Submitted: 24/04/2026 - Accepted: 25/05/2026 - Published: 28/06/2026

The Feminization of Preschool Education Departments: Sociodemographic Profile, Social Background, and Gender Dimensions of a "Female" Career Choice

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DOI: 10.26417/sfz0pn59

Abstract

This article explores the social dimensions of feminization in Preschool Education through an analysis of the sociodemographic profile of 192 male and female students in two departments at two Greek universities, namely the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of West Attica and the Department of Preschool Education at the University of Ioannina. Despite the global prevalence of female overrepresentation in the field, its systematic sociological analysis in the Greek context remains limited. The research is based on a quantitative methodology using a self-administered questionnaire completed by students within the university institutions. The findings reveal that the overrepresentation of women (96.4%) is not an expression of "natural inclination" but rather the result of socially constructed gender dispositions shaped by family socialization. The analysis documents the predominance of students from families with low and medium educational capital (46.3% first-generation students), the near-universal reliance on shadow education (84.4% attended a tutoring centre), and the stark gendered division of household chores from childhood through the university years. Chi-square tests further reveal that the more resource-intensive forms of shadow education and cultural participation remain socially stratified according to parental education. The study demonstrates that feminization constitutes a structural phenomenon arising from the inextricable intertwining of gender, class, and geographical relations of social reproduction, requiring an analysis that simultaneously examines these axes

of inequality. The contribution of this research lies in the empirical documentation of the mechanisms that produce this gendered and social composition within the Greek context.

Keywords: cultural capital, habitus, intersectionality, shadow education, social reproduction, care work

Introduction

The education and care of preschool-aged children is one of the most feminized sectors of education worldwide. According to OECD data, women account for over 95% of the workforce in preschool education in most European countries (OECD, 2021), and Greece is no exception. However, this statistical observation is not sufficient, as sociological analysis requires an investigation of the social mechanisms that produce and reproduce this concentration. This phenomenon, referred to in the international literature as *féminisation* (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2001) or *gendered occupational segregation* (Charles & Bradley, 2009), has deep historical roots. The historical formation of the profession of preschool educator is inextricably linked to social representations of women's "maternal nature," representations that the sociology of education has demonstrated to be social constructs that legitimize the gendered division of labor (Duru-Bellat, 2004; Mosconi, 1994). These representations do not belong solely to the past but continue to function as active mechanisms of social reproduction.

Specifically, this study examines the sociodemographic profile of 192 male and female students in two university departments of preschool education in Greece (the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of West Attica in the regional unit of West Athens and the Department of Preschool Education (Pedagogical Department of Kindergarten Teachers) at the University of Ioannina, located in the Prefecture of Ioannina in the Epirus region, one of Greece's 13 regions), while simultaneously highlighting the gender, class, and geographical dimensions of the student body. The central research questions concern the sociodemographic profile of Preschool Education students, the social mechanisms that explain feminization, and the way in which social background differentiates the student population.

Theoretical Framework

The feminization of the Departments of Preschool Education (training of kindergarten teachers for children aged 4 to 6) and Early Childhood Education and Care (training of educators for children up to 4 years of age) in Greece as a social process.

To understand why women exceed 90% in the two university departments studied here, we need a framework that simultaneously addresses the gender, class, and geographical dimensions of the phenomenon, since no single axis suffices. The central

analytical axes are Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) and of class habitus, the system of enduring, transmissible dispositions that, shaped by each class position, organises practices and representations (Bourdieu, 1979, 1980), together with Kergoat's account of the inseparable intertwining of class and gender relations (Kergoat, 2009).

Feminization refers to the process by which women become the majority in a field. In preschool education it has historical roots in Friedrich Froebel, founder of the first kindergarten in Germany in the 1840s, who held that women's "maternal nature" made them ideal carers of young children (Allen, 2017). This association between "feminine nature" and pedagogical ability was passed on not as a cultural lag but as an active mechanism reproducing the gendered division of labour and the devaluation of childcare work.

Feminization is inseparable from symbolic devaluation, since a feminized profession loses social prestige (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2001; Buscatto & Marry, 2009) in a self-perpetuating cycle, as the absence of men reinforces the "female" label and that label legitimises low recognition. In early childhood education and care, the perception of childrearing as a "natural" female activity reproduces a mind-body dichotomy that devalues care work and entrenches feminization as a structural feature of the sector (Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, Roets & Peeters, 2014). Tellingly, despite financial incentives, support networks, and changes in vocational training in Norway, Belgium, and Germany, no European country has reached the 20% target for men set by the European Commission's Network on Childcare (1996), which rules out treating feminization as a mere policy issue (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015).

The analysis gains depth through intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1989) to show that African American women faced discrimination explicable neither by race nor by gender alone, but by their simultaneous intersection, since race and gender are mutually constitutive (Collins, 2000). This reveals how multiple axes of inequality interact to produce complex forms that cannot be reduced to one dimension. In French-speaking sociology, the concept of *consubstantialité* captures the same inseparable intertwining of class and gender, holding that there is no "pure" class position independent of gender nor a "pure" gender position independent of class (Kergoat, 2009, 2011; Galerand & Kergoat, 2008). On these approaches, the "female" composition of these programmes is not a demographic fact but the product of intersecting class and gender mechanisms.

