Exploring children's symbolic play preferences: Promoting autonomy and well-being in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

Symbolic play plays an important role in a child's life. Using costumes, objects, or even without any materials, children take on real or imaginary roles, experiment, express themselves, and explore the adult world. Everything in their environment "comes to life," creating an imaginary world where princesses, action heroes, and jungle animals take center stage. The present study investigates the preferences of children, aged 3 to 6 years old, in symbolic play using disguise materials in a private Early Childhood Education and Care setting. The aim is to capture their choices regarding the roles they choose to play, either in free activity or in adult-led activity, and whether these preferences change as they grow older. The outcomes showed that as children get older, they are influenced by the media movies, cartoons, advertisements which results in diminishing their imagination. Children at all ages seem to pick costumes that personify their gender roles. Moreover, it seems that adults indirectly guide their children to certain preferences based on gender and current fashion. Consequently, it is important that the children's voices be heard and taken into consideration by the adults surrounding them parents and educators and this ensures the well-being of children regardless of gender. The adults around them parents and educators should follow a pedagogical approach oriented towards the recognition of children's rights, which allows and reinforces them to participate and act independently.

Keywords: *Children's voice, early childhood education and care settings, early childhood, social and emotional well-being, symbolic play, gender.*

Highlights of this paper

- Symbolic play is a crucial form of expression and learning for preschool-aged children, allowing them to take on roles and explore the world around them.
- The findings show that children aged 3–6 mainly choose roles from mass culture, such as superheroes and Disney princesses, influenced by media and the toy industry, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.
- The study emphasizes the need to provide children with space and time to express themselves freely and without pressure, ensuring their voices are genuinely heard, thus promoting autonomy and active participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A defining feature of the last century was the progressive expansion of rights to "people once ignored or excluded" by the law. A major milestone in that process was the recognition, in both international human rights (IHR) law and various national constitutions, of the rights of children. The United Nations (1989) identifies children as competent individuals who have their own experiences, knowledge, and attitudes, in addition to having the right to have their own 'voice' in a range of contexts (Fleer, 2018; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2013) and recognizes them as holders of rights, as are adults, to participate in all matters concerning them. Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention are significant, as they delineate their right to express their views on everything that affects them and that their views should be taken into account by adults around them. The recognition of such rights can also imply a corresponding duty on the part of the adults around them to provide extensive forms of affirmative protection for individuals (OHCHR, 1989).

Children are entitled to well-being, which means that they should feel supported, respected, and cared for. Such emotional security is crucial for the development of key skills and competencies that contribute to their future flourishing. Adults surrounding them have the responsibility to create appropriate conditions in childhood to promote children's well-being now and in the future. As childhood is a fundamental period of development, during which critical skills and abilities are cultivated, investing in it has long-term benefits for the course of life. To achieve the above, it is necessary that children's views and perspectives be taken into account in matters that affect them, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children clearly states (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2021).

Early childhood is a fundamental environment for preschool-age children Early Childhood Education and Care settings that create the appropriate conditions where children are encouraged to explore, identify, and express their authentic selves, and also acquire a positive self-image (Conyers, Reynolds, & Ou, 2003; Faas, Wu, & Geiger, 2017), enhance the sense of security and instill respect for peers, adults, and oneself. In such a learning context, students are able to express their views, participate, and communicate, so that ultimately democratic values are experienced and applied in everyday life, contributing to the formation of active citizenship (Flowerday & Schraw, 2003). Moreover, it is characterized as a vitally important period, as children develop many of the competences and skills needed for their well-being throughout life (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2021).

In this context, the research aims to investigate children's preferences in symbolic play using disguise materials within a private Early Childhood Education and Care setting, emphasizing their own 'voice'. Previous literature recognizes the significance of symbolic play in the holistic development of children, as well as their well-being (Sidiropoulou & Tsaoula, 2008), but it rarely addresses broader issues related to the implementation of children's rights, such as the right to express opinions. Most research on play relies on reports from parents and educators or on inferences drawn from researcher observations, which may not accurately reflect children's actual desires and experiences (Rogers & Evans, 2008). Furthermore, there are no existing studies that compare children's preferences

in symbolic play with disguise materials between children-guided and adult-guided activities. Therefore, this research raises critical questions about whether adults parents, educators, and society at large are consciously attentive to children's preferences to support their well-being and what messages are conveyed through play, whether through toys or activities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic play has been identified as an important milestone for early childhood due to its significant contribution to children's cognitive (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gopnik & Walker, 2013), social, and emotional development. At the same time, it serves as a source of fun in a natural way shaped by children themselves. It also creates an appropriate environment for richer communication and interaction with peers, making it a co-constructor of meaning. Children can encode their experiences into symbols, resulting in the recall of events or images from memory. It functions as a necessary 'tool of the mind' in school and family environments to facilitate storytelling and understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

