

Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Gender in the Classroom: A Multifaceted Examination

Seçil Yıldız^{*a} & Nefise Semra Erkan^b

* Corresponding author

E-mail: secilyildiz@nevsehir.edu.tr

a. Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University,
Faculty of Education, Department of
Pre-school Education, Nevşehir, Türkiye


b. Istanbul Gelisim University Child
Development Department, İstanbul,
Türkiye

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Note

This study was produced from the doctoral thesis of the first author.

ABSTRACT

The present quantitative study was conducted to investigate preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom. Study group consisted of 120 preschool teachers working in official pre-school institutions affiliated to Kırşehir Provincial Directorate of National Education in Turkey. Participant selection was performed by using simple sampling. Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Gender in the Classroom Scale was used for data collection. For statistical analyses, Kruskal-Wallis Test, one-way ANOVA test and independent T test were performed. The findings showed a statistically significant difference between the mean overall gender statement scores and the mean gender role trait scores of preschool teachers and the said difference is influenced by the professional seniority of the teachers. It was also found that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean gender role trait scores between the teachers who participated in a gender-oriented educational activity and those who did not. However, there was no statistically significant difference between mean general gender statement, mean gender role trait, mean gender-specific behavioral responses, mean gender roles in tales and stories, and mean total scores regarding the number of children in their classes.

KEYWORDS

Gender; gender perception; preschool; preschool teachers

INTRODUCTION

Attitude and value development begins at an early age, through which children learn behaviors that may or may not be acceptable in a particular social context (Rogosic, Maskalan & Krzmar, 2020). Gender is a concept that defines the social roles and responsibilities of men and women depending on how society perceives them and what behaviors and attitudes are expected from them in the society (Zeybekoğlu, 2013). Since the perception of gender develops from an early age, children begin to understand these roles and responsibilities early on (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Muasya & Muasya, 2020). In this process, in addition to parents, preschool teachers play an important role in the formation of children's gender perception as well. With their behaviors and statements, teachers represent important people with whom children identify while they acquire an understanding of gender (Duffy et.al., 2001; Emilson et.al., 2016; Rogosic et.al., 2020).

Teachers' thoughts, attitudes and behaviors regarding gender roles significantly affect children's perceptions (Torun, 2002), and although they do not openly discriminate against children's gender in the school environment, teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles, the discipline models they use according to children's gender, and the differences in their behaviors and reactions towards children of different sexes, the games and toys they prefer give children explicit or implicit messages about gender perception (Berekashvili, 2012; Logue & Harwey, 2009; Lynch, 2015; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Onurluer, 2019). Due to the perceptions of gender roles, boys are more often described by their teachers as naughty, active, behaviorally problematic and prone to fight with their peers, while girls are described as calm, quiet and emotional more often (Morojele, 2011; Sayılan, 2012; Shen et al., 2009).

Teachers' perceptions of gender roles are reflected in their disciplinary approaches to boys and girls. Teachers who believe that girls are more emotional than boys are more likely to believe that girls should be disciplined more gently than boys (Erden, 2004).

Teachers' perception of gender also affects their perceptions of the areas where girls and boys can be successful. Teachers who believe in traditional gender roles assume that boys are predisposed to be successful in numerical areas, and girls in verbal areas such as language (Berekashvili, 2012; Ganter, 2010; Hyde, 2005).

The games that children prefer may also cause them to be exposed to different approaches by teachers in the context of their gender. Girls who are involved in games that require a lot of movement do not get very positive reactions from their teachers. On the contrary, teachers give positive reactions to boys when they play the same games. In this context, it can be said that playing games suitable for traditional gender roles is welcomed by teachers. It is seen that when girls play dramatic games, teachers intervene the play. Teachers generally think that games that include doing a somersault, rolling and superhero roles are suitable for boys, and games that involve fewer active roles with concepts such as home, family, childcare are better suited for girls. (Logue & Harwey, 2009; Lynch, 2015)