The sociology of education shows in empirical detail how women's career choices are socially shaped. The expansion of women's education has not reversed gender norms of career choice, a *paradoxe de l'émancipation* whereby women study more yet continue to choose different fields than men (Marry, 2004; Buscatto & Marry, 2009), so that girls' rising attainment does not overturn gendered patterns of choice (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer & Marry, 2001).

Duru-Bellat (2004) places at the centre of analysis the explicit and implicit school mechanisms that shape different expectations for girls and boys. Girls internalise expectations about "feminine" professions early, so that their "choice" reflects a realistic assessment of what is "feasible" and "expected" rather than genuine preference, a process Duru-Bellat (2004) attributes to anticipatory biases (*anticipations de l'avenir*), a proactive internalisation of likely outcomes that leads to self-exclusion from fields seen as not for them. The mechanism is effective precisely because it is not felt as coercion, since the socially constructed inclination is experienced as an authentic expression of the self.

Schools convey different expectations to boys and girls through invisible mechanisms of evaluation and guidance. Bernstein (1975) showed that schools transmit not only knowledge but also social values, norms, and hierarchies through the hidden curriculum, the informal transmission of norms embedded in everyday school life, and invisible pedagogy, marked by unspoken control and unseen rules that operate as social reproduction. These acquire a gendered dimension in what Mosconi (1994, 2004) calls the *curriculum différentiel* and *pédagogie invisible*, since even in coeducational schools teacher-student interaction reproduces gender hierarchies, with boys receiving more attention and girls steered toward socially acceptable choices, independently of teachers' intentions. Bourdieu's (1980) *choix du raisonnable* is analytically valuable here, as the reasonable choice is not a calculated strategy but a semi-conscious adjustment of expectations to the objective limits of one's position. For middle- and lower-class women, preschool education is precisely this, a rational choice combining access to higher education with the reproduction of the gendered norms that mark these Greek departments.

This choice also follows the logic Boudon (1973) analysed in *The Inequality of Opportunities*, where school choices appear as rational individual decisions. Treating users of the school system as consumers who defend their interests, Boudon held that inequality of opportunity arises from differences in the cultural resources families transmit, in motivation, and in the cumulative effect of successive school orientations. The sum of these independent choices alters the conditions of competition and employment and produces the inflation and devaluation of degrees, depriving those whose rewards fail to match their aspirations and investments (Boudon, 1973).

Forms of Capital and the Pedagogical Component of Socialization

Bourdieu's sociology offers a rich framework for feminization. Central is habitus, the system of enduring, transferable dispositions acquired through socialisation that shapes how individuals perceive, evaluate, and act (Bourdieu, 1980). Habitus is neither conscious choice nor mechanical determinism but a regulator of action producing practices objectively aligned with one's position in social space, without strategic intention. This is crucial for feminization, because choosing studies in these departments is not a "free" choice but a socially structured act that appears as a "natural inclination" while reflecting socially constructed dispositions (Bourdieu,

1980). Feminization is moreover not only a matter of gender but of class, since feminized departments disproportionately attract students from the middle and lower strata (Reay, 2006).

The theory of the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1979) illuminates the link between social background and educational trajectory, as elite departments attract the upper strata and low-prestige ones the lower strata, without this being perceived as a class distribution but as a matter of individual ability (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964). Inequality is also linguistic and symbolic, since academic communication requires what Bernstein (1971) called the elaborated linguistic code, marked by abstract thought, explicit conceptual formulation, and independence from context, in contrast to the restricted code resting on shared implicit assumptions. The elaborated code is unequally accessible across classes, so students from lower backgrounds experience academic discourse as detached from their everyday life (Bernstein, 1971). Symbolic violence lies precisely in presenting this evaluation as objective while it rewards competencies acquired only through upper-class family socialisation.

The concept of the field (*champ*) is especially useful here. Every field has its own internal logic that determines which forms of capital are valued and which positions exist (Bourdieu, 1989), functioning as a space of power and competition where each actor's place is defined by the capital they hold. The field of preschool education, comprising the Department of Preschool Education or Kindergarten Teachers (for children aged 4 to 6) and the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care (for children up to 4), is socially recognised as both "feminine" and "natural", a recognition that operates circularly to perpetuate its devaluation, so that feminization is both cause and consequence of symbolic devaluation. This circular mechanism resists change precisely because its logic seems "self-evident", the typical expression of what Bourdieu calls *doxa*, the unquestioned beliefs that constitute the "natural order" of a world (Bourdieu, 1980).