This study is theoretically based on Bandura and Vygotsky's approaches. Vygotsky (1978) considers the social effects on children's cognitive development as the zone of proximal development. The child, by taking on different social, family and class roles (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; LaForett & Mendez, 2017; Pellegrini, 2009) and also by using objects to represent something else, enters a zone that creates opportunities for learning and developing abstract thinking (Orr & Geva, 2015), the Zone of Proximal Development according to the sociocultural approach (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning and cognitive development are achieved through the social interaction and active participation of children with adults and more experienced peers (Vygotsky, 1978), leading to the construction of their own knowledge (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

On the other hand, the social learning theory of Bandura also known as learning through imitation or observation-based learning explains how gender is developed and differentiated in children's minds and how the family environment can influence the formation of gender identity through parental rewards (Berk, 2013; Mischel, 2015). From the first months of life, children are encouraged to adopt behaviours that match their biological sex in order to form a gender identity that satisfies the expectations of their parents and the wider social environment (Stern & Karraker, 1989). Children perceive gender roles from a very early age and copy the specific norms, attempting to incorporate the stereotypical perceptions surrounding them (Karniol, 2011). If a child is rewarded for having "boyish" habits, then he or she may feel that he or she should become a boy. Many research findings confirm that the family teaches children what is stereotypically appropriate for each gender and also what behaviors are inappropriate (Giddens & Sutton, 2021; Hussain, Naz, Khan, Daraz, & Khan, 2015; Leaper, 2000). Consequently, gender role formation and the development of gender stereotypes are not genetically determined but are shaped by the family environment.

Additionally, the media is a crucial factor that can influence the development of children's gender roles through the messages they convey in multiple formats, which are easily accessible to children, either in the form of film, advertising, or animation (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Studies have documented the impact of the messages carried by the media on the construction of gender roles in children's minds (Halim et al., 2014).

2.1. Guided Play and Free Play

Free play refers to unstructured activity, where children choose what to do and which materials to use, without intervention from adults. It is entirely led and initiated by the children themselves; children decide what to play and how (Weisberg, Kittredge, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Klahr, 2015). Free play has value for various aspects of

children's development (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2008). Children who engage more frequently in play have better social and emotional skills (Singer & Singer, 2009) and demonstrate better self-control (Diamond & Lee, 2011). It is suggested that play is beneficial for the development of creative thinkers, well-prepared individuals to solve challenging problems.

Whereas guided activity is initiated and led by adults, it really consists of direct instructions, with adults telling children what to do, thus reducing the child's autonomy. It is based on learning objectives defined by the curriculum and provides the child with the opportunity to process new concepts and information, as it is a form of teaching but in a playful way (Weisberg et al., 2015; Wood, 2022). It also increases attention levels and supports the development of their social and communication skills (Veiga, Neto, & Rieffe, 2016).

2.2. Children's Choices in Role Play

Boys reinforce their masculinity through 'masculine' play roles, such as superheroes or wild/jungle animals (Rodríguez, Peña, Ma Fernández, & Viñuela, 2006). Developmentally, children like superheroes as much as they do because they can identify with the simple and concrete message they carry: there is good and bad in the world, and they want to eliminate injustices, to administer social justice and to protect all forms of life. Girls, on the other hand, are more engaged in traditional female roles (family care - domestic work – grooming) or roles that highlight beauty, such as princesses and fairies. Studies investigate that girls continue to accept and internalize them, affecting their psyche (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Marcotte, Fortin, Potvin, & Papillon, 2002). Furthermore, the beauty standards portrayed by Disney princesses place appearance and physical attractiveness at the centre of girls' values (Golden & Jacoby, 2018), which contributes to the escalating social pressures they experience nowadays, manifested as symptoms of disordered eating (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

2.3. The Aim of the Research

The aim of the research is to capture children's choices regarding the roles they want to play, either in free activity or in adult-led activity, and whether these preferences change as they grow older. We also consider whether children's views are taken into account by the adults who surround them.

2.4. Research Questions

This research was guided by four questions:
- What roles do children choose to play in free play?
- What roles do children choose to play in adult-guided activity?
- To what extent are children's choices influenced by their age?
- To what extent are children's preferences taken into account by their parents?

3. METHOD

The qualitative approach was employed in the present research, as it was conducted with semi-structured interviews, a suitable tool for listening to children and collecting information about their lives, which allows access to their choices, attitudes, and perceptions of social phenomena (Flewitt, 2014). Emphasis is also placed on children's participation in the research process, as they are considered capable of constructing their own meanings and contributing to the production of knowledge (MacNaughton, 2003). The listening perspective is based on the view that children are "experts in their own lives"; they have their own rights, which make them active subjects of the

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particular ensemble (family-school-society) in which they live and grow up (Broström, 2012; Palaiologou, 2023). Research data are illustrated with descriptive statistics (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

3.1. Participants

The basic criterion for children's participation was their age. Material was collected voluntarily from 95 early childhood children (2.5 years old to 6 years old) from private Early Childhood Education and Care settings in the Municipality of Athens, Greece. Specifically, 28 children aged 2.5 to 4 years (9 boys and 9 girls), 31 children aged 5 to 6 years, and 36 children aged 6 years (20 girls and 16 boys) participated.