In the traditional context, it is argued that boys are more active in terms of physical mobility and their motor development is at a better level, while girls exhibit more passive behaviors. In addition, teachers describe boys as rude, curmudgeonly and strict, and describe girls by emphasizing their appearances (Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Wingrave, 2018). International studies on teachers' perceptions of gender investigated teachers' adult gender role beliefs and their effects on children's behaviors regarding gender role (Cahill & Adams, 1997), teachers' gender stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes (Chen & Rao, 2011; Frawley, 2005; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Warin & Adriany, 2017; Wingrave, 2018), and disciplinary strategies teachers use in the classroom for boys and girls (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004; Robinson, 1992). In Turkey, there have been studies conducted with individuals from different education levels and age groups or with prospective teachers on attitudes and perceptions of university students towards gender and gender roles (Alptekin, 2014; Aslan, 2015; Aydın & Duğan, 2018; Cömer Gazi, 2018; Filiz Ünser, 2019; Gönç, 2016; Karasu et.al., 2017; Koyuncu Şahin et.al., 2018; Onurluer, 2019; Öngen & Aytaç, 2013; Özcan & Özdil, 2018; Saçan et.al., 2015; Sarı, 2011; Seçgin & Tural, 2011). It was observed that there are limited number of studies in the literature regarding studies conducted with teachers.

Preschool is the developmental period in which socialization begins, social skills are acquired and mental development accelerates; therefore, the activities offered to children by teachers are as important as their approaches. The lack of awareness of teachers' own perceptions, beliefs or attitudes about gender in the classroom may be due to the fact that they are comfortable with traditional gender roles or that they themselves have traditional views. It is important that teachers provide activities that incorporates gender equality in the class, use and exhibit egalitarian statements and behaviors, and provide non-sexist materials to serve as a model for the children. Examining the perceptions of teachers about gender is the first step to be taken to increase their awareness and enable them to exhibit these egalitarian behaviors. It is important to determine the perceptions of preschool teachers about gender in the classroom, in terms of reducing the stereotypes of teachers and enabling children who will be adults of the future to have egalitarian views and behaviors. Thus, the present study aimed to examine preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom by accounting for various variables. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought within the scope of the study:

1. Does preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom differ significantly according to the gender of the teachers?
2. Does preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom differ significantly according to their professional seniority?
3. Does preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom differ significantly according to the number of boys and girls in classrooms?
4. Does preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom differ significantly according to whether or not they participate in the gender-oriented educational activity?

5. Does preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom differ significantly according to whether or not they have taken any courses on gender?

METHOD

Research Model

The present study aims to examine preschool teachers' perceptions of gender in the classroom by taking various variables into account. This quantitative study was designed by the relational screening model, one of the quantitative research screening models. The relational screening model aims to determine the existence or degree of co-variance between two or more variables (Karasar, 2004).

Participants

Participants consisted of 138 preschool teachers working in independent kindergartens affiliated to the Ministry of National Education and in kindergartens within primary and secondary schools in the city center of Kırşehir in the 2017-2018 academic year. Teachers who did not volunteer to participate in the study and whose scale forms were incomplete and incorrect were excluded from the study. The final study group consisted of 120 preschool teachers. Participants were selected using the convenience sampling method, one of the nonprobability sampling methods. In this sampling method, researchers collect data from the participants in their immediate surroundings to whom they have convenient access (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). 95.8% of the teachers participating in the study are female and 4.2% are male.

Data Collection Tools

Data collection was performed using "Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Gender in the Classroom Scale (PTPGCS)" developed by Yıldız (2019). This scale consists of four five-point Likert-Type subscales and a total of 42 items. The scale form has two parts. The first part of the form includes the Demographic Information Form, which consists of questions to determine the demographic characteristics of teacher such as gender, professional seniority, the number of girls and boys in their classes, whether or not they participated in any gender-oriented training and whether or not they took any gender-oriented classes. In the second part of the form, scale items and options are presented. In the 5-point Likert scale, the social distance interval between the choices of each proposition is equal. Options numbered from 1 to 5 are as follows: "strongly agree" 5 points, "agree" 4 points, "indecisive" 3 points, "disagree" 2 points, "strongly disagree" 1 point. There are four subscales in the scale. The general gender statement subscale has 17 items, the gender role trait subscale has 12 items, the gender-specific behavioral responses subscale has 7 items, and the gender in fairy tales and stories subscale has 6 items. Cronbach's alpha values of these dimensions are .85, .85, .77, .74 respectively. The fit indices for the CFA results for the validity of the scale are $\chi^2/sd=1.68$, RMSEA= .037, CFI= .92, GFI= .090, IFI= .092. Since scale items express negative perceptions, high scores obtained from subscales, as well as a high total score, indicate traditional perception, while low scores indicate androgenic perception. In this study, using this multidimensional scale, preschool teachers' perceptions of

gender in the classroom were examined in terms of variables such as professional seniority, the number of girls and boys in the classroom, whether or not the teachers took any classes about gender or participated in a gender-oriented activity.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the teachers were analyzed using the SPSS 23 software. Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were performed to determine which method would be used in the analysis of the obtained data and whether the data showed normal distribution. In line with the results of these tests, one-way ANOVA test or independent t test from parametric methods was performed for the normally distributed data of the study, and Kruskal Wallis test or Mann-Whitney U test from non-parametric methods (Karasar, 2004) was performed for the data that did not show normal distribution. In addition, Tukey HSD Post Hoc test was used to determine which group favored the difference.

