Figure 4** Choices and rejections after the intervention

The increase in network relations among group members was also indicated by the fact that after the intervention many students claimed that the maximum of three choices was too restrictive; that is why we allowed up to five choices. This was expressed by comments such as *"I don't have this few friends"* or *"I need at least five choices or it's unfair"* prove the shift in group dynamics and the positive environment that was created by the drama/theater-in-education program.

In conclusion, the data in Figure 4 after the intervention indicates an increase in mutual choices between boys and girls, which confirms the development of more complex relation networks and an increase in the group coherence. The low percentage of rejections demonstrates a significant improvement in group relations.

#### *The students' justifications after the intervention*

Tables 3 and 4 indicate that the reasons for choosing or rejecting a classmate mentioned by the group members are characterized by greater variety and accuracy. While before the drama/theater-in-education program the justifications were more general (e.g. *"He/she is my friend"*, *"I know him/her"*, *"He/she is a good kid"*, *"I don't like him/her"*), after the program the students statements became more concrete (*"He/she has a great sense of humor"*, *"He/she is smart"*, *"We get along well"*, *"we don't get along"*). This change indicates that the students came closer to each other and thus, they were able to determine with greater accuracy their classmates' specific traits that led them to choose/reject them. Note here, that the rejections concerning the opposite sex appear to have a lower percentage now (14.1% after and 19.4% before the program).

**Table 3** Reasons for choosing classmates after the intervention

Friendship	33,2%
Cooperating well	14,5%
Sense of humor	10,6%
Communicating well / having fun	15,7%
He/she is very active	9,8%
First time cooperation	7,7%
Good kid	8,5%

**Table 4** Reasons for rejecting a classmate after the intervention

Misfit	46,7%
Difficulty in working together	39,2%
He/she is a boy/ girl	14,1%

#### *Group members' relation networks on the basis of thematic analysis*

In this section, we will present the research findings as they emerged from the thematic analysis on the data collected by observation and recorded in the researchers' (R) journal; we also present the comments, the concerns and the descriptions of the activities. The analysis also includes statements and comments of the critical friend, as well as the recordings of all 15 meetings. The basic analysis axes were the social relations between girls and boys, the group members' stereotypical statements, the students' gender stereotypical perceptions and the participants' cooperation.

#### *Resistance to closeness «Do I have to sit next to her?» (B7)*

The game "Finding my place on the circle" mirrored the relation network and the interaction development. Initially the children positioned themselves on the circle so that boys were separated from girls, as if by an invisible line. In the first interventions, there were quarrels about *"which place belongs to me"* and *"who will sit next to me"* (R, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting). When a child had to sit next to an opposite sex classmate, there was resistance. However, from the first meeting the children got "uncomfortable" due to a "fruit salad" game that made them leave their

spot and move around the classroom. Since the goal of the game was for each player to try to find an empty chair, no child complained about who sat next to them. During the next interventions, and especially after the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, the “uncomfortable-ness” seemed to amuse the children. In the critical friends’ own words (CF, 13<sup>th</sup> meeting) during the last intervention the children participated in a *“different fruit-salad, in which my neighbor is a child, not a boy or a girl”*.

The drama/theater-in-education interventions gave the children the opportunity to come closer to each other. During the first games, when the students were asked to come in contact with or touch the classmate next to them, a few reactions arose (laughing, awkwardness, blushing) Even when they had to touch a same sex classmate, the children seemed unfamiliar with the sense of touch. During the fifth intervention, the critical friend noted that “[B6] *easily becomes the mirror of ... [G5] and follows her moves; he observes her; they remain quiet and seem to enjoy the process; unlike previous meetings, there are no longer mocking comments by classmates*” (CF, 5<sup>th</sup> meeting). The concept of trust and familiarity with the other were built progressively and during the eleventh intervention the exercise “I rely on you”, which entails touching, working together and trusting, was carried out with great success; the children were very enthusiastic about it.

