



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring factors that affect Kindergarten teachers' use of picturebooks with gender non-conforming fictional characters

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## Abstract

Kindergarten environments are critical settings for early socialization and development of gender perceptions. Teachers play a significant role in shaping children's understanding of gender, as do the materials and media they introduce to the classroom. The aim of this study is to explore the factors that affect kindergarten teachers' use of picturebooks with gender non-conforming fictional characters in their teaching process. For the purposes of this research a quantitative approach was utilized. A sample of eighty-five kindergarten teachers answered a semi-structured questionnaire. A descriptive statistical analysis was performed, presenting the factors which affect kindergarten teachers' use of gendered oriented picturebooks. Results show that factors which mostly affect kindergarten teachers are a) related to the educational framework, b) interwoven with teachers' own personal beliefs, and c) referring to parents' influence. The comparison of mean scores of factors in different academic qualification groups shows that highly qualified teachers with the least working experience are not affected negatively in their use of picturebooks with gender non-conforming characters in their teaching process. Those teachers are open to gender diversity, are not discouraged by the parents' influence and take advantage of both the variety of LGBTQ picturebooks offered and the methodological framework of the Early Years Curriculum to deconstruct gender binaries. Mapping the factors could reveal the need for enhancing teachers' continuing education on diversity matters and teachers' resilience towards parents' influence. Furthermore, findings reveal the need for designing a more detailed and practical methodological framework regarding the approach of gender issues in early years.

Keywords: gender binaries deconstruction; gender non-conforming fictional characters; kindergarten teachers; picturebooks; teaching process

## INTRODUCTION

Initial understandings of gender develop from direct sources like family and school, and later from more indirect elements like media, religion, and cultural norms. Gender identity, intimately linked to one's gender, pertains to an individuals' self-perception as male or female, formed via their early encounters within their immediate surroundings (Maragoudaki, 2005). Adam & Harper's (2023) findings show that gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experience of young children and a requirement for educational policies rooted in the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child. Research over many years is clear about the negative impact of sexism and gender stereotypes on children's development; it limits potential growth and development, impacts self-esteem and shapes interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Estola 2011; McCabe et al. 2011). Depictions of gender in children's literature can shape development, influence career aspirations, frame attitudes about future roles in society and impact personality characteristics (Peterson & Lach, 1990; Hamilton et al. 2006; Caldwell & Wilbraham 2018).

Approaching gender social construction topics in their teaching might place kindergarten teachers in a position of disrupting gender binaries (Whitmore & Angleton 2017). Even educators' unconscious attitudes, practices and expectations of boys and girls in class may negatively impact self-confidence (Ebach et al., 2009), reinforce gender stereotypes and affect girls' and boys' motivation, participation and learning outcomes (de Groot Kim, 2011; Kelly, 2012). These unconscious attitudes can impact teachers' selection of children's books, thus reflecting

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their attitudes towards gender held by the teachers themselves (Ebach et al. 2009).

There is a growing body of literature on the representation of gender non-conforming characters. It examines how these characters are portrayed, their impact on children's perceptions of gender, and their potential to challenge traditional gender norms (Ritchie 2017). These characters -that do not conform to traditional gender norms- challenge the stereotypes and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity that young children may carry and shape their attitudes toward gender diversity. It has been suggested that children's exposure to gender non-conforming fictional characters can lead to more flexible and open-minded views of gender roles and identities. Also, children can develop greater empathy and acceptance towards individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms (Block, 2019). The importance of using picturebooks with gender non-conforming fictional characters in early childhood education lies in the fact that children are exposed in a diverse reality. They are asked to shape or re-shape attitudes and beliefs about the socially constructed world around them, to challenge established roles and behaviors or to adopt new ones and to develop their own perspectives using critical thinking.

Evidence from the last thirty years suggests a longstanding problem with gender representation in children's books. Gender non-conforming themed picturebooks have been highly contradicted or been frowned upon. There are countries, like Greece, where there are no original publications or translated versions of these themed books (Weitzman et al., 1972; Hamilton et al., 2006; Tsao, 2008; Crisp & Hiller, 2011). The reason for conducting this research is to reveal all those factors that affect Kindergarten teachers' use of gender diverse picturebooks in their attempt to approach gender issues in early years development.