Symbolic capital, which Bourdieu (1980) defines as any form of capital that enjoys special social recognition, is significant here. As this study's findings show, the profession of preschool and early childhood educators in Greece carries low symbolic capital despite its high humanistic and social content, reflecting the devaluation of care work performed mainly by women. This devaluation is structural rather than accidental, since in Western societies care is treated as a moral virtue of women, something that "belongs" to them naturally and therefore need not be recognised economically or socially (Tronto, 1993, 2017). It simultaneously reflects hierarchies of gender, class, and age, as caring for young children is deemed less complex than teaching older students, reproducing a hierarchy of devaluation within the sector itself (Van Laere et al., 2014).

The family is the central agent transmitting cultural capital, the reading practices, language habits, and attitudes to learning that shape trajectories (Lahire, 2004). For Reay, class remains decisive despite the rhetoric of meritocracy, and her notion of

emotional capital shows how mothers from lower backgrounds invest emotional labour in their children's schooling without it being equivalent to upper-class cultural capital (Reay, 2006). Hochschild (1983) treats the regulation of emotions as a structural, undervalued element of the care professions. Accordingly, class differences in parenting, the "concerted cultivation" of the middle classes versus the "natural growth" of working-class families (Lareau, 2011/2024), bear directly on academic success.

The Greek Context

In Greece the family is the primary agent of educational strategies, so the link between family capital and success is more direct than in Northern European welfare states (Mouzelis, 1978). Greek policy has long relied on free public higher education as a tool of democratisation, yet selection through nationwide exams and reliance on shadow education reproduce social inequalities while shifting them to a less visible level.

Shadow education, the system of tutoring centres and private lessons, equalises only superficially while in practice reproducing inequality through the unequal distribution of resources, as wealthier families invest more intensively and reach prestigious departments, while poorer families are displaced toward those with lower admission thresholds (Gouvias, 1998). It constitutes a double injustice, since families pay for preparation that public schooling should provide, and pay unequally (Gouvias, 1998). Stratification is expressed mainly through a qualitative distribution across departments of differing prestige, with higher-background students in the main departments and lower-background students in education departments (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). The metropolitan-regional contrast is not merely geographical but deeply social, since regional universities absorb students whose exam scores barred them from higher-threshold departments, a forced geographical mobility that further diversifies the student body (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010).

Women and men of similar performance make different choices, confirming that gender stratification reflects socially constructed inclinations rather than ability (Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2011). Modernisation policies have not overturned structural inequalities, and the 2010-2018 economic crisis deepened them, hitting the care sectors especially hard (Zambeta, 2002, 2014), so that Greek policy, for all its rhetoric of equality, reproduces patterns reflecting specific power relations (Giamouridis & Bagley, 2006).

Methodology

Research Context and Setting

This study is based on a quantitative methodology using a closed-ended questionnaire administered to students in two preschool education departments at two universities, namely the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of West Attica (Athens), which trains educators for children up to 4 years of age, and the Department of Preschool Education at the University of Ioannina

(in the Prefecture of Ioannina in the Epirus region, one of Greece's 13 regions), which trains educators for children aged 4 to 6.

The sample consisted of 192 male and female students from these university departments. Sampling was purposive (*purposive sampling*), aimed at studying a specific population rather than statistical generalization (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The sample size (N=192) is considered sufficient for reliable frequency distributions and subgroup analysis in the social sciences (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Data collection took place during the 2022–2023 academic year using self-administered questionnaires during classes, ensuring a high response rate.[1]

The closed-ended questionnaire covered demographic characteristics and citizenship, social background such as parents' educational level, employment status, and family structure, educational background such as type of school, learning preferences, tutoring support, and foreign-language proficiency, and finally the criteria for choosing a field of study and academic experience.

The design drew on the methodology of Grignon and Gruel (1999; Grignon, Gruel & Bensoussan, 1996), developed within the large-scale national surveys of the Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante in France to capture students' living conditions, social background, and trajectories through a multidimensional approach. Its premise is that the "average student" is a misleading construct and that forms of student life are as diverse and unequal as higher education itself, which brings to the surface social differences hidden behind the apparent homogeneity of the student body. The approach was adapted to the Greek context, taking account of admission through the national entrance exams and of the family as the central agent of educational strategies. Analysis used IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0 for descriptive statistics, namely frequency distributions and measures of central tendency and dispersion (Agresti & Finlay, 2018), while Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) independence tests examined associations between parental educational level, recoded as low, medium, and high, and selected cultural, educational, and school practices, with significance set at p<.05.

The choice of a quantitative methodology followed from the aim of systematically mapping the students' sociodemographic profile and identifying social patterns (Bryman, 2016; de Singly, 2020; Creswell, 2014). In the tradition of French sociology of education, the data are not treated as self-explanatory but interpreted through a framework that reveals the social relations behind the numbers (Bourdieu, 1980).

[1] The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire, which included 86 closed-ended questions on sociodemographic, educational, and cultural topics. The number of valid responses varies slightly across certain variables due to a limited number of non-responses to specific questions in the questionnaire, as reflected in the corresponding tables of the descriptive statistical analysis. This variation is considered normal in anonymous surveys using self-administered questionnaires and does not affect the overall interpretation of the results.