The children themselves contributed to the formation of the group rules, and during the program they allowed the most hesitating children to take part in that (B8, G11, G1, G3, B10). As said at the final interviews: *“It was the first time that I spoke this loud and I was at the center of the circle”* (G11), *“The best rule was respect”* (G14) (R, 13<sup>th</sup> meeting). During the reflective process of the first meetings, there were both positive (enthusiasm, joy) and negative (stress and anxiety) emotions. Negative emotions concerned feeling exposed in front of the classroom, *“Could I say my words from where I’m sitting, without standing up?”* (G11); negative emotions were also connected to presenting each performance successfully. As the critical friend noted, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, the feeling of insecurity was more intense in girls, who often chose not to take their coats off, were more careful about their movements, and talked quietly. Both the researchers’ reflective journals and the critical friend’s notes suggest an improvement on that topic during the course of the program. Although the most hesitating children remained more reluctant in front of the entire classroom and during presentations, they started taking the initiative inside the group they belonged in and they started feeling more liberated in games that were strongly based on movement, while some boys (B10, B4, and B3) did not hesitate to embody female roles.

### *Social relations expansion – “Bold” collaborations*

During the initial interviews, when children were asked about their relations with the opposite sex, boys as much as girls made stereotypical statements, that they couldn’t justify. For girls, boys are *“naughty, stupid and aggressive”* (G1, G6, G7, G14) whereas for boys girls are *“irritating, full of themselves, they are nagging and act like they know it all”* (B3, B8, B11) (R, 1<sup>st</sup> meeting). The students stated that boys and girls play together sometimes, mostly during physical education, but often they argue and they prefer to play separately, boys with boys and girls with girls. The children made these stereotypical statements during the first interventions; mentioning the fact that they were arguing led to tension in the classroom. In the meetings that followed the children continued to disagree, but their expressions and justifications changed; they become more specific. For example, during the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, the critical friend mentioned that B3 argued with G10 and he was annoyed by the fact that she spoke too loud, without paying attention to him. According to the critical friend’s affirmations, before the theater-in-pedagogy program, the same boy B3 had rejected the same girl G10, on the basis of gender: *“I can’t stand her because she is a girl”* (CF, 7<sup>th</sup> meeting). The change in the students’ views became even more apparent from the

10<sup>th</sup> meeting onwards, during group activities. This change in children's justifications might imply a deeper change in their relations.

According to the reflective journal data and the critical friend observations, the group members had a hard time becoming active listeners. Initially, the students didn't seem to be willing to listen to their interlocutor, they were indifferent about others' opinion and they often raised their voice to have their personal opinion heard. Change came gradually. The critical friend (CF, 1<sup>st</sup> until 4<sup>th</sup> meeting) reported that this was the most common reason for the interruption of the play flow. The immediate consequence of all that was that problems arose during times when group members had to collaborate. During the initial interventions, intense negative remarks regarding certain students emerged; children did not want to work with them. It is understandable that during the first meetings there was quite a lot of tension and certain group games were not completed as scheduled; however, they revealed the direction the intervention had to take.

The group dynamics seemed to start changing after the fourth intervention. The children seemed to enjoy the process more, and they set a goal to work together for a common cause. During the program, every group member had had a chance to work with every other group member. The children's final interview statements confirm that their collaboration improved through the drama/theater-in-education practices (R, 13<sup>th</sup> meeting). *"I thought I couldn't work with certain classmates, but when we got into the same group, I realized that it wasn't that bad and we didn't fight"* (B11). *"I liked having to become parts of different groups and that we worked together with every one, because we had never done that before"* (G14). *"We argued during quite a few games but we couldn't argue because we had to prepare something as a team. It was as if it were compulsory for us to work together and afterwards I couldn't remember the reason why I had gotten mad"* (G9). *"It was like our personalities changed in order for us to be able to work together and those who I dislike weren't annoying"* (B5).

*A critical approach to gender representations – "She could never work at the street market [...] because she is a woman"* (B11)