## Literature Review

### *The role of kindergarten teachers in shaping gender identity understanding*

Early perceptions about gender are shaped first by direct influences like family and school, and later by indirect factors such as media, religion, and cultural norms. According to postmodern theories of gender, identity is constructed and constituted through social interactions and performances (Giraldo & Colyar, 2009). Gender identity involves how individuals see themselves as male or female, established from early experiences in their immediate environment (Maragoudaki, 2005). Gender stereotypes refer to societal perceptions regarding the expected traits individuals should display based on their gender, encompassing activities, interests, skills, and occupations. Internalizing these stereotypes starts in childhood, as children interact with parents, teachers, and peers who reinforce these beliefs (Liben et al., 2002; Brannon, 2011).

Blaise's (2005) findings indicate that a range of heterosexual discourses were operating throughout kindergarten classrooms and include wearing femininity, body movements, make-up, beauty, and fashion talk. These five gender discourses disclosed how children "do" gender in the classroom, how they understood and practiced emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity and in particular how gender was constructed relationally

between them. Based on this research, it is highlighted that the heterosexual matrix holds significant ways in the kindergarten setting, exerting influence and marginalizing certain aspects. This necessitates fresh insights into how children actively engage in shaping their gender identities, demanding a vigilant approach from teachers dedicated to confronting and addressing gender inequalities. But shifting and updating the teaching approach is not that simple since most educators are unaware of the heteronormative bias entrenched within classroom images and materials and their inclination to conventional approaches of gender topics reinforces the assumption that these representations are the only valued ones (Blaise, 2010). Wyse and Dowson (2009) noted that the barriers to creative learning, which is any type of learning that is unconventional and divergent, fall into the categories of statutory (emphasis on framework), organizational (parents' ambitions and expectations from education) and pedagogical (teachers' insecurity of taking risks -deviation from the already known).

Teachers' role should be to eliminate "gender policing" as it can elicit feelings in other children like that of not being welcome in their classroom and that hence, they are not included (Killen & Stangor, 2001; Miller et al., 2003; DiDonato et al., 2012). Nevertheless, teachers may not always recognize the significance of gender stereotypes, yet research indicates biases—such as perceiving girls as more willing to engage and boys as disruptive but inherently capable (Riley 2014). Despite students arriving at school with preconceived stereotypes, teachers' beliefs and teaching approaches can significantly impact the prevalence of these stereotypes within the classroom (Gosselin 2007). According to Major and Santoro (2014), teacher education programs have become largely silent about gender and the influence of gender discourses on teaching and learning. Stereotypical views of males and females dominate teachers' views of boys and girls, and they can be seen as essentially different—as binary opposites. This has implications for identity construction of children as they take up or resist the identity positions made available to them by the teacher.

Giraldo and Colyar (2009) explored US preschool teachers' influences on the construction of children's gender identities. Their findings include the teachers' awareness of the importance of their interactions with students and the impact they have on students' gender performances. It appeared that teachers need more resources and self-awareness regarding their own gender performances. It was also shown that teachers' self-knowledge may be important in disrupting gender-stereotyped teaching and social constructions, and in creating more inclusive learning spaces for all students. Adding to that, Tatar and Emmanuel (2010) investigated attitudes and perceptions of teacher behavior regarding students' gender roles. Results indicate no extreme egalitarian or chauvinistic responses. Female teachers gave more gender egalitarian responses to questionnaire items than male teachers. Only 15% of teachers in this sample had attended courses on gender equality. Over 50% of teachers did not respond to the question concerning their school's gender policy. The findings reflected a relative lack of teacher awareness concerning the in-depth nature of gender stereotypes and their overall influence.

DiDonato et al.'s (2012) and Lamb et al.'s (2009) findings showed that "gender policing" behavior can have a negative impact on children's psychological well-being and could lead to their exclusion from the school setting. The lack of engaging the children in a discussion about

what is normal gendered behavior results in reinforcing the assumption that there is a single “true” way of being a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ without providing space for children to question the power of gender (Butler 1990; Jackson and Scott 2010). Discussing this difference of experiences within the school setting could help children appreciate the other’s experience with the intention of celebrating diversity through taking new information and co-constructing their understanding of gender structures (Bruner 1963).