Ethical Approval

The present study was conducted with the approval of Hacettepe University ethics commission dated 15.08.2017 and numbered 35853172/433-2944.

RESULTS

Participant demographics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Teachers Participating in the Study

Demographics	Groups	n	%
Gender	Female	115	96
	Male	5	4
Professional Seniority	1-10 years	53	44
	11-20 years	58	48
	21 years and above	9	8
Number of children in class	More girls	48	40
	More boys	52	43
	Equal	20	17
Participation in educational activity	Participated	13	11
	Not participated	107	89

As it can be seen in Table 1, 95.8% of teachers are female and 4.2% are male. The majority of the participants are female teachers. 44.2% of the teachers have professional seniority between 1-10 years and 48.3% of them have between 11-20 years, while 7.5% of the teachers

have a seniority of 21 years and above. The ratio of teachers with more male students in their class is 43.3%, the ratio of teachers with more female students is 40%, and the ratio of teachers with equal number of male and female students is 16.7%. 89.2% of the teachers stated that they did not participate in any gender-oriented activities. Among the teachers who stated that they participated in a gender-oriented activity, 92.3% attended a seminar and 7.7% attended in-service training. It can be said that very few of the teachers who participated in the study took part in activities related to the research topic.

Table 2

Kruskal-Wallis Test Results Comparing PTPGCS Subscale Scores by Professional Seniority

Dimensions	Professional seniority	n	Mean	sd.	Min	Max	Mean Rank	z	p	Difference
Gender role trait	1-10 years	5 3	19.7 0	6.0 1	12	36	51.23	7.1 2	0.0 28*	1-2
	11-20 years	5 8	23.0 0	6.8 8	12	37	68.63			
	21 years and above	9	21.8 9	4.8 6	12	25	62.72			
Gender-specific behavioral responses	1-10 years	5 3	12.8 9	3.7 6	7	21	53.96	4.5 8	0.1 01	-
	11-20 years	5 8	14.1 0	4.1 9	7	26	63.84			
	21 years and above	9	15.5 6	3.0 5	12	20	77.44			
Gender in tales and stories	1-10 years	5 3	15.2 5	4.7 4	6	28	53.83	3.5 6	0.1 68	-
	11-20 years	5 8	16.6 4	4.1 4	6	24	66.16			
	21 years and above	9	16.4 4	4.0 7	10	22	63.33			

As it can be seen in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference between teachers' mean gender role trait scores according to their professional seniority ($p < 0.05$). The mean "In-class gender role trait" score of teachers whose professional seniority ranges between 1-10 years (19.70) is significantly lower than the mean "In-class gender role trait" score (23.00) of teachers whose professional seniority ranges between 11-20 years. It is also seen that there is no statistically significant difference between mean gender-specific behavioral responses and mean gender roles in tales and stories according to teachers' professional seniority ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3*One-Way ANOVA Test Results Comparing PTPGCS Subscale Scores by Professional Seniority*

Subscale	Professional seniority	n	Mean	sd	Min	Max	F	p	Difference
General gender statement	1-10 years	53	51.62	11.30	23	76	3.43	0.036*	1-2
	11-20 years	58	57.29	11.65	23	85			
	21 years and above	9	55.11	10.30	44	72			
Total	1-10 years	53	99.45	15.24	66	134	7.59	0.001*	1-2 1-3
	11-20 years	58	111.03	16.43	56	147			
	21 years and above	9	109.00	15.48	87	132			

No statistically significant difference was observed between the mean general gender characteristics scores among teachers with regards to their professional seniority ($p < 0.05$). The mean general gender characteristics score of teachers whose professional seniority ranges between 1-10 years (51.62) is significantly lower than that of teachers whose professional seniority ranges between 11-20 years (57.29). There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scale total scores in terms of the professional seniority of the teachers ($p < 0.01$). The mean scale total score (99.45) of teachers whose professional seniority ranges from 1-10 years is significantly lower than the mean scale total score (99.45) of those whose seniority ranges between 11-20 years and those whose seniority is over 21 years (111.03 – 109.00).

