

# **Discriminated teachers: a study of male teachers in the early grades of primary school<sup>I</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to analyze some gender representations of teachers of the early grades of primary education in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Aveiro (Portugal), especially the representations that generate discrimination affecting male teachers. Socially defined as female, such occupation has representations that may differentiate practices and choices. Many of such representations associate teaching to the feminine and claim that male teachers are *out of place*. Using qualitative and quantitative analysis of questionnaires and interviews with teachers, I examine gender representations regarding teaching the early grades of primary education, whether there is discrimination affecting male teachers, as well as whether men who join the profession are free from prejudice and help to reduce gender discrimination. I conclude that the mere fact that there is a male teacher in the classrooms can cause various representations of gender; in this sense, teachers may or may not try to break such representations, which happened to some of the participants of this research. In spite of suffering from prejudice, many take advantage of masculinity in society. Nevertheless, we established that the presence of male teachers in the early grades is a way of including gender issues in education, demonstrating to school children that men can also choose this activity successfully and evidencing that the aptitude for teaching does not depend on one's sex.

## **Keywords**

Gender – Teachers – Male – Discrimination.

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# **Professores discriminados: um estudo sobre os docentes do sexo masculino nas séries do ensino fundamental**

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## **Resumo**

*Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar algumas representações de gênero que envolvem a docência nas séries iniciais do ensino fundamental no Rio de Janeiro (Brasil) e em Aveiro (Portugal), especialmente as representações geradoras de discriminações que afetam os homens atuantes na profissão. Socialmente definida como feminina, tal profissão carrega representações que podem diferenciar as práticas e as escolhas, sendo que muitas delas associam o magistério ao feminino e alegam que os professores homens estariam fora de lugar. A partir da análise qualitativa e quantitativa de questionários e entrevistas com professores desse segmento, examinamos, então, quais são as representações de gênero que circulam em relação à docência nas séries iniciais do ensino fundamental, se existe discriminação em relação a eles, bem como se os homens que entram na profissão são desprovidos de preconceitos e ajudariam a diminuir as discriminações de gênero. Concluímos que o simples fato de existir um professor do sexo masculino nas salas de aula pode provocar várias representações de gênero; nesse sentido, os professores podem ou não tentar quebrar tais representações, o que aconteceu com alguns dos participantes desta investigação. Mesmo sofrendo preconceitos, porém, muitos se aproveitam das vantagens da masculinidade na sociedade. Apesar disso, demarcamos que a presença de professores do sexo masculino nas séries iniciais é uma forma de inserir as questões de gênero na educação, demonstrar às crianças na escola que o homem também pode escolher essa atividade com sucesso e evidenciar que a aptidão para o magistério não depende do sexo.*

## **Palavras-chave**

*Gênero – Professores – Sexo masculino – Discriminação.*

**I-** Este artigo é fruto de pesquisa financiada pela Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia e realizada na aculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Coimbra.

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Lately, we have witnessed a proliferation of research linking the education profession to gender perspectives, but the object of such studies has been only women, without considering that feminization produces a gendering of the profession that also affects male teachers.

By emphasizing the female voices in the current educational research, one runs the risk of ignoring the thought of the men who choose to teach and go through the process of adaptation / recreation of the masculine in the school environment. When it comes to the masculine view of the teacher of this segment, there are very few references to the theme, and what is more, prejudices and discourses that circulate in contemporary society are reaffirmed in daily school life. Thus, the male teacher becomes a *foreign body* in the early grades of primary education.

I shall examine what gender representations<sup>1</sup> of teaching circulate in the early grades of primary education. Are there prejudices against such teachers? Are the men who enter this profession free from prejudices because they have overcome difficulties and discrimination? In their practice, do they help to reduce gender discrimination?

## Methodology

Based on the objectives and issues listed, I developed my methodology articulating all aspects necessary for the study. That is, I did not separate the quantitative and qualitative research approaches, but rather, according to the proposal of Sampieri, Collado and Lucio (2006), I chose a multimodal and mixed model of research which combines both approaches and benefits from their advantages.

Accordingly, I chose to focus on a qualitative method to gain a greater depth of data because I consider that between individuals and

**1-** Most of the representations found were based on gender, but discrimination of ethnicity, sexuality and generation also appeared, showing that these issues can not be separated.

their environment there is a dynamic relation and that there is an inseparable link between the subjective and the objective which cannot be translated only into numbers. However, I also used quantitative research to obtain more general data on the subject.

Among a sample of 209 public school teachers who responded to questionnaires<sup>2</sup> - 60 from Aveiro District (Portugal) and 149 from Rio de Janeiro State (Brazil)<sup>3</sup> -, we interviewed six teachers (three from each place) randomly selected, one from each country by age group (30 years old, 30-40 years old, older than 40).

Such material allowed the analysis of the information obtained and provided more extensive data (categorization, assessment and quantification of the statistics and written discourses from the questionnaires) and allowed to locate the information in experiences (in the interviewees' narratives) and discern the meanings therein present: their relationship with society, institutions and statements. The combination of these processes of data and discourse collection allowed me to make the comparison between the general and local.