3.2. Ethical Approval

Ethical issues had to be carefully considered in the research process: at the planning stage, in the research design, during data collection and analysis, and in the storing and sharing of data (Creswell, 2014). All parents of the participant children gave written consent allowing them to take part in the research group, after being informed of the objectives and scope of the research. In our attempt to highlight the "voice" of younger children and their right to participate and to choose, even though we had written consent from the parents, we orally informed the children about the project and the research process in a manner that is meaningful and child-friendly. Children were able to articulate their willingness to participate in the research (Burke, Jindal-Snape, & Ding, 2024). We also informed the children that they have the option to withdraw from the group at any time or not to participate at all. On both occasions, our situational ethics are fulfilled.

The anonymity of the children was maintained at all stages of the research, from data collection to analysis. The digital records collected by the researchers did not contain personal names or the preschool setting's identification to protect the children's anonymity (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities. All copies of data are kept in a secure format and location.

3.3. Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, all audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher to ensure familiarity with the data (Virginia Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis (TA) was employed as the methodological approach for identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning within the qualitative dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Guided by the research questions, the data were systematically reviewed, and relevant excerpts were extracted and coded according to participant group. Codes were then examined across all groups to identify patterns across the data of all groups, in order to construct the representative themes. These themes were presented with illustrative quotations from the transcripts and formed the foundation for the presentation and interpretation of the study's findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

3.4. Research Process

The data collection process began with the children's interviews (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017), which were conducted in April 2023. To give the children a voice and explore their perspectives on issues that concern them, the paper adopts a critical child-centred approach that seeks to "put the children first" (Bhana, 2016). This approach aims to engage children as active agents and encourage them to feel comfortable around the researcher, enabling open communication about these issues.

The procedure was carried out in consultation with the researcher, always with the help of the teacher. The children were in an environment familiar to them. The children were asked questions individually or in pairs related

to their favorite roles they want to play, either in free play or in adult-led activities. The researcher holding a magic stick asked the children the following questions:

Question 1: Let's imagine I am a princess of a fairy tale, holding a magic wand. What would you like me to transform you into now? Let's do it!

Question 2: Do you remember what costume you chose to dress up as at the school festival?

Question 3: Who chose the costume you wore? Do you like it?

4. RESULTS

4.1. Free and Guided Activity at Early Childhood Education and Care Setting

Children's preferences in early childhood education and care settings during free activities tend to be dominated by action heroes (Spiderman, Batman, Iron Man) and wild animals, reflecting their desire to express masculinity through 'masculine' play roles (Rodríguez et al., 2006). Figure 1 and 2 illustrate children's preferences during free and adult-guided activities, respectively. Differences are observed in dress-up play choices across genders and activities. As shown, boys predominantly choose heroes at 28.55%, with animals selected at a lower percentage of 14.3%. This suggests that most boys aim to save the world and eliminate villains, indicating an internalization of the message that it is good to be good. Conversely, girls tend to choose animals, mainly domestic ones, at 25% (N=7), followed by princesses at 7.15% (N=2), and caregivers, cartoons, and fruits, each at 7.5% (N=1). These preferences reflect gender-specific tendencies and social influences on play behavior in early childhood settings.

C1: I'd like to dress up as a strawberry because I love strawberries; they're my favourite fruit.

R: Do you have a uniform? Or are you going to buy one?

C1: I'm going to get a red dress and put on some strawberries.

C2: I want to dress up as Spiderman with a straight hand gesture to fly high and save the good guys.

C3: I want to be this huge giant named Halk so I can be strong and kill thieves.

What is interesting about these data is that two boys chose to dress up as Santa Claus, and one boy wanted to dress up as a princess. The words of the children justifying their choices are revealing:

C8: I want to dress up as Santa Claus to bring lots of presents to children.

C4: I want to dress up as a princess to hang out with Katerina.

C5: But... you are a boy. Boys don't wear dresses.

C4: I don't care.

C5: Come on! It's girly.

C4: It doesn't matter!

The preferences of children in Early Childhood Education and Care settings during a structured activity are different; there is little room for imagination to take over. Specifically, boys chose to dress up as animals, mostly wild animals, at a percentage of 28.55%, and girls as fairies or princesses at the same percentage of 28.55%.

Furthermore, in the structured activity, 71% (20 out of 28 children) reported that this costume was chosen by their mommy or daddy. (R=researcher, C=children)

R: Who chose the costume?

C6: My mom, she went and got it... from Jumbo.

R: Did you go too?

C6: No, I stayed with my grandmother.

C7: It's my sister's costume. Mom didn't get me a new one.

R: Why?