### ***Influence of LGBTQ picturebooks on children’s gender perceptions***

Over the past four decades, there’s been a surge in picturebooks spotlighting LGBTQ individuals, with many of these stories subtly conveying LGBTQ themes, often through subtext and implication (Naidoo 2012; Epstein 2014; Capuzza 2019). Early examples, like “The Story of Ferdinand” by Munro Leaf in 1936, started this trend by challenging gender norms, presenting characters who did not conform to traditional expectations (Naidoo 2012; Dorr et al. 2018). These gender bending narratives, where boys engage in traditionally feminine activities and, less commonly, girls explore more masculine pursuits, dominate the genre (Capuzza 2019). Notably, male characters breaking gender stereotypes have been seen as more groundbreaking, particularly the “boys in dresses” trope that gained traction around the 2000s (Naidoo 2012). Classics like “William’s Doll” by Charlotte Zolotow and “Jesse’s Dream Skirt” by Bruce Mack laid the groundwork for these explorations (Naidoo 2012). These gender-bending books are considered precursors to more progressive stories depicting transgender and genderqueer characters, a shift that began with titles like “X: A Fabulous Child’s Story” by Lois Gould in 1978 (Naidoo 2012). Initially, these early narratives aimed to redefine non-conforming gender activities within traditional masculine boundaries to validate them (Bittner et al. 2016; Malcom and Shehan 2019). However, some of these books inadvertently conveyed the idea that cross-dressing was incorrect, a notion children often pick up from societal cues, though later reframing it as a celebration of individuality and normalcy (Naidoo 2012).

The child’s response to this media, such as picturebooks introducing non-conforming fictional characters, would allow educators to bridge the child’s existing understanding of gender (Rogoff et al. 1989) and understand what social scripts the child is utilizing (Jackson and Scott 2010). The child’s assumption that individuals must wear clothing that matches their gender offers a bridge to discuss the more subtle nature of gender, such as identity and how individuals feel they are (Butler 1990). Discussing the diversity of clothing that an individual wears or the length of their hair helps children broaden their rigid categories of gender and come to understand its flexibility (Martin and Ruble 2009). Conversation about gender non-conforming feeling of the self allows children to question the assumptions of the heteronormative bias such as binary genders and sex (Butler 1990; Johnson and Griogis 2003). Discussion and critical thinking on gender non-conforming characters could draw on children’s understanding of fairness (Killen and Stangor 2001) and emphasize that every child has the right to be welcomed and accepted (Moradi et al. 2009).

The child is capable of drawing on scripts to devalue heteronormative situations (Levy 2008; Dunphy 2012). Children understand the illusion of gender consistency and

feel that their gender does not match the social expectations of their biological sex (Butler 1990; Simons et al. 2014). The child responds to “gender policing” either in the classroom or at home; for they have internalized the expectation that all children adhere to typical gendered behavior (Lamb et al. 2009). Children often focus on behaviors or physical appearance when asked if they are a girl or a boy. Discussing the diversity of gendered behavior through the gender non-conforming characters depicted in a picturebook, can support children in developing more flexible and less stereotypical conceptions of gender which has been linked with less internalizing and externalizing problems (Martin and Dinella 2011; DiDonato et al. 2012; Goble et al. 2012). Through the identification with the fictional characters or the interpretations of their motives and feelings and thoughts, an open discussion of the diversity of gender may create space for those children who are gender non-conforming to discuss their experiences as they may feel pressure to mask their atypical behavior or feelings from both peers and educators (Martin et al. 2005; DiDonato et al. 2012).

### ***Rational, aim and objectives of the present study***

The importance of teachers’ role to eradicate the practice of “gender policing” which may cause some children to feel unwelcome in the classroom, leading to a sense of exclusion was highlighted by many previous studies (Killen and Stangor 2001; Miller et al. 2003; DiDonato et al. 2012). Given that, LGBTQ narratives aimed to redefine socially constructed heteronormative gender roles and non-conforming gender activities (Bittner et al. 2016; Malcom and Shehan 2019), a framework which can lead to the normalization of marginalized identities (Aronson et al. 2017), should have been considered as the ideal medium for teachers in their approach to gender social construction topics. However, factors that affect teacher’s use of LGBTQ picturebooks in their teaching have not been investigated thoroughly.