In international research, combining Francophone and Anglo-Saxon approaches has proved fruitful for studying educational inequality. The Francophone tradition, centred on Bourdieu's critical sociology, interprets quantitative data as socially constructed and reads every statistical distribution as a trace of underlying social relations that analysis must reveal (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; de Singly, 2020). The Anglo-Saxon tradition, from Bernstein and Willis to Reay and Skeggs, enriches the analysis of social reproduction by emphasising linguistic coding, the active formation of class identities, and the emotional dimension of education, while also criticising the structural determinism of some readings of Bourdieu and stressing the role of agency (Willis, 1977; Reay, 2017). It has likewise developed standardised tools for statistical analysis, sampling, and instrument validation (Bryman, 2006, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Their complementarity suits the study of feminization, which requires both empirical documentation and interpretation as the product of social mechanisms, an analysis at once statistically reliable and sociologically meaningful.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted within an official educational leave granted to the first author by the University of West Attica, in formal collaboration with the Research Unit for Social Discrimination, Gender Identity and Bullying of the Laboratory for the Study of Social Issues and Media of the Department of Preschool Education at the University of Ioannina. It followed the principles of research ethics widely recognised in the international sociological literature, in particular the codes of the British Sociological Association (2017), the American Sociological Association (2018), and the *charte de déontologie* of the Association Française de Sociologie (2012). Participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent, with students briefed on the purpose of the research beforehand. The questionnaires were anonymous, no identifying data were collected, and responses were used solely for research, safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of participants throughout.

Demographic Profile: The Numerical Dominance of Women

The most striking feature of the sample is the overwhelming predominance of women, who make up the great majority against a tiny male minority (Table 1), a pattern that mirrors a global trend, with comparable shares reported in France, Germany, and the United States (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2001; Warin, 2014; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The seven male students form a minority that challenges gender stereotypes and may face social stigma in a field where male presence is marginal (Peeters, 2007), and even sustained recruitment campaigns in Norway and Denmark have failed to exceed a 20% male presence (Cameron, 2006; Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015). Paradoxically, this rarity confirms rather than weakens the gendered character of the field, since the participation of men registers as a visible deviation that must be explained, whereas the presence of women is treated as self-evident. This asymmetry is the mark of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1998), where

the gendered division appears as part of the natural order, inscribed in both structures and dispositions and functioning as *doxa*, so that the men who enter cross a symbolic boundary whose strength their marginal position confirms (Bourdieu, 1998; Connell, 1987).

The age distribution reveals significant data, with a mean of 20.35 years (SD=4.86) and a range of 17 to 51 years. The relatively high standard deviation suggests the presence of non-traditional, older students, which in the literature is associated with lower socioeconomic status and often involves individuals who interrupted their studies, worked, or dealt with family responsibilities before entering university (Erlich, 1998). The wide age range should not be read merely as a matter of individual circumstance. It is the trace of socially differentiated trajectories of access to higher education, since social position shapes not only whether but also when and through what detours one reaches the university. For students from lower social strata, the educational trajectory is frequently non-linear. It is interrupted by periods of paid work, by family obligations, or by repeated attempts at the national entrance examinations, whereas the linear and uninterrupted path from secondary school to university remains a privilege more readily available to the upper strata. This temporal dimension of inequality, the fact that the working-class student often arrives later and by a more circuitous route, constitutes an embodied expression of class condition that is inscribed in the very biography of the student (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964). The presence of older, non-traditional students in these departments thus reinforces rather than contradicts the reading of preschool education as a sector that absorbs trajectories marked by social constraint.

The sample is almost ethnically homogeneous, since the overwhelming majority hold Greek citizenship and were born in Greece (Table 1). Among the small group whose parents were born abroad, the predominant countries are Germany, reflecting the labour migration of Greek workers in the 1960s and 1970s, and Albania, corresponding to the migration wave of the 1990s, with both groups historically belonging to the lower-middle social strata. Only a handful of students have received a scholarship, an extremely low share that highlights the absence of institutional financial support.

Family structure and developmental conditions. Who cared for the students during their preschool and school years

The family structure during the school years reveals relative stability, as most participants lived with both parents throughout primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education (Table 2). The gradual decline across these stages reflects family breakups and, in a small number of cases, the loss of a parent.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants (N=192)

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Women	185	96.4
Men	7	3.6
Age (years)		
Mean (SD)	20.35 (4.86)	
Range	17–51	
Citizenship		
Greek only	182	94.8
Greek and another	10	5.2
Place of birth		
Greece	180	96.3
Abroad	7	3.7
Parent born abroad		
Father	28	14.7
Mother	23	12.2
Scholarship holder		
Yes	7	3.7
No	182	96.3

Among the students whose parents had separated or divorced, custody rested primarily with the mother (Table 2). This finding carries interpretive weight, because female students raised under exclusive maternal custody experienced firsthand the model of the woman as primary caregiver, an experience that may reinforce the gendered habitus of care associated with the choice of this field. The distribution reflects both legal norms and deeply rooted social representations of the female caregiving role (Hochschild, 1983).