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C7: I don't know... Maybe... Mum told me that we have one.

R: Do you like this costume?

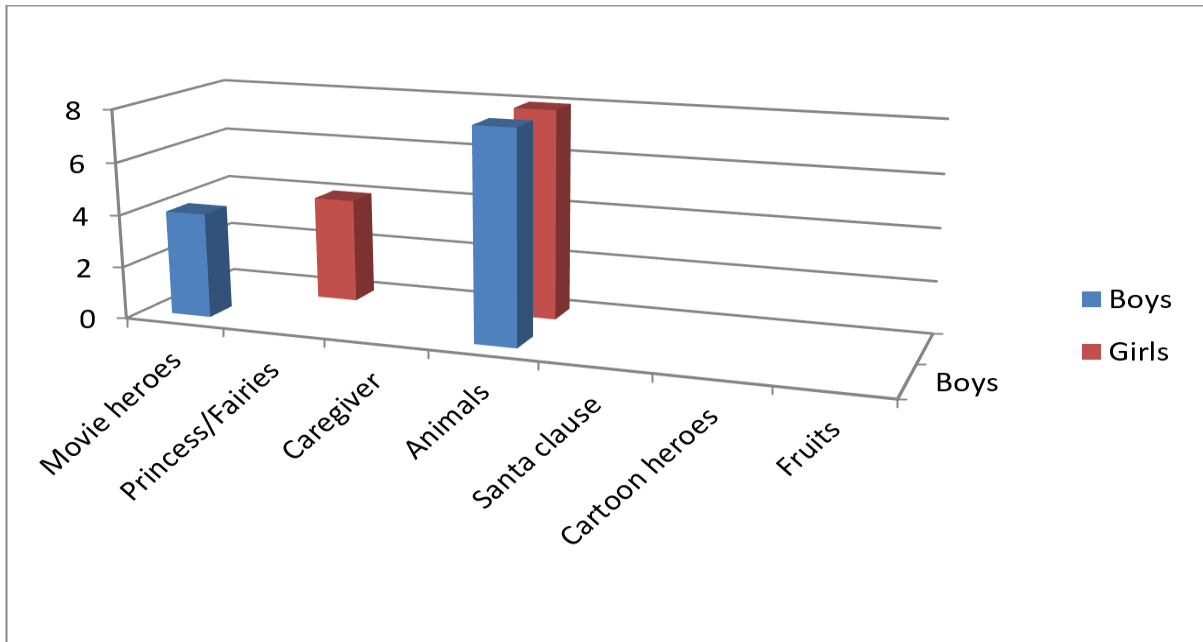*C7: Well... It's fine. But... Paw Patrol is better. I like the movie.*

Figure 1. Children's preferences at early childhood education and care setting during the free activity.
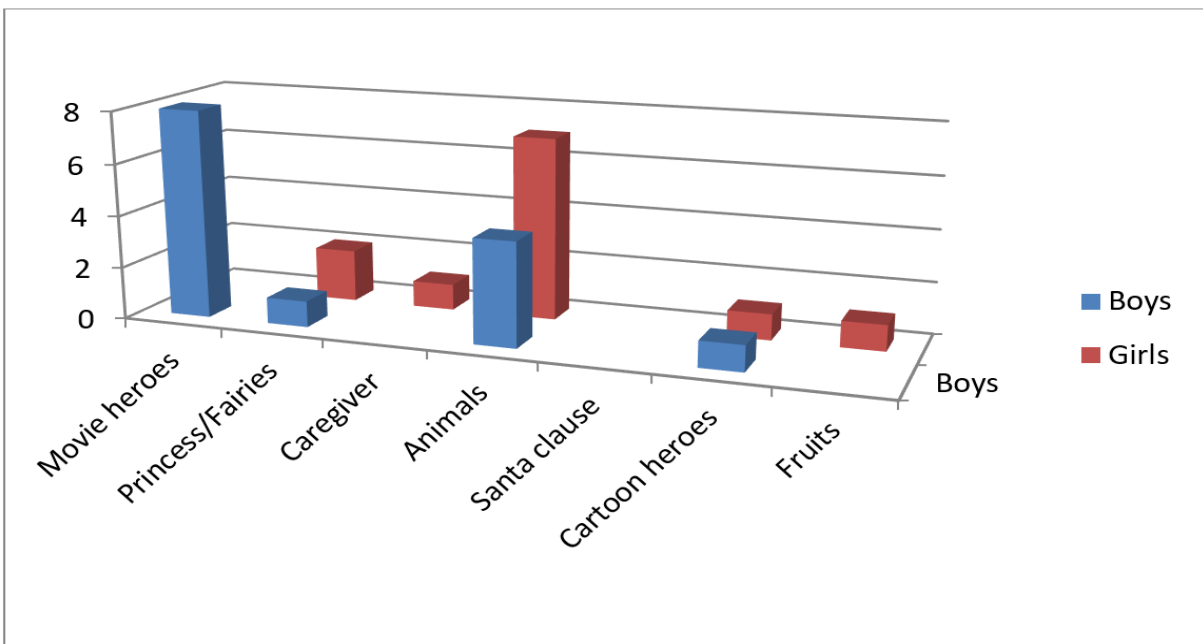

Figure 2. Children's preferences at early childhood education and care setting during the adult-guided activity.