Considering the discussions of various authors, I believe that there is no difference in the memory of men and women:<sup>4</sup> memories are different according to the social experiences and trajectories of each individual, and the memories of women may differ from those of men due to the occupations and social positions that they usually have. Thus, there are different memories according to their construction, to the way a person sees the world, to the relation between the personal and the political, etc. According to this reflection, I analyzed the

**2-** The questionnaire with open and closed questions followed some central aspects present in the interview script. I ensured the equivalence of concepts in both countries.

**3-** 113 questionnaires were distributed in Aveiro district and 328 in the Rio de Janeiro State, which equates to a rate of return of 53% and 45% respectively.

**4-** See, for example, the work of Catani et al. (1997).

narratives of men who choose an occupation considered feminine and I realized that their discourses may be intertwined both with the social considerations which try to shape the ways of thinking of individuals and with the new views on them.<sup>5</sup>

In this work I used narrative research – according to the guidelines of Bolivar, Domingo and Fernandez (2001) – to assess, from the information collected, the existence or absence of prejudice. The use of narratives as a methodological resource will not allow to achieve the continuous mobility and fluidity of our thought (Fentress; Wickham, 1992), yet it is essential to appreciate and criticize facts that concern traditions not yet studied of a group and the factors that lead individuals to act in a certain way.

Narratives allow clarifying subjective processes of the human experience. Such processes facilitate the contact with *small stories* and unique experiences of individuals, groups and communities of often overlooked segments, which allows registering a popular history (Bolivar; Sunday; Fernández, 2001). With this historical and individual contribution it will be possible to intertwine the data and analyze the modes of transmission of values and of discontinuities and ruptures in the discourses of the six teachers interviewed.

I limited the number of interviews to six because it would be impossible to conduct and analyze for quality many open interviews. To establish such limit, I took into account what Blanchet and Gotman (2001) emphasize: the required number of interviews is generally lower than that of questionnaires, because information from them is validated by the context and does not need to be legitimized by a mathematically defined sample.

The questionnaires given to teachers who perform teaching activities in the early grades of primary education in the public school system

**5-** I regret but textual limitation does not allow me to describe such narratives in words. I will only present the analysis I did of them and some data from the questionnaires.

of Aveiro District and Rio de Janeiro State seek to further validate, complement and confirm the research with interviewees' narratives.

The spatial area was taken and chosen as the focal point of discussions and comparisons in order to capture differences and similarities between the two places, never disregarding the influence of the Portuguese colonization on the Brazilian culture and school, but also highlighting local characteristics so as to see that different paths can be traced and that they depend on the various constraints to which they are subjected.

In the narratives and discourses present in the interviews and questionnaires, I captured the representations they contain, analyzing the preeminences which try to attach meanings to the occupation as well as their fluencies and potential for emancipation. Finally, I related the narratives of the teachers I interviewed – male and working in the early grades of primary education – to the data collected from the questionnaires distributed to the male teachers of Aveiro (AV-PT) and Rio de Janeiro (RJ-BR) to understand what representations such teachers are subjected to.

## **Discrimination**

The term *gender* has been used in feminist analyzes since the mid-1970s (SCOTT, 1990; ALMEIDA, 1998), when it was defined as a social construction of different attributes to men and women which takes place throughout life, often determining the relations between the sexes in several respects.

Jane Almeida (1998, p. 43) argues that

[...] sex is determined before birth by natural biological processes whereas gender is a cultural product acquired and transmitted in social structures.

Thus, gender studies consider the difference between the sexes as a social construction which has often generated

inequalities. Such studies, however, advocate the analysis of these differences and propose disregarding those based simply on the biological aspect and rejecting naturalistic approaches.

Ligia Amancio (1998, p. 15) considers that discrimination has its origin in the “form of social thought that establishes differentiation in terms of value of the models of male and female persons and the social functions of the two sexes in society”. That is why it is important to analyze not the differences between men and women, but the *social thought* about the differentiation between the masculine and the feminine, i.e., the epistemology of common sense about the sexes, the ideology and intergroup relations. Importantly, the author states that not only men, as the *dominant sex*, impose their thoughts on women; rather, both sexes share/reproduce certain values. Therefore, gender discrimination is not attributed only to women or only to men.

Both men and women are responsible for change and gender equality: both the women who fight for the end of their subalternization in society and the men who do not reproduce the dominant role and somehow subvert these values. However, in general, both men and women adopt models of behavior which are socially imposed on them as if they were natural, sharing assumptions and contributing to accentuate the gender difference. Masculinity and femininity are constructed in the interaction between sexes. If both share the stereotypes and contribute to inequality, both repressing and building ways of being, if each sex contains the opposite sex, it is possible to question the rules which try to fix the masculine and the feminine from this construction of the being, inquiring about the relations of power which formulate them.

For all that, I emphasize that gender studies are important for analyzing the presence of men in activities socially considered feminine, because the work of these professionals comes into conflictuality with expectations and can show exceptions to the gender patterns or attempts of reaffirmation of their *masculinity*. Finally, gender

studies may help understand conflicts, resistances, reaffirmations, satisfactions and successes of these men who seem to be out of place.