During their studies, the participants are distributed mainly between those living with both parents and those living alone, while only a small fraction live in a dormitory, an indication of insufficient institutional support (Table 2). The high rate of independent living partly reflects geographical relocation for studies. For students

from low socioeconomic backgrounds, living independently is an additional financial burden that drains the time and energy available for study, so that social inequalities are reproduced within the university itself, as already disadvantaged students face financial pressures that their more affluent peers rarely encounter (Erlich, 1998).

Table 2. Family structure and living conditions

Variable	N	%
Lived with both parents		
Primary education	154	92.8
Lower secondary	145	89.5
Upper secondary	142	86.1
Parents separated or divorced (by lower secondary)		
Yes	25	13.4
No	161	86.6
Main weekday custody (if separated)		
Mother	11	47.8
Alternating residence	5	21.7
Father	3	13.0
Living arrangement during studies		
With both parents	85	44.3
Alone	68	35.4
With other family members	47	24.5
With one parent	21	10.9
University dormitory	10	5.2

Parents' educational level. The family's cultural map

Data on educational level are the most revealing indicator of social composition. Nearly half of the participants report that at least one parent holds a university or technical college degree, while almost as many are first-generation students whose parents hold no higher education degree (Table 3). In prestigious departments such as Medicine and Law, first-generation rates fall below 20% (Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010). This discrepancy empirically confirms Bourdieu's theory of qualitative stratification, which posits that educational inequality is expressed not in access to university, but rather in which department a student attends. The structural homology between the

educational field and social space explains why stratification is reproduced within the very system meant to overturn it, as children of the upper strata concentrate in high-prestige departments and children of the working classes in low-prestige ones, without this being perceived as a class distribution but as a matter of individual ability (Bourdieu, 1989).

The distribution of fathers' educational levels exhibits a characteristic profile concentrated around the upper secondary diploma, with university degrees far less common and doctorates almost absent, confirming the complete underrepresentation of the academic elite (Table 3). Equally telling is the share of fathers holding only a primary school diploma, a figure that reflects generations with minimal formal education, characteristic of rural and working-class environments.

For mothers the distribution differs notably, with a higher share of university degrees than among fathers and a smaller share with only primary schooling (Table 3). This reversal reflects the general rise in women's education between the 1960s and 1970s, which did not translate into a commensurate improvement in social status. Duru-Bellat (2006) described this as educational inflation, since women's education increased while the relative value of each degree declined, particularly for degrees tied to low-prestige departments, so that women's qualifications have historically yielded lower returns in the labour market and inequality persists even among educated women and men.

Of particular importance is the intergenerational dimension. The large majority of grandparents on both the paternal and maternal sides had no university education (Table 3). This three-generation absence of higher education constitutes the biographical expression of constrained mobility, according to P. Bourdieu and J.-C. Passeron (1964), that is, an upward social trajectory that unfolds gradually from generation to generation, without, however, crossing the boundaries of the working-class pole of the social field. The family recognizes the value of education and invests in it, but these investments remain confined within the limits of its social position, leading to low-prestige sectors rather than those of the academic elite. This is a form of real but limited mobility that reproduces the basic class position while simultaneously transforming it superficially (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964). The family functions as the central agent for the transmission of cultural resources that directly influence the educational trajectory (Lahire, 2004). Three generations without a university degree mean three generations lacking the practices, language habits, and tacit knowledge for navigating the academic environment, a fact that intensifies the degree of alienation experienced by first-generation students upon their admission to university (Reay, 2017; Reay, David & Ball, 2001). Pearson’s chi-square independence tests empirically confirm specific dimensions of this cultural transfer. A statistically significant correlation emerged between the father’s educational level and family attendance at theater or concerts during school years, $\chi^2(4)=13.18$, $p=.010$, with 18.6% of students with highly educated fathers reporting frequent participation compared to just 6.4% of those with fathers of low educational attainment. A similar

pattern emerges for participation in sports activities in middle school, $\chi^2(4)=10.64$, p=.031, where students with fathers of medium and high educational levels show higher rates of frequent participation (71.9% and 62.2%, respectively) compared to 44.0% of those with fathers of low educational levels. These findings empirically support Bourdieu's theory of the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital through family practices. For most other cultural activities examined (cinema, museums, art exhibitions, libraries, reading), no statistically significant correlations emerged, suggesting that cultural participation in this sample remains generally limited regardless of class background.

Parents' employment status. Class mapping

The analysis of employment status completes the picture of social background. During the participants' childhood, fathers worked predominantly full-time, while mothers combined full-time and part-time work in patterns typical of the middle and lower strata, where the mother's employment is an economic necessity rather than a career choice (Table 4).reflect the realities of the middle and lower social strata, where the mother's work is an economic necessity rather than a career choice.

Regarding the current situation, most fathers are employed, while the unemployment rate among mothers is markedly higher than among fathers, as is the share of mothers outside the labour market as homemakers (Table 4). This reflects the persistent gender inequality of the labour market, especially in lower socioeconomic strata. The consistently higher unemployment of women is a structural feature of European labour markets and reflects both hiring discrimination and the gendered division of family care, which interrupts women's careers (Buscatto & Marry, 2009). In the lower strata this inequality is compounded by broader difficulties of labour-market access, producing a complex experience of marginalisation that disproportionately affects working-class women (Skeggs, 1997).