4.2. Free and Guided Activity in Nursery

Figures 3 and 4 present the preferences of children in Nursery, as observed during free play and structured, adult-led activities, respectively. During the free dressing-up play, 6 boys chose to be film heroes either because they liked the corresponding film or to be strong and defeat the bad guys. 8 girls chose to be princesses with colorful and magical wings, outfits with gold dust, and fancy dresses (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Servos,

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Dewar, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2016). Of course, these choices also glorify supernatural abilities, but from a different perspective. At this age, another category of disguise roles appears, as children of both sexes choose to be a doctor giving their teddy a check-up or a policeman to protect the people from thieves. Three girls chose to be caregivers, "holding a baby in their arms and trying to feed it." Also, a large percentage of children, almost exclusively boys, chose to dress up as various objects, which seem to be quite important to them, such as a computer, guns, a car, and a rainbow. Researchers have explored and investigated in different ways that the combination of boys, weapon toys, and war play can be interpreted as a form of gendered play, which, in this article, is also connected to a play role (Davies, 2003; Delaney, 2017). In the words of the children:

"I want to dress up as a tablet and make the keys... tick... tick (the boy makes sounds with his mouth)" C3.

"I want to be a gun to make bang bang... and kill bad guys" C2.

"I want to dress up as a rainbow because it has many colours... I will wear a colourful dress... and wings" C5.

A different picture emerges regarding the guided dress-up activity. The majority of children's choices are limited to movie heroes for boys (N=8) and Disney princesses (N=10) for girls. Moreover, police officers and firefighter costumes are popular for boys, and animal costumes (N=3) for girls. Both girls and boys are interested in wearing cartoon hero costumes. Thus, the results of our study are in line with previous research (Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Rodríguez et al., 2006).

In this age group, 61.3% (19 out of 31) of the children chose their costume on their own, either because they like the movie, watch the corresponding cartoons, or have the corresponding toy.
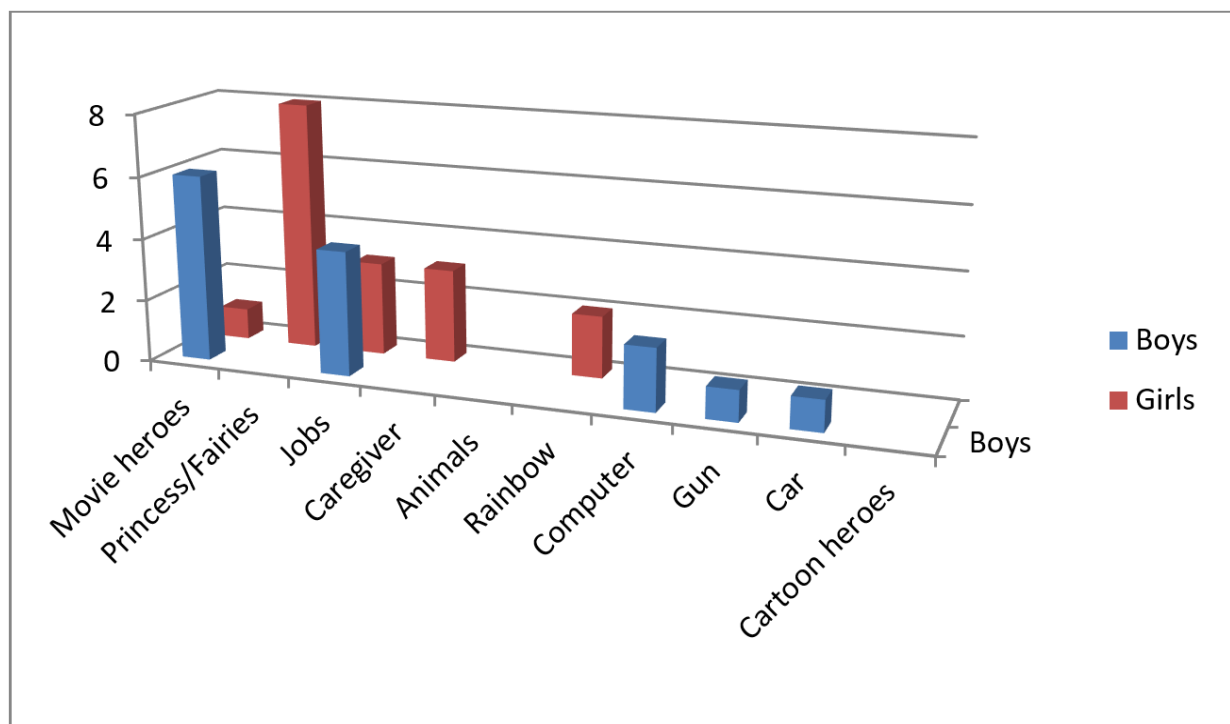