The aim of the current study is to explore those factors that affect Kindergarten teachers’ use of picturebooks with gender non-conforming fictional characters in their teaching process. These specific picturebooks will be referred to as GNC picturebooks for brevity. More specifically the study intends to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: Which elements affect kindergarten teachers in using GNC picturebooks in their teaching process?*

*RQ2: Which factors are the most determinative in kindergarten teacher’s decision of using GNC picturebooks in their teaching process?*

*RQ3: To what extent do working experience and academic qualifications relate to the factors affecting kindergarten teachers’ use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process?*

### **Research design**

#### ***Research approach***

This study aims to explore the factors affecting kindergarten teachers’ use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching approach. Although a qualitative approach would be more suitable to analyze perceptions, considering testing a bigger scale sample to ensure results’ reliability, the approach utilized for this research is quantitative (Sells, Smith and Sprengle 1995).

### Data collection tool

For the data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed by the author for the purposes of this research. Previous studies have explored kindergarten teachers' views on gender development in early ages (Giraldo and Colyar 2009; Tatar and Emmanuel 2010; Major and Santoro 2014) or conducted a critical analysis of GNC picturebooks commenting on their use in early childhood education (Martin et al. 2005; Martin and Dinella 2011; DiDonato et al. 2012; Goble et al. 2012). However there has been no study exploring specific factors that affect kindergarten teachers in their use of GNC picturebooks. Hence, the tool's questions were specifically formulated for the purposes of the current research, to highlight those elements that may lead to specific factors. The framework that the questionnaire's elements were based on was Wyse and Dowson (2009)'s barriers to creative learning (statutory, organizational, and pedagogical). Furthermore, certain questions were based on Cannizzaro's (2019) interview questions for exploring perceptions on gender in early years among kindergarten teachers.

The questionnaire included (excluding the demographic questions) twelve (n=12) 5-point Likert scale questions, ranging as follows: 1 = Disagree/Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Neutral/Sometimes, 4= Most of the times, 5= Agree/Always. The questions were grouped into three (n=3) thematic areas: personal beliefs, parents' influence, institutional support. Each thematic area included four (n=4) questions. The instrument's reliability is reasonably high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.97).

After questionnaires' collection, data was entered into SPSS and the necessary coding followed. Data analysis included descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. In particular, beyond the mean score tables, one-way ANOVA was used to compare the mean scores of factors in different academic qualification groups. The significance level in all tests was 0.05.

### Sample

Eighty-five (n=85) kindergarten teachers participated in the research by fully completing the questionnaire. This big scale sample of professionals in the field of Early Years Education was chosen to ensure results' reliability (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). They all worked in Greek kindergartens of the public sector. The inclusion criteria used to select the sample were, the academic qualifications (range from bachelor to PhD) and the working experience (range from 1 to 30+ years). Even though an attempt was made to include male kindergarten teachers in the research, due to the vast majority of women in the field of kindergarten education, the participants were all female. One more important inclusive factor was the participants' certificate of English language competency (range from lower to proficiency level). The reason for that is because most of GNC picturebooks are foreign publications, so Greek teachers either acquire them in printed versions of their original language or track them in YouTube read-aloud videos. In both cases, kindergarten teachers should be competent enough to translate these picturebooks themselves.

The questionnaire was distributed through the Directorate of Preschool and Primary School of Eastern Thessaloniki (Greece) where the permanent and substitute teachers of preschool education are registered. Kindergarten teachers were reached through their professional email addresses of the Hellenic social school

network. Prior to the distribution of the electronic version of the questionnaire, an electronic version of consent form was acquired from all the participants. The consent form was accompanied by an information sheet describing the tool and the context of this study. After the conclusion of the study, debriefing letters were distributed to kindergarten teachers to inform them about the study's process, aim and methodology. This research was approved by the Institute of Educational Policy in Greece.

### Results

#### *Elements affecting kindergarten teachers in using GNC picturebooks in their teaching process*

The purpose of the present study was to explore the factors, which could affect kindergarten teachers' teaching in terms of using GNC picturebooks. A descriptive statistical analysis was performed, presenting means and standard deviations for the question groups (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
**Elements that affect kindergarten teachers in using GNC picturebooks in their teaching process**

Descriptive Statistics	Mean	SD
Teachers' openness to gender diversity	3.35	1.578
Children's exposure to gender diversity	2.94	1.168
Challenge of heteronormative practices	4.17	0.789
Attitude shaping	4.17	0.789
Parents' openness	2.94	1.168
Parents' support	2.17	0.789
Parents' co-operation	2.94	1.168
Parents' awareness	2.52	0.853
Picturebooks archetypes' variety	4.17	0.789
Picturebooks as medium to encourage opposing attitudes	3.23	1.485
Picturebooks as medium to explore gender role diversity	3.94	1.168
Early Years Curriculum's framework	3.52	0.853