In terms of employment type, fathers are spread across private-sector employment, self-employment, and the public sector, while mothers follow a somewhat different pattern (Table 4). The relationship between educational level and occupation reveals the expected distribution, with parents of low educational level in manual occupations such as construction work, farming, driving, and crafts, those of medium level in commerce and the public sector, and those of high level in the liberal professions, while high-status professions such as doctors, lawyers, and university professors appear in very few cases.

Table 3. Parents' and grandparents' educational level

Variable	N	%
At least one parent with a higher education degree		
Yes	96	50.5
No (first-generation students)	88	46.3
Do not know	6	3.2
Father's diploma		
Primary school	23	12.2
Lower secondary	26	13.8
Upper secondary	70	37.0
Private post-secondary	21	11.1
University degree	37	19.6
Master's	9	4.8
Doctorate	2	1.1
Mother's diploma		
Primary school	13	6.9
Lower secondary	13	6.9
Upper secondary	74	39.4
Private post-secondary	25	13.3
University degree	47	25.0
Master's	13	6.9
Doctorate	1	0.5
Grandparents with higher education		
Paternal side: yes	12	6.3
Maternal side: yes	23	12.1

Regarding siblings, the participants are distributed across only children, youngest children, and firstborns, and among those with siblings more than half report that a sibling has already studied at a higher education institution (Table 4). This carries interpretive weight, since a sibling with university experience familiarises the student with the academic environment and reduces the uncertainty of educational choice. For Bourdieu (1980), choices are perceived as more or less feasible according to one's position in the social field, and when a brother or sister has already completed the

path, the family acquires concrete knowledge of admission procedures and academic requirements, a form of embodied cultural capital, while the older sibling serves as a living example that turns university from an abstract possibility into an achievable prospect (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964). In families with limited resources, however, educational investment is often distributed unevenly by gender and birth order, favouring boys as future providers and steering girls toward less costly paths or fields deemed appropriate to a caregiving role, so that the gendered division of labour is reproduced through family strategy itself (Lareau, 2011/2024; Barclay, Lyngstad & Conley, 2021).

Household chores. Gendered socialization from childhood to the present

The analysis of participation in household chores reveals a continuous gendered socialisation that extends from childhood into student life. During the school years, from primary through lower secondary education, almost all participants were responsible for tidying their own room, and substantial shares set the table, changed sheets, washed dishes, cleaned common areas, and helped with their siblings' chores (Table 5). Very few households employed domestic help, and for almost half of the participants these chores followed no fixed schedule.

The early assignment of household responsibilities is a characteristic indicator of socialization in lower socioeconomic strata, typically for girls. This process functions as a potential reinforcer of the care habitus, as familiarity with care practices in the family environment serves as preparation for the professional role of care. According to Hochschild (1983), care work is inextricably linked to emotional labor, that is, the regulation of emotions and the management of others' emotional needs, which is primarily passed on to girls through the early assignment of caregiving roles within the family. While not experienced as coercion, this mechanism shapes a sense of "naturalness" that makes teaching professions seem like a logical life choice.

Today, during their studies, this pattern persists, as the large majority clean the house weekly, help with chores, cook, and do the shopping (Table 5). For most, this absorbs between thirty and sixty minutes at a time, while for a substantial minority it exceeds two hours per week. This invisible time is a typical expression of time poverty, a concept introduced by Vickery (1977), who showed that a full understanding of poverty must account not only for income but also for available time, a distinct form of deprivation that disproportionately affects women of low socioeconomic status. This time poverty, according to Burchardt (2008), extends and interacts with economic poverty, creating vicious cycles of deprivation that are particularly hard to break. It is telling that more than a third of the students live alone and bear full responsibility for household management, adding a double burden to their daily student life.

Table 4. Parents' employment status and siblings in higher education

Variable	N	%
Father's current status		
Employed	151	79.1
Retired	23	12.0
Deceased	9	4.7
Unemployed / at home	6	3.2
Mother's current status		
Employed	137	71.7
Unemployed	19	9.9
At home or not working	17	8.9
Retired	9	4.7
Deceased	8	4.2
Employment sector (father)		
Private-sector employee	66	36.9
Self-employed	60	33.5
Public-sector executive	51	28.5
Employment sector (mother)		
Private-sector employee	72	41.1
Public-sector executive	63	36.0
Self-employed	29	16.6
Never worked	11	6.3
Sibling in higher education (of those with siblings)		
Yes	90	55.2
No	73	44.8

Table 5. Participation in household chores

Variable	N	%
During school years (primary–lower secondary)		
Tidying own room	163	95.9
Setting the table	121	71.2
Changing sheets	101	59.4
Washing dishes	91	53.5
Cleaning common areas	85	50.0
Helping with siblings' chores	83	48.8
During studies (at least weekly)		
Cleaning the house	167	87.4
Helping with chores	153	82.3
Doing the shopping	133	69.3
Cooking	128	67.7

Sleep, Commuting, and Academic Attendance

Data on daily life reveal a student reality marked by constant time pressure. Most participants slept between five and seven hours the previous night, below the amount recommended for adults, a pattern that reflects the combination of academic demands, household responsibilities, and, for more than a quarter, part-time work (Table 6). Morning preparation is kept short for the vast majority, a further sign of time-saving practices.