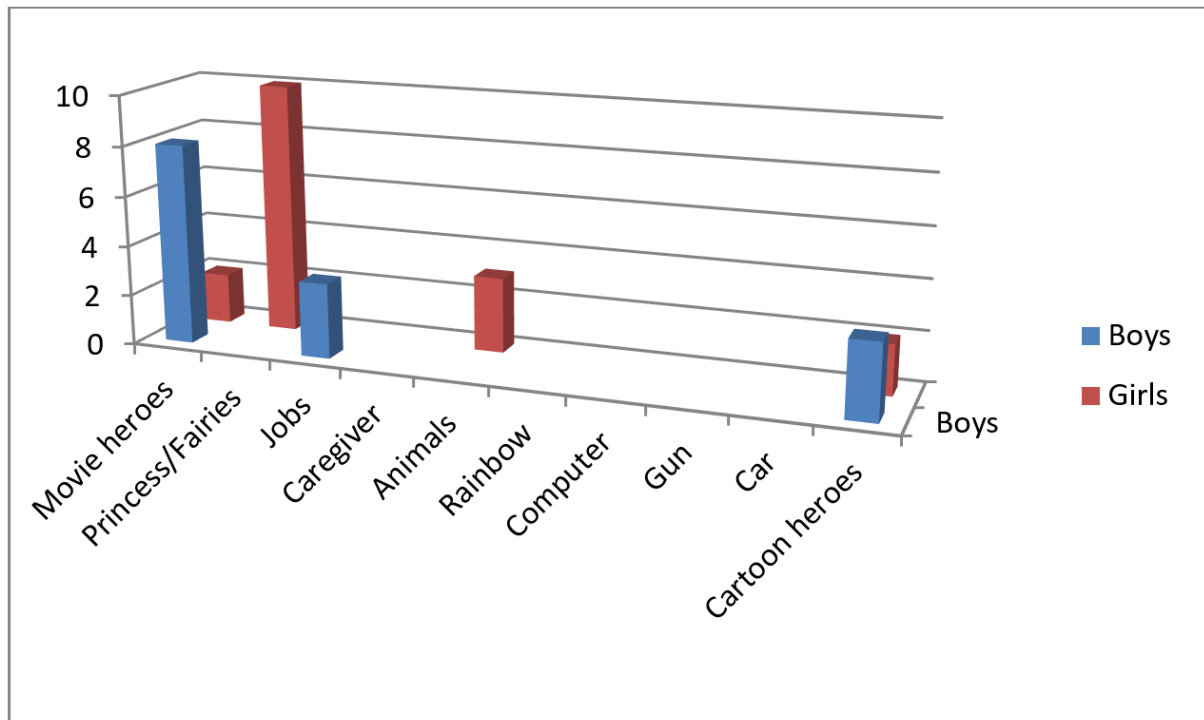**Figure 3.** Children's preferences in Nursery during the free activity.

Figure 4. Children's preferences in Nursery during the adult-guided activity.

4.3. Free and Structured Activity in Primary School

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the children's preferences in primary school during the free and adult-guided activities, respectively.

Children in primary school continue to be influenced by TV and games (Edwards, 2013). Boys choose to wear movie heroes' costumes during pretend dress-up play at a percentage of 19.5% and job costumes at a rate of 8.4%. Moreover, they are fascinated by knights and wild animals' costumes at the same rate (5.5%). Similarly, girls prefer to dress up as Disney princesses and fairies at a rate of 27.8%, and animals at a lower rate of 8.4%. As we can observe, it is interesting to note that toy preference is highly gendered, wherein boys' toys are typically related to war, weapons, display of masculinity, and aggression (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010).

Boys aged 6 years old during the structured activity chose to dress up as movie heroes with strong personalities and power at a percentage of 27.8%, while girls chose to be princesses at a rate of 33.4%. Six boys chose to dress up as a doctor, firefighter, or police officer. The percentage of heroes' costumes in girls' choices decreases dramatically compared to their percentage in boys, a finding which also occurred in children of younger ages.