Role-playing games, still/dynamic images and group sculptures, were some of the exercises that fueled our group conversations about gender stereotypes. The fact that students were allowed to express themselves freely on how they perceive men and women in a safe context provided by the role they chose to play resulted in the formation of a stimulating context for communication and free expression. The children considered others' different views as enriching, rather than as a threat against what is known and ordinary. More specifically, the students were asked to embody roles that are more unsettling in comparison with familiar gender role-models, such as a woman working as a taxi driver, a man working at a nursery, a man working at a beauty salon and other similar cases. A large number of the children's stereotypical views emerged during role-playing games. During the reflection phase, the students were asked to discuss their experience both as players and as viewers. *"I don't think that it is weird that a man works with babies, because my dad works at a nursery school"* (B6) (R, 7<sup>th</sup> meeting), *"You weren't such a bad [female] driver after all"* (B4 to G1, 13<sup>th</sup> meeting), *"My dad didn't allow me to dress up as pirate"* (G8, 14<sup>th</sup> meeting). These statements during the reflection phase led to other group members to comment on the arbitrary connection of gender to certain social and professional categories. B4's statement that *"My dad washes dishes"* (R, 7<sup>th</sup> meeting) gave rise to conversations on a man's and a woman's role in family life. During 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> group improvisations, some groups presented powerful, busy, working women and men that take part in the housework and help their children with homework. In contrast, when they had to embody the roles of grandparents they would create family scenes with distinct functions: grandpa is reading the newspaper; grandma is knitting or

cooking. During the short performances, children's perceptions on the role of women-mothers and men-fathers, depicting the modern family model, were not affected by traditional stereotypes; they seemed to mirror modern images and experiences coming from their families: *"I like the fact that we don't live in the old days, because I wouldn't be able to become a veterinarian"* (G6, 12<sup>th</sup> meeting). However, despite the statements in favor of men's and women's equality mentioned during drama games and the reflection later on, the majority of students supported the view which wonders: *"Why should men do the chores on Sunday, since mums don't work on Sundays?"* (B9). A similar phenomenon occurred during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> meeting during which most children playing female roles embodied women as nagging or charming and those playing male roles embodied men as being busy reading the newspaper, or holding the TV remote control, or looking tired due to hard work.

In mixed group discussions on the topic of men and women, a few issues came up; these issues were turned into topics for discussion which took place during the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting, in role, on an imaginary TV show, under the following titles: *"Pink for women and blue for men?"*, *"Girls cry, boys hit"*, *"Do women know how to drive?"* (CF, 11<sup>th</sup> meeting). All children expressed their opinions in role, during an imaginary TV reportage. These opinions were discussed in front of the whole classroom and gave food for thought to the students. We will share B3's quote as an example that reflects the openness in communication and the shift in views on inherited gender stereotypes owed to the educational drama workshop: *"Does this mean that I can wear my red shoes now, without being mocked as 'girl'?"* (B3). The educational drama workshop created a safe space for expressing an internal contradiction and initiated critical thinking procedures towards arbitrary social stereotypes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of our research was to explore the effects of a drama/theater-in-education program on dealing with gender stereotypical perceptions and on cultivating a classroom environment characterized by cooperation and communication. On the premise that theater/drama is in essence playful and creates a space for free and creative expression, we attempted to bring out the pupils' perceptions on gender, their subconscious thoughts and prejudices, their emotions and their fears.

The social network representation after the drama/theater-in-education program seems to have expanded; this fact establishes the contribution of theater pedagogy as a methodological tool aiding in the group's bonding/strengthening of interpersonal and social relations. The educational drama workshop provided the students with a life-like imaginative context, which ensured a safe space for personal gender stereotypes to emerge and be discussed.

More specifically the sociometric test analysis before and after the intervention indicates a relation network that is clearly denser and stronger after the program. The same analysis shows that children's choices of opposite sex classmates to work with and collaborate proliferated, while opposite sex classmate rejections decreased after the intervention. This shift proves the creation of more complex communication networks. Moreover, after the intervention, the reasons for rejecting a classmate seemed to be less connected to gender; they were more about other traits such as personality, behavior, school life conduct.

The qualitative data analysis brings us to the same conclusion. The initial resistance to closeness diminished. Drama games provided a safe and free environment for tactile communication, an environment that favored children to treat their bodies as a means of

expression. This gave the students the opportunity to discuss their experiences, prejudices, and behaviors connected to their own gender perceptions. Through educational drama/theatre practices, the children approached one another's different identities and they viewed the differences between the two sexes as an opportunity to enrich their point of view and open their minds. Furthermore, working in small groups and sharing drama pieces between groups strengthened their social relations. During their rehearsals and their short performances, they experimented with different behavior models and embodied their roles integrating views that were hitherto unfamiliar to them. This process combined with the reflective discussion which followed, opened the group members to new ways of thinking and to redefining gender roles in the family, professional and social life. The sense of safety provided by the drama roles allowed the children to express themselves freely; thus, in the context of an imaginary place and time, the children revealed their innermost thoughts and didn't hesitate to face their personal conventions. In essence, the drama workshop created a safe space for the free multisensory expression of an unexpressed emotional load. The children's free, safe, creative expression and action during drama play revealed in the most eloquent of ways their perception mechanisms and reflected their views, values, contradictions and internal conflicts. In the same context, personal gender representations were questioned or transformed.