As far as the first research question was concerned, results show that there are several elements affecting kindergarten teachers' use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process. More specifically, elements with the most impact appear to be GNC picturebooks variety which can be used as archetypes for gender binaries deconstruction (M=4.17), teachers' confidence in the potential that GNC picturebooks can have on shaping children's attitudes toward gender issues (M=4.17), and teachers' belief that GNC picturebooks challenge the status quo which supports heteronormative practices (M=4.17). Other elements are the degree to which teachers believe GNC picturebooks can be used as a medium for exploring gender role diversity (M=3.94), and the degree to which they encourage opposing attitudes toward gender binary characters (M=3.23). The latter two elements are related to kindergarten teachers' openness towards gender diversity and their eagerness to challenge gender binary role construction (M=3.35). Another determinative element appears to be teachers' support by the Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021) which offers discrete methodological approaches and recommendations on gender diversity topics (M=3.52). Elements exhibiting smaller means are: parents' openness to the idea of introducing picturebooks on gender social construction topics in teaching (M=2.94), parents' co-

operation in reading GNC picturebooks at home to support the kindergarten program ( $M=2.94$ ), parents' awareness of their children's divergent gender orientation ( $M=2.52$ ), and parents support of teachers' effort to deconstruct binary gender roles through picturebooks ( $M=2.17$ ). The latter four elements are related to the teachers' belief on whether children should be exposed to picturebooks introducing gender diversity during kindergarten ( $M=2.94$ ).

The aforementioned elements affecting kindergarten teachers in their use of GNC picturebooks could be categorized in three factors: a) teachers' beliefs, b) parents' influence, and c) educational framework.

### ***Comparison of factor determinacy in kindergarten teachers' decision to use GNC picturebooks in their teaching process***

**Table 2.**  
**Factors' determinacy in kindergarten teacher's decision to use GNC picturebooks in their teaching process**

Factors' determinacy	Mean	SD
Factor 1: personal beliefs	3.66	1.077
Factor 2: parental influence	2.64	0.976
Factor 3: educational framework	3.72	0.986

With regard to the second research question, factors most determinative in kindergarten teacher's decision to use GNC picturebooks in their teaching process, as shown in Table 2, parental influence has the least impact ( $M=2.64$ ). Results show that teachers, even though discouraged by parents' opinions on the matter, are most motivated by their support from the educational framework ( $M=3.72$ ) and their personal beliefs ( $M=3.66$ ) on gender diversity. In total, the elements mostly affecting kindergarten teachers are related to the educational framework (as previously shown in Table 1, Total Mean=14.86) and their personal beliefs (as previously shown in Table 1, Total Mean=14.63). Lastly, the elements with the least effect refer to parents' influence (as previously shown in Table 1, Total Mean=10.57).

**Table 3.**  
**Working experience, and Academic qualifications demographics of kindergarten teachers using GNC picturebooks in their teaching process (N=80)**

Demographics	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Working experience</b>				
1-5 years	18	21.2	21.2	21.2
5-10 years	17	20.0	20.0	41.2
10-20 years	15	17.6	17.6	58.8
20-30 years	15	17.6	17.6	76.5
30+ years	20	23.5	23.5	100.0
<b>Academic qualification</b>				
Bachelor	35	41.2	41.2	41.2
Master	33	38.8	38.8	80.0
Ph.D	17	20.0	20.0	100.0

The third research question refers to the extent to which working experience and academic qualifications are correlated with the factors that affect kindergarten teachers' use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process. Results in Table 3 show that more than half of the participants (50 teachers out of 85) have working

What can be conclusively assumed regarding the factors, is that parents being opposed to the idea of introducing GNC picturebooks, who do not support and cooperate with teachers' effort to explore gender non-binary roles, are sometimes perceived as a barrier. However, teachers' dependance on the Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021) methodological framework, their openness to gender diversity and their eagerness to use GNC picturebooks to deconstruct gender binaries and support anti-heteronormative practices to shape children's attitudes, have a greater positive impact on their decision.