Regarding their choice, only 27.7% said that their costume was chosen by their parents, which shows that as children grow older, their choices are taken into account by the parents.
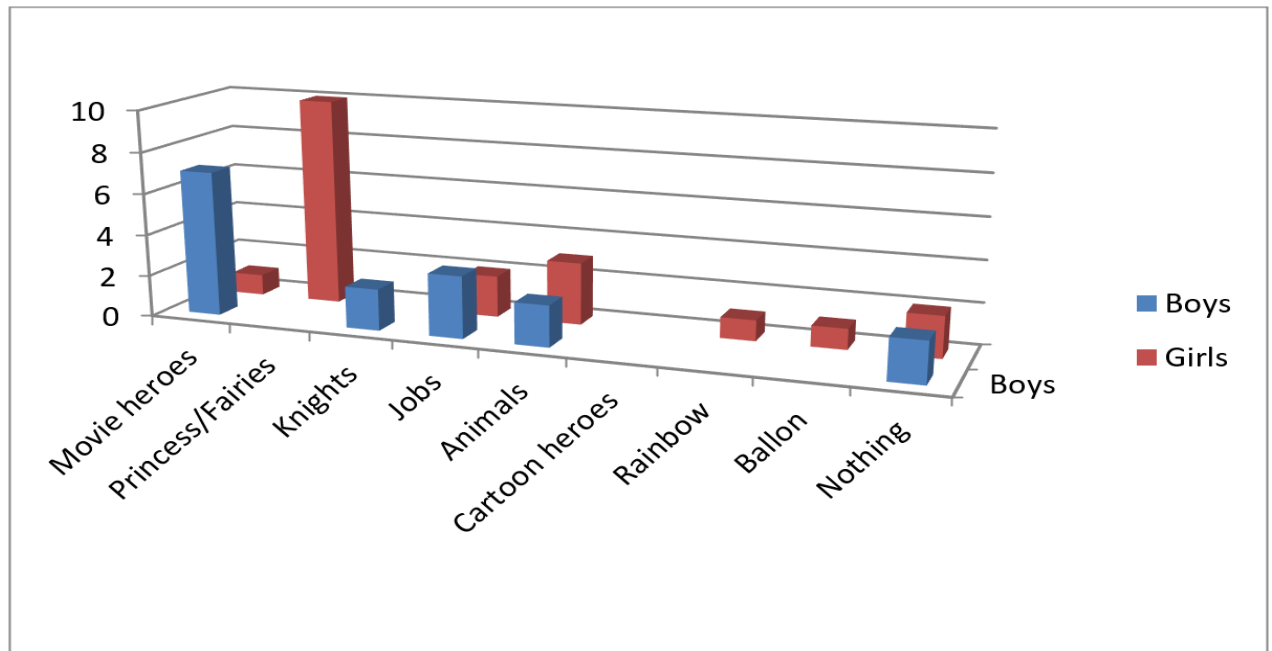
Figure 5. Children's preferences in Primary school during the free activity.
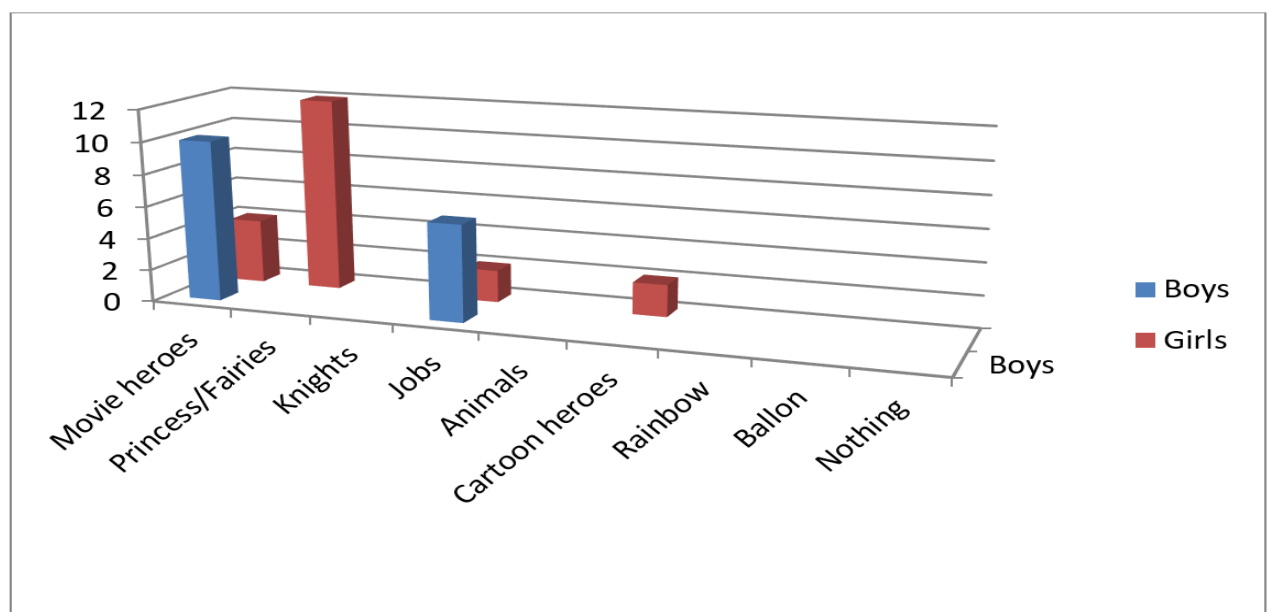

Figure 6. Children's preferences in primary school during the adult-guided activity.