Our findings concerning the effects of theater pedagogy on creating the basis for an intercultural discussion and on the cultivation of social and communicational skills among students as people with different views are confirmed by other studies (Erbay & Doğru, 2010; Kompiadou et al., 2017; Lenakakis & Koltsida, 2017; Tsiaras, 2016b; Wright, 2006). The intercultural nature of the educational drama workshop allows the player to freely express his/her personal, different views. In this sense, theater pedagogy becomes a space that allows for the reconstructing and demystifying of (gender) stereotypical images (Hatton, 2013; Ramsay, 2014; Terret, 2013). However, recent research findings shed light into gender stereotypes issues and prejudices within the family and society, noting that a person's priorities are affected by gender stereotypes, setting work as a man's priority and doing the household chores and raising children as a woman's priority (Ellemers, 2018). Other studies suggest that although women scientists are proliferating day by day, children associate science professions with men; these studies also note that men that behave in ways that don't confirm gender stereotypes, regardless of their sexual preferences, have suffered negative consequences (Miller, Nolla, Eagly, & Uttal, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2017).

The above recent findings reveal a need to find a supporting framework for the negotiation of gender representations. Rademacher (2012) reminds us that in order for a person to deconstruct their deeply rooted prejudices, the accumulation of new knowledge collected externally is not enough; it is necessary to build, through exercises and games, an experiential relation between the two sexes. Only through such a context can the child player stand with a critical eye to the social construction of gender representations, adopt another person's point of view, and enrich his/her own views or reframe them.

In our research the potential of theater pedagogy was revealed in giving the players the possibility to update and realize their sensory impulses, through scene images, symbols, metaphors, intonation and through the 'as if' context. The activation of such sensory impulses made the players realize the potential to express themselves in a variety of ways and the opportunities to stand with a critical eye toward inherited social stereotypes. The realization, visualization and symbolic representation of the students' contradictions occurred within a safe context, where the players could suggest their own solutions to a problem and test them. The educational drama workshop proved to be a valuable, remarkable place of freedom, but at the

same time it was also a social lab, a special space, inside which the basic sensory functions - hearing, vision and touch- were redefined and rediscovered, and they were released from inherited social and cultural stereotypes. The magical 'if' that constitutes theater as a game worked in favor of this new way of negotiating, exploring, experimenting, cooperating, communicating and interacting, under the prism of enjoying common, collaborative creations.

Through this research, we attempted to share this educational drama workshop experience and to disclose our methodological decisions on the aspects of negotiating gender stereotypes that abide by drama/theater-in-education practices. Our findings do not depict an objective, generalized reality. Although we have been very open and honest about the way we presented all the research steps, we knew that there were constraints that don't favor the generalization of our findings. Convenience sampling and choosing the participants based on easy access to this particular population, doesn't render our sample representative, and thus, our findings cannot be generalized. Furthermore, the fact that there was no control group constitutes a research limitation, since it doesn't allow the comparison of our results with those of a population sample that didn't experience drama/theater-in-education interventions. Lastly, the short duration of our program didn't allow the deeper examination of the participants' stereotypical views, inside and outside our workshop, on a social interaction level outside the classroom.

However, the results obtained by this particular group indicate a clear shift in students' perceptions related to gender stereotypes. We hope that our findings, despite their limitations, will contribute to the discussion between drama/theatre pedagogues and teachers, on the importance of theater pedagogy in typical, non-typical and atypical education, and to the contribution of theater pedagogy to the creation of places where people with different gender identities, cultures, languages etc. meet freely.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term Theatre Pedagogy refers to drama and theatre in education, and it is used in analogy with the German term *Theater pädagogik*. Both constituent words are of Greek etymology.

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