Findings from the current research align with many aspects of previous research. All elements that can be categorized in the three factors of teacher's beliefs, parent's influence, and educational framework match with Wyse and Dowson's (2009) barriers to creative learning: the statutory, the organizational, and the pedagogical. Kindergarten teachers are affected by their beliefs and teaching approaches, which can significantly impact the prevalence of gender stereotypes within the classroom (Gosselin, 2007). They need a methodological framework, an education program on teaching and learning gender discourses to base on, a fact that is already highlighted by Major and Santoro (2014). Teachers' awareness of the importance of their interactions with students and the impact they have on students' gender performances plays, also, an important role in their use of GNC picturebooks. In total accordance with Giraldo and Colyar's (2009) suggestions, findings show that teachers need more resources and self-awareness regarding their own gender performances. However, Tatar and Emmanuel's (2010) findings that teachers' attitudes and perceptions reflected a relative lack of awareness concerning the in-depth nature of gender stereotypes and their overall influences, differs from current findings showing that teachers' self-knowledge may be important in disrupting gender-stereotyped teaching and social constructions, and in creating more inclusive learning spaces for all students.

### ***Comparison between factors in different academic qualification groups and kindergarten teachers' use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process***

experience from 10 to 30+ years (Total  $M=58.7$ ), while 35 teachers work between 1 to 10 years (Total  $M=41.2$ ). Accordingly, results in Table 3 show that a significant percentage of teachers (41.2%) owns a bachelor's degree, while only a small percentage (20%) owns a PhD degree.

**Table 4.**

**Comparison of the mean scores of factors in different academic qualification groups regarding teachers' use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process**

Factors	Academic qualifications	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p
F1 Personal beliefs	Bachelor	35	2.6429	0.75314	83.603	0.000
	Master	33	4.1818	0.63206		
	PhD	17	4.7500	0.00000		
	Total	85	3.6618	1.07716		
F2 Parents' influence	Bachelor	35	1.7500	0.87867	65.362	0.000
	Master	33	3.1591	0.37924		
	PhD	17	3.5000	0.00000		
	Total	85	2.6471	0.97612		
F3 Educational framework	Bachelor	35	2.7857	0.62762	87.123	0.000
	Master	33	4.1818	0.63206		
	PhD	17	4.7500	0.00000		
	Total	85	3.7206	0.98683		

In all three factors, the higher the academic qualification level of the participants, the higher the mean scores, as shown in Table 4. Differences between academic qualifications are statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) in all cases, while post-hoc testing shows similar levels on factor two between master and PhD holders.

Kindergarten teachers working experience and academic qualifications are presented as defining elements that affect their personal beliefs, their resilience towards parents' influence and their dependence on the educational framework. Findings show two notable patterns. The first pattern includes kindergarten teachers with a great amount of working experience who usually own only a bachelors' degree. These are the ones less open to gender diversity and deconstruction of gender binaries through GNC picturebooks. They are influenced in a negative way by parents' attitudes on the matter and appear reluctant to follow the methodological framework offered by Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021). They are experienced in specific teaching methods and seem to struggle in adapting to innovative methodologies and controversial tools. Furthermore, the absence of translated GNC picturebooks in Greek presents an obstacle, since in their majority these teachers own a lower degree of English language competence. The second pattern includes kindergarten teachers with less working years of experience owing a masters' and a PhD degree. These are the ones open to diversity subjects, willing to challenge gender binaries and eager to use GNC picturebooks despite parents' contradiction. These teachers are fully aware of innovative methodological frameworks offered by the Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021). They are eligible and affirmative towards tools such as GNC picturebooks, and are unaffected by the lack of translated picturebooks in Greek, since they usually own a proficiency degree of English language competency.

## Discussion

There is a notable link between the results and Wyse and Dowson's (2009) study. As the latter researchers noted, the three barriers to creative learning fall into the pedagogical, organizational, and statutory categories. The current findings show that Kindergarten teachers' personal beliefs, parents' influence and the educational framework affect their teaching of gender social construction. More specifically, a lack of confidence in deviating from the heteronormative gender orientation, and their attitude towards the themes suitable for preschool age, present a barrier for half of the teachers.