5. DISCUSSION

Commenting on the data, in short, and taking into account the research questions, the findings highlighted valuable insights. The majority of children's preferences regarding dress-up play are related to superheroes and Disney princesses at ages 3-6 years old. Playing with mass culture heroes and heroines fascinates children from an early age; these figure toys invade the school and family environment in multiple ways, such as the design of their bags, water cans, or clothes. As Edwards (2013) suggests, children today are active participants in a "digital-consumer environment." The findings also show that as children grow older, the influence of media and digital games on their choices increases. While most children in Early Childhood Education and Care settings choose to dress up as animals, as they get older, they tend to select characters such as heroes with supernatural powers or Disney princesses in fancy dresses, which reinforces a strictly one-dimensional and rigidly defined set of gender roles (Pollen, 2011).

The findings highlight that gender-typed toy/play is a complex and multifaceted issue, deeply situated within a gendered world that is constantly changing, as it expresses the values of a gendered society more than in previous years (Sweet, 2012). Symbolic play, in particular, contributes significantly to the construction of children's gender identity. Specifically, children tend to pick costumes that personify their gender roles (Charalampous & Sidiropoulou, 2024; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Cherney & London, 2006).

Society promotes gender stereotypes through the game industry, employing themes for children in early childhood during a period that is quite important in personality formation (Spinner, Cameron, & Calogero, 2018). Moreover, theachers may also unintentionally reinforce stereotyped gender issues, showing greater tolerance toward boys engaging in play with toy weapons (Cheng et al., 2003; Lynch, 2015). Boys remained true to the dominant masculine representations, choosing either to hold weapons and equipment that defend their masculinity, or to dress up like superheroes with supernatural abilities who engage in battles to save the world by killing the 'bad guy', or to dress up as someone with leadership skills (e.g., police officer, doctor, firefighter). At any rate, they demonstrate their masculinity. In contrast, girls tend to adopt roles that align with conventional notions of femininity, often centered on domestic tasks and childcare (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Servos et al., 2016) and hegemonic femininity through roles that showcase grooming (blonde hair, colourful clothes, high heels).

The research findings also show that children during free dress-up play stray a little from stereotypical choices and opt to dress up as balloons, Santa Clauses, computers, guns, caregivers, and other items. This variety of children's preferences across all age groups reasonably raises the question of whether parents, and by extension society as a whole, are consciously 'listening' to children's preferences. Although the importance of actively listening to children is recognized by adults, it is not clear that very young children's 'voices' are heard and taken into account in their environment; ignoring them can be detrimental to their holistic development and well-being. Analyzing the data, it appears that the implementation of children's right to participate in social processes either by expressing their opinions or making decisions regarding their own lives is related to their age. It may seem surprising, but children of younger ages are characterized by adults as a group "without a voice" (Pachtelidis, 2015), and as a result, they are treated as an inferior group, as they are unable to communicate verbally. Therefore, it is crucial to raise parents' awareness of the benefits of active listening and the significance of even very young children's voices. Implementing strategies in young children's school settings and at home that enhance listening to their perspectives however they may be expressed can significantly support personal development and well-being (Murray, 2019). Providing children with appropriate space, which is safe and inclusive, to express themselves freely without external pressure, and giving them time to share their views without rushing, can foster confidence and encourage them to become active participants in their own lives and, consequently, active citizens.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A key concern for every country by 2030 is the implementation of the 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring the well-being of children regardless of gender. Listening to young children's voices (Bragg, 2007) illuminates their interests and provides valuable information on a range of daily life topics, enabling adults to respond positively to their needs and interests if they choose to do so. Taking into consideration children's needs and interests allows for tailored provision for each child, offering opportunities to support their development and helping them find what has meaning for them. As a sense of meaning is crucial for individual well-being (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2018), it can be argued that children's well-being can be improved when their own voice is taken into account in their educational provision.

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Understanding gender inequality in children's preferences, as discussed so far, raises concerns about equitable access to opportunities provided through play, positioning it as a matter of social justice. Indeed, inequalities emerge when not everyone has the same capabilities, freedoms, and opportunities to express their views. It is confirmed that play, and specifically in the present research as an activity, is a "vehicle" for conveying diverse meanings, experiences, and messages that contribute significantly to shaping children's social, cultural, and gender identities through a series of activities that are repeated and refer to normative standards imposed by society (Liamadis, 2003).

Given the increasing awareness of gender stereotypes and the rise of extreme reactions and incidents in the early 21st century, it is necessary to deconstruct the gender binary identity in society, beginning with the field of education. The adoption of a pedagogy grounded in neutrality and social justice (Kalessopoulou, Sidiropoulou, Sotiropoulou, & Psatha, 2024) supports the critical examination of stereotypes and provides children with a broader spectrum of experiences and skills. This approach supports their holistic development and actively promotes gender equality (Kogkidou, 2015).

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