For the vast majority the commute to the university lasts up to an hour (Table 6). During this time the predominant activity is using a mobile phone, followed by conversation, reading, and, for a small share, schoolwork, the last of these indicating the need to use every available spare moment.

Regarding attendance, the large majority arrived on time the previous week and most had missed only a single class. The reasons for absence reveal deeper trends, since the predominant reason is a lack of motivation, followed by health issues, transport problems, and work (Table 6). “Lack of motivation” is not merely individual indifference but corresponds in the literature to a sense of alienation experienced by students when the institutional habitus is not aligned with their own family habitus. By the term “institutional habitus,” Reay, David & Ball (2001) refer to the cultural and organizational practices of an educational institutional structure, which incorporate specific class values and codes, shaping a culture that is never socially neutral. When

a student's family habitus aligns with the institutional habitus, the student feels at home in the academic environment and easily adapts to its informal codes. When it diverges, however, the informal expectations, the academic code, and the institution's atmosphere are experienced as "foreign," leading to a sense of not belonging that manifests itself through phenomena such as reduced participation and unexcused absences (Reay, David & Ball, 2001). More than a quarter work while studying, a finding that reflects financial pressure.

The average weekly course load is close to twenty-five hours, corresponding to roughly eight courses, with most students devoting a further two to four hours to independent study (Table 6). About half consider this time somewhat sufficient, while a comparable share feel the workload is somewhat too heavy. This simultaneous satisfaction and sense of overload characterizes students who manage multiple obligations, namely academic, domestic, and in some cases professional, creating a triple burden that is particularly onerous for female students. The combination of time and financial pressure is a distinct factor that negatively affects academic performance and well-being, regardless of inherent academic abilities (Burchardt, 2008).

Shadow Education: The Family Compensation Strategy

One of the most striking findings concerns the nearly universal use of tutoring centers, as 84.4% (N=162) attended a tutoring center after school, with 93.2% (N=151) attending classes with other children. Furthermore, 52.4% (N=99) used both tutoring centers and private lessons for the national college entrance exams, while 44.7% (N=84) used only private lessons. These percentages reveal that families are actively investing, mobilizing financial resources to secure their children's admission to higher education. Chi-square analyses further show that the very act of resorting to shadow education is socially stratified. A statistically significant correlation emerged between the mother's educational level and attendance at a tutoring center, $\chi^2(2)=6.51$, $p=.039$, with 88.3% of students with highly educated mothers attending a tutoring center compared to just 67.9% of those with mothers of low educational capital. At the same time, the father's educational level was significantly associated with private foreign language lessons, $\chi^2(2)=8.45$, $p=.015$, as 60.9% of students with highly educated fathers reported private tutoring, compared to 32.7% of those with fathers of low educational capital. A particularly strong correlation emerged between the mother's educational level and learning German outside of school, $\chi^2(2)=13.66$, $p=.001$, with 25.4% of students with highly educated mothers reporting such instruction, compared to zero percent of those with mothers of low educational capital. These findings demonstrate that, while shadow education is generally widely accessible, its more specialized and resource-intensive forms remain socially stratified, reproducing the very inequalities that the educational system promises to overcome.

Table 6. Daily life: sleep, commuting, attendance, and workload

Variable	N	%
Sleep the previous night		
5 hours or less	35	18.2
5–7 hours	91	47.4
7–9 hours	56	29.2
More than 9 hours	10	5.2
Commute to the university		
Less than 30 minutes	78	40.8
30 minutes – 1 hour	86	45.0
1 – 1.5 hours	24	12.6
More than 1.5 hours	3	1.6
Attendance and workload		
Arrived on time the previous week	134	80.2
Works while studying	55	28.6
Mean weekly course load (SD), hours	24.82 (6.22)	
Main reason for absence		
Lack of motivation	80	41.9
Health issues	53	27.7
Transport problems	42	22.0
Work	18	9.4

The relationship between this investment and outcomes is not linear. The high rates of high school graduation with “excellent” (48.4%) and “very good” (37.5%) grades demonstrate that shadow education achieves its goal of university admission. However, admission occurs in departments that correspond to the social background of the students’ families and not necessarily to their academic performance. Students with “excellent” grades are admitted to Departments of Preschool Education (departments for kindergarten teachers for children aged 4 to 6) and Early Childhood Education and Care (for educators working with children up to 4 years old) instead of Medicine or Engineering, not because they cannot, but because the horizon of the possible has been defined differently by their social habitus. Bourdieu (1989)

highlighted that in the field of higher education, the structural homology between the educational and social fields explains why children from working-class backgrounds, even when they achieve high grades, tend to choose departments according to their position in the social field. According to Bourdieu, the subjective assessment of what is possible is objectively adapted to actual chances of success, without individuals being aware of the rules governing these chances.