Conversely the other half, perceive these same elements as triggers to use picturebooks with gender non-conforming character topics. This observation can be explained by Riley's (2014) findings that in schools, teachers might not be fully aware of the importance of gender stereotypes, but studies show biases persist—like viewing girls as more cooperative and boys as inherently capable but disruptive. Parent's influence proves to be a negative most of the time for attempting the deconstruction of binary gender roles through GNC picturebooks. Parents' lack of awareness regarding their children's divergent gender orientation affects teacher's methodological approaches and material on a high level. Given that, family, according to Brannon (2011), is the first setting where parents commonly convey gender-specific standards to their children through everyday interactions, guiding their behaviors and activities according to gender roles, the confrontation of that setting from the school seems to be in most cases an insurmountable barrier. In addition, lack of in-depth knowledge of current educational frameworks and material variety lead older teachers to feel unsupported in their effort to adopt gender social construction topics, while younger and highly educated teachers follow the supporting methodological approaches and recommendations of the New Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021), which offers a clear and discreet framework for gender and family diversity and gender social construction topics and themes. As Gosselin (2007) highlights, even though students bring preconceived notions to school, teachers' beliefs and teaching methods greatly influence how prevalent these stereotypes are in the classroom.

Moreover, what needs to be noted is that the lack of picturebooks with gender non-conforming characters in Greek publications limits teachers' choices to either using the restricted token of translated LGBTQ picturebooks or using the foreign titles which are presented in this study and offered via YouTube in read-aloud videos while doing the translation themselves. In any case, whatever form the medium is in, as Johnson and Griogis (2003) showed, GNC picturebooks read aloud introduce preschool and kindergarten children to children who are GNC or belong to diverse families and demonstrate how children can be powerful agents in creating inclusive classroom environments. The same researchers, based on their findings, recommended that educators should take an active role in responding to instances of gender policing and exclusion while empowering children to unground the heteronormative bias. It appears that children's literature, and especially GNC picturebooks, functions as a starting point to engage young children in dialogue to broaden conceptions of gender.

Although there is a large percentage of kindergarten teachers who are reluctant to set as archetypes gender non-conforming fictional characters who challenge the status quo which supports heteronormative practices, there is a promising percentage who appears willing to use these GNC picturebooks as a medium to encourage opposing attitudes toward gender binary characters. The fact that these teachers are eager to explore a diversity of gender roles agrees with Adam and Harper's (2023) findings, showing that gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experience of young children and a requirement of updated educational policies. Teachers being open to gender diversity and to the challenge of gender binary role construction, leads -according to Blaise (2005)- to their recognition of the significance of gender in students' daily lives and the creation of classroom structures that support a pedagogy intent on confronting gender bias and inequities. This promising percentage of teachers understands that, as previous studies have shown, discussing the diversity of gendered behavior through the gender non-conforming characters that picturebooks depict, can support children in developing more flexible and less stereotypical conceptions of gender which has been linked with less internalizing and externalizing problems (Martin and Dinella 2011; DiDonato et al. 2012). For those reasons, these teachers use gender non-conforming fictional characters to challenge the status quo, which supports heteronormative practices. At the same time, they believe that GNC picturebooks shape children's attitudes in kindergarten through setting of archetypes, deconstruction of binary models and the exploration of gender role diversity.

What needs to be highlighted is the impact that the academic qualification level has on kindergarten teachers' use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process. Teachers who own only a bachelor's degree are the most obstructed by their conservative personal beliefs, parent's confrontation, and lack of in-depth knowledge of the new educational framework. On the other hand, kindergarten teachers holding a master or a PhD degree, (therefore considered as highly qualified) are not affected negatively in their use of GNC picturebooks in their teaching process. Those teachers are open to gender diversity, are not discouraged by the parents' influence and take advantage of both the variety of LGBTQ picturebooks and the methodological approaches and recommendations of the Early Years Curriculum; to say the least, they are eager to offer children a range of gender-typed activity choices across preschool social contexts (Goble et al. 2012). These assumptions align with all previous studies that highlight the urgent need for teachers' continuing education and training on gender issues (Giraldo and Colyar 2009; Tatar and Emmanuel 2010; Major and Santoro 2014). A notable assumption based on current findings could be that the more in-depth the training and the specialization in one field, the more open mindedness and awareness is achieved by a professional. Thus, those kindergarten teachers sensitized and informed with regard to gender identity and gender diversity issues may not be discouraged by factors such as parent's influence, or personal beliefs; they -on the contrary- may be fully encouraged to build on to the educational framework and take it one step further.