Table 4*One-Way ANOVA Results of Comparison of PTPGCS Subscale Scores by Number of Children in Class*

Dimension	of Children	n	Mean	sd	Min	Max	F	p	Difference
General gender statement	More girls	48	54.25	12.33	23	85	1.89	0.15	-
	More boys	52	56.50	11.55	33	81			
	Equal	20	50.65	9.34	34	69			
Gender-specific behavioral responses	More girls	48	12.96	3.67	7	21	1.33	0.26	-
	More boys	52	14.08	4.04	7	25			
	Equal	20	14.35	4.48	7	26			
Gender in tales and stories	More girls	48	16.98	4.53	6	28	2.11	0.12	-
	More boys	52	15.54	3.53	7	24			
	Equal	20	14.90	5.87	6	24			
Total	More girls	48	106.40	15.91	56	137	1.381	0.256	-
	More boys	52	107.33	16.59	69	147			
	Equal	20	100.20	18.49	66	125			

As it can be seen in Table 4, no statistically significant difference was observed between the mean general gender characteristics, mean gender-specific behavioral responses, mean gender roles in tales and stories, and mean scale total scores with regards to the number of children in teachers' classrooms ($p>0.05$).

Table 5

Kruskal-Wallis Test Results of Comparison of PTPGCS Gender role trait Subscale Scores by Number of Children

Dimension	of Children	n	Mean	sd.	Min	Max	Mean Rank	z	p	Difference
Gender role trait	More girls	48	22.21	6.23	12	36	63.27			
	More boys	52	21.21	6.55	12	37	59.68	0.68	0.71	-
	Equal	20	20.30	7.27	12	36	55.98			

There is no statistically significant difference between teachers' mean gender role trait scores with regards to the number of children in their classes ($p>0.05$).

Table 6

Mann-Whitney U Test Results of Comparison of PTPGCS Subscale Scores by Participation in a Gender-oriented Activity

Dimensions	Participation in Activity	n	Mean	sd	z	p
Gender role trait	No	107	24.85	6.33	-1.98	0.047*
	Yes	13	21.05	7.44		
Gender-specific behavioral responses	No	107	16.54	3.99	-3.11	0.002*
	Yes	13	13.33	2.54		
Gender in tales and stories	No	107	15.77	4.49	-1.707	0.088
	Yes	13	18.00	3.42		

As it can be seen in Table 6, there is a statistically significant difference between mean gender role trait scores among teachers in terms of participation in the activity ($p<0.05$). The mean gender role trait score (21.05) of the teachers who stated that they participated in the activity is significantly lower than that of the teachers who stated that they did not participate (24.85). There is a statistically significant difference between mean gender-specific behavioral responses scores among teachers in terms of whether they participate in the activity or not ($p<0.05$). The mean gender-specific behavioral responses score of teachers who participated in a gender-oriented activity (13.33) was significantly lower than that of teachers who did not (16.54). There

is no statistically significant difference between mean gender roles in tales and stories in terms of teachers' participation in the activity ($p>0.05$).

Table 7

Independent T-Test Results of the Comparison of PTPGCS General Gender Statement Subscale Scores by Participation in an Activity

Dimensions	Participation in Activity	n	Mean	sd	t	p
General gender statement	No	107	55.20	11.60	1.55	0.123
	Yes	13	49.92	11.29		
Total	No	107	105.34	17.16	-0.80	0.421
	Yes	13	109.31	12.22		

There is no statistically significant difference between mean general gender statement and mean scale total scores with regards to whether or not teachers participated in a gender-oriented activity ($p>0.05$).

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of the analysis regarding the gender variable of the present study were not reported due to the lack of sufficient number of male preschool teachers. There are various stances in the literature regarding the idea of men being early childhood educators. One of these views is that women are more likely to be in caregiver roles than men, and therefore childcare is best suited for women (Joseph & Zita; 2016). Although Turkey society is not very strict on traditional gender roles compared to previous years, the perception of "professions for women" and "professions for men" still continues to exist. If they choose to work, preschool or primary school teaching was deemed appropriate for women, professions in line with the roles and duties with which they are traditionally associated; on the other hand, the same roles and duties have become a taboo for men (Haskan Avcı et.al., 2018; Kmec, 2008). It is not surprising that similar results are found in the database of the Ministry of National Education on the number of preschool teachers. The 2021-2022 data shows that the rate of female pre-school teachers is 93.8%, while the rate of male pre-school teachers is 6.2% (MEB, 2022).