It is also noteworthy that, throughout the educational journey of the students in our sample, the online instruction provided by tutoring centers during the Covid-19 pandemic was deemed unsatisfactory by 52.2% (N=82). This finding highlights digital inequalities that disproportionately burden students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The international literature documents that the transition to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a magnifying glass of pre-existing social inequalities, as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had limited equipment, unstable internet connections, and less quiet study space compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic strata (Bonal & González, 2020). Digital inequality is not limited to mere access to equipment but extends to a second level concerning digital literacy skills, the quality of family support, and cultural practices that facilitate distance learning. In the Greek context specifically, research by C. Zagkos and colleagues (2022) on students at Greek universities confirmed that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequalities, as the Greek educational infrastructure was characterized by insufficient digital readiness, resulting in students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds facing more serious obstacles in participating in distance learning. The finding of this study that more than half of the participants considered the tutoring centers' distance learning to be unsatisfactory confirms this broader pattern and highlights that the shadow education sector, as a market for educational services, was not exempt from the mechanisms that reproduce social inequality. Chi-square analyses further support this interpretation, as the operation of tutoring centers via distance learning during the pandemic was significantly associated with both the father's educational level, $\chi^2(2)=7.98$, $p=.018$, as well as with that of the mother, $\chi^2(2)=6.95$, $p=.031$, with students from families with higher educational capital reporting access to distance learning at higher rates.

Conclusion

The findings show that the feminization of preschool education departments has no single cause but is the visible result of converging gender, class, and geographical structures of reproduction. Three findings together offer a coherent interpretation.

The first concerns the gendered nature of career choice. The overwhelmingly female presence confirms that this choice is not a "natural inclination" but a socially constructed habitus linking women to caregiving, motherhood, and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). The "naturalness" of this feeling is the most effective form of symbolic violence, since the very absence of felt coercion marks the mechanism's

success, as students who already hold the care habitus choose a field that reinforces it (Van Laere et al., 2014).

The contradiction between high academic performance and the choice of a low-prestige department confirms Bourdieu's *choix du raisonnable* (1980), the semi-conscious adjustment of expectations to the limits of one's position, a mechanism Duru-Bellat (2004) documents for girls, whose success coexists with self-exclusion from prestigious fields through *anticipations de l'avenir*. The concentration of high-achieving women in these departments is the clearest illustration of how educational success and gender-based devaluation coexist without contradiction.

For women of low social origin, class and gender intertwine into a double symbolic stigma. Skeggs (1997) showed that working-class women in care programmes pursue respectability through care professions as an available path to recognition, yet this very choice reproduces the devaluation they seek to escape, since care work is morally valued but economically and symbolically undervalued (Tronto, 2017). Recent research confirms the pattern, noting that working-class women remain concentrated in the low-paid *5C professions* of care, cleaning, catering, clerical work, and cashier work (Warren et al., 2025). This is the structural trap of these students, since the choice that grants access to higher education simultaneously places them in symbolic devaluation. The failure of Scandinavian gender-balance policies to exceed a 20% male presence (Peeters, Rohrmann & Emilsen, 2015) shows that change requires a deeper transformation of how care work is valued, not superficial intervention.

The second finding concerns class. These departments are not merely "feminine" but working-class, occupying the dominated pole of the field of higher education (Bourdieu, 1989). The intergenerational pattern is one of gradual but constrained mobility, as roughly three-quarters of grandparents on both sides and almost half of the parents lack a higher education degree, so that children enrol in programmes of lower symbolic prestige. Mobility is real yet stays within the working-class sphere, and the transition to university is not only institutional but emotional and cultural, entailing distance from the family and a sense of not belonging that the discourse of "equal opportunities" ignores (Reay, 2017).

The third finding concerns everyday life as lived inequality. The link between parental educational capital and daily conditions shows how inequality is experienced physically and temporally, as fewer hours of sleep, housework from childhood onward, part-time work, and commuting combine into a time poverty that drains academic opportunity regardless of ability. The continuity of household participation from school age into student life underlines the persistence of the gendered habitus of care across the life course.

Especially telling is that lack of motivation is the main reason for absence. This is not individual indifference but a collective expression of alienation, a silent response to the sense that the institution is "not for them", as first-generation students meet an

institution embodying upper-class cultural practices and live the clash between family and academic habitus as an exhausting struggle to adapt (Reay, David & Ball, 2001).

Kergoat's *consubstantialité* (Galerand & Kergoat, 2008) is fully substantiated here, since this is at once a "female" and a working-class sector, the mechanisms of gender and class operating together to produce this social composition.

The feminization of these sectors cannot be addressed by superficial measures but requires a deeper revaluation of care work, beginning with the recognition that "natural inclination" is always socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1980; Mosconi, 1994).

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