Greek Early Years Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy 2021) includes -under the section of innovative programs- topics of diversity and the diverse family. Kindergarten teachers are expected to implement

programs related to gender subjects. GNC picturebooks as a tool to approach diversity in early years can prove to be highly suitable and relevant (Killen and Stangor 2001; Moradi et al. 2009), provided that kindergarten teachers are willing to employ it. Findings of the current study reveal all those factors that affect teachers' use of GNC picturebooks and in extension factors affecting teachers' approach of gender construction topics. Mapping the factors reveal the need of enhancing teachers' gender education in terms of diversity awareness and teachers' resilience towards parents' influence. This assumption argues with previous findings showing that the teacher's discursive practices based on unexamined assumptions, limited the identity positions available to the children in relation to gender and culture. Given that, previous research has shown that teacher education has an important role to play in preparing teachers with a critical orientation towards dominant gender discourses (Major and Santoro 2014). Hence, compulsory courses and seminars on gender self-awareness during teacher training are essential (Tatar and Emmanuel 2010). Furthermore, findings reveal the need for designing a more detailed and practical methodological framework. This framework should be accompanied by training seminars, for teachers to base their teaching on and implement approaches on gender subjects in early years.

### Research implications

Understanding how kindergarten teachers approach gender social construction through gender non-conforming fictional characters is an important area of study with the potential to inform educational practices and media content for young children. In conducting further research in this area, it is essential to employ different methodologies and types of analysis. The present study employs a quantitative methodology with a large sample which can lead to safe assumptions. For a multilevel approach which is recommended for future use, qualitative interviews or focus-group observations could also be employed. Moreover, interventions within kindergarten settings should be designed and conducted, whilst demographics of regions where the kindergartens are located in can be included at a later stage. With that multilevel analysis of nested data, the different levels (student, teacher, kindergarten) will provide a more complete view due to multiple dimensions and criteria (Frenzel, Pekrun and Goetz 2007).

Regarding the themes identified in this research, future research areas to be explored include an investigation of GNC picturebooks' impact on children's social and emotional development towards gender diversity by fields such as child psychology and gender studies. Moreover, teacher resilience against internal and external factors affecting their teaching attitudes could also be further explored.

### Conclusion

Exploring how students actively form their gender identities within societal, cultural, and political contexts provides kindergarten teachers with opportunities to perceive young children from fresh and intricate perspectives. Demonstrating how these children grasp gender concepts in early education settings reveals their capacity to wield this awareness in impactful ways, both in upholding and challenging established gender standards.

These new understandings of children make it necessary to re-imagine the role of the teacher. Teachers do have to deal with factors, such as their personal beliefs, the parents' influence, and the educational framework, which can either become barriers or boosters in their effort to approach gender social construction in the kindergarten. However, when these factors act as a supporting net, there is an opportunity to recognize the various ways that children perceive gender in the classroom and begin creating pedagogies that challenge children's desires to embody already established femininity and masculinity.

The importance of recognizing and integrating non-conforming gender perspectives in the teaching process, brings into light the broader integration between early childhood education and gender studies. Through the use of GNC picturebooks, a whole new perspective of social constructivism unfolds and establishes its roots in a defining area of human development, that of the early years. While the field of research on gender non-conforming characters in picturebooks is continually evolving, it is clear that these characters have the potential to contribute to more inclusive and accepting societies by challenging traditional gender norms and encouraging discussions about diversity and identity. These LGBTQ picturebooks can be used as the medium for teachers to create opportunities in the curriculum; to raise hard, critical questions about gender for children themselves to negotiate and struggle with.

The study indicates that while various influences impact how kindergarten teachers address gender, it is significant for them to expand beyond viewing gender solely through biological and societal lenses. Embracing alternative viewpoints, like those offered by GNC picturebooks, becomes essential to unravel the intricacies of gender and its multifaceted perceptions among children. By doing so, this could pave the way for teaching approaches that prompt challenging new inquiries about gender, children, and education. This shift might propel the early childhood field toward devising strategies for gender equity, ultimately aiming to transform the prevailing gendered dynamics in both classroom and society.

#### Declaration

##### i) Ethics approval

Not applicable

##### ii) Consent for publication

Not applicable

##### iii) Availability of data and material

Not applicable

##### iv) Conflicts of interest/Competing interests

No conflict of interest

##### v) Funding

Not applicable

##### vi) Authors' contributions

Not applicable

#### About the Author

**Christina Kalaitzi** specializes in English and American Children's Literature and Creative Writing in Education. Her doctoral research investigated the development of narrative skill through the combined use of narrative elements. She has published papers in the areas of children's literature, social literacy and creative writing-based teaching approaches, creative approaches to the new curriculum and teaching interventions. Her latest published scholarly book outlines the development of

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