A statistically significant difference was found between the mean general gender statement scores of the teachers according to their professional seniority ($p<0.05$). The mean scores of teachers with a service period of 11-20 years were found to be significantly higher than those with a service period of 1-10 years. In terms of teachers' perception of gender role trait, it was observed that those with 11-20 years of seniority had a more traditional perception than those with 1-10 years of seniority. There was no significant difference between mean gender-specific behavioral responses and mean gender roles in tales and stories with regards to teachers' professional seniority. There is a statistically significant difference in mean scale scores

among teachers according to their professional seniority. The mean scale total score of the teachers whose professional seniority is between 1-10 years is significantly lower than the mean scale total score of the teachers whose professional seniority is between 11-20 years and 21 years and above. The fact that there is a significant difference between general gender statement scores, gender role trait subscales and scale total scores according to teachers' professional seniority implies that teachers with professional seniority of 11-20 years and over 21 years have a more traditional perception. The fact that teachers with a seniority of 1-10 years have a more androgenic perception than teachers with a seniority of 11-20 years may arise from the fact that they are younger, as well as from the fact that their awareness is higher with the changing society structure. Contrary to the findings obtained in the present study, Tantekin (2002) concluded that the professional seniority of teachers is not related to their gender roles and discipline attitudes.

The results of the present study showed that teachers' mean general gender statement scores, mean gender role trait scores, mean gender-specific behavioral responses, mean scores of gender roles in tales and stories, and mean scale total scores did not differ according to the number of children in their classes. In the literature research, no study was encountered in which the gender perception of teachers was examined according to the number of girls and boys in the classrooms. Torun (2002) stated that some teachers mentioned that there is excessive noise in their classrooms due to the fact that the number of boys in their classes is higher than the number of girls, and teachers have to pay special attention to boys in order to cope with the high noise in the class.

It was observed that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean general social gender role trait, mean gender in tales and stories, mean scale total scores with regards to the teachers' participation in any educational activity. It was found that there was a statistically significant difference between mean gender role trait regarding whether the teachers participated in the activity or not. It was observed that the mean gender role trait scores of the teachers who participated in an educational activity were significantly lower than the scores of the teachers who did not participate. This finding is supported by the evidence in the literature. It was seen that the perceptions and attitudes of prospective teachers and teachers were positively affected by educational activities and in-service training programs. Participating in the activities or trainings lead teachers to become aware of their gender biases and change their attitudes (Dezolt & Hull, 2001; Jones et.al., 2000)

Since only one of the teachers participating in the study took courses on gender, the results of the analysis for this variable were not reported. In one study (Esen, 2013), prospective teachers received a short-term systematic training on gender. As a result, prospective teachers started to question their stereotypes, developed sensitivity in the subject in both their professional and private lives, and started to create awareness and sensitivity regarding gender. In order to see the long-term and permanent effects of such trainings, in-service trainings shall also be provided (Tantekin Erden, 2009). The Higher Education Council decided to include the

'Gender Equality' course as a compulsory or elective course in the university curricula at the "Universities with Gender Equality Awareness" workshop on 29 May 2015 (YÖK General Assembly Decision, 2015). The date of this decision explains the reason that the teachers who participated in the study and who had a tenure of 11 years or more did not take any courses on the subject. Today, knowledge and skills related to gender are presented through elective courses added to education programs in our country (Tantekin Erden, 2016). It has been claimed that including gender related courses to curriculum of prospective teachers and including topics of gender sensitivity and equality into the existing courses are effective actions of measure for changing traditional perceptions and attitudes related to gender (Campell & Sanders, 1997; Egelioglu Çetişli et.al., 2017; Gray & Leith, 2004; Tantekin Erden, 2009). In addition, it is recommended that teaching practices courses of all departments in the education faculty should offer skills related to gender equality (Tantekin Erden, 2016).

The study has limitations at certain points. Within the framework of these limitations and as a result of the findings obtained, various suggestions were made to other researchers. The research is limited to preschool teachers in Kırşehir, Turkey. In the future, gender role perceptions of larger sample groups and teachers working in different regions of Turkey can be examined. Since this study is limited to the standard measurement tool, it can be enriched with qualitative research based on teacher opinions. In future studies, preschool teachers' gender role perceptions of different variables can be investigated.

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