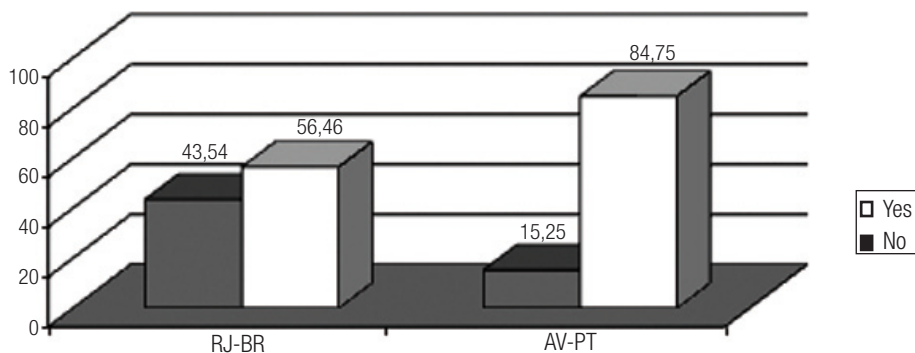
Vianna (2001/2002) argues that the feminine sense of the teaching profession goes beyond the fact that most teachers are women, because feminization happens in spaces and practices which, even when taken by males, make the teaching profession be a feminine profession as a result of a social attribution connected with a meaning of gender regardless of the sex of the person who performs it.

In this perspective, I saw in my study that male teachers working in the early grades of primary education feel gender issues strongly. What causes the most suffering to those teachers are the cases of discrimination they have experienced or witnessed. However, there is a great difference in this perception in the two locations we investigated (and which will be analyzed below), because, as we see in Chart 1, in Rio de Janeiro, 43.54% of the respondents have witnessed some discrimination, whereas in Aveiro, this percentage is much lower: 15.25%. As this subject comprises taboos, one must be very cautious both in interviews and in the questionnaires distributed (because of this, certain questions were not asked in the latter<sup>6</sup>). Therefore, in the interviews, the reports were filled with emotions that involved, among other aspects: rejection of career choice by families; the teasing of classmates due to low income and suspicion of homosexuality arising from working as a teacher in this segment; discrimination by colleagues and fathers / mothers of pupils; shock when they said they were teachers of such young children.

In the questionnaires, the prejudices that appeared the most were those related to: homosexuality (homophobia); the idea that men are incapable of dealing with children (e.g., for being different, young, rude, authoritarian); the assumption that all teachers of the segment are women and that it is a female job; fear of

<sup>6</sup> - For example, questions related to sexual orientation.

**Graph 1** – Has experienced or witnessed discrimination against male teachers working in the early grades? (%)

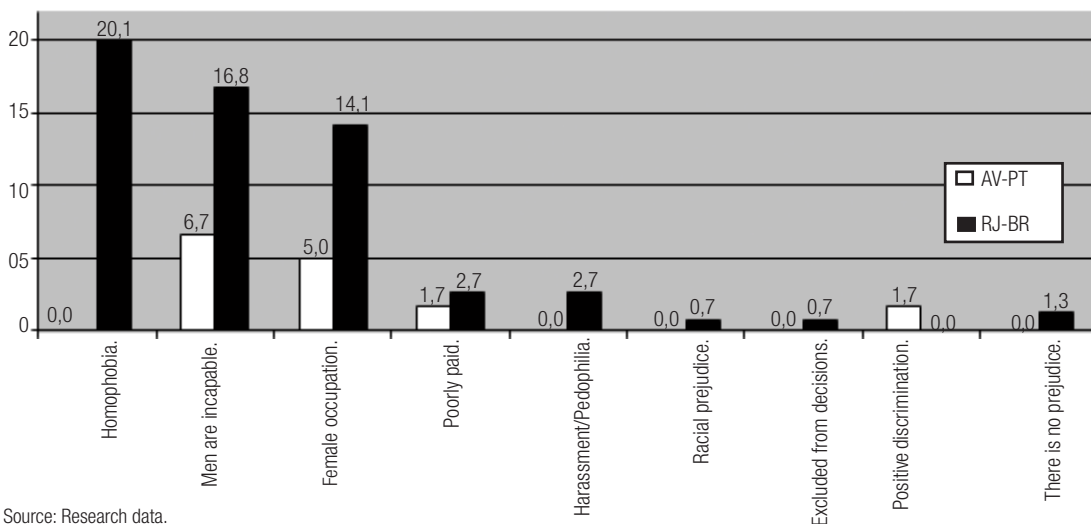


Source: Research data.

pedophilia and sexual harassment; the idea that teaching is an unprofitable occupation and not suitable for men. Other types of discrimination were also mentioned, such as racial prejudice, positive discrimination and exclusion from

decisions. In Graph 2, I categorized the prejudices mentioned in surveys by percentage of teachers who had experienced or witnessed such prejudice (the same justification can be in more than one classification):

**Graph 2** – What type of discrimination have you witnessed or experienced because you are a male teacher working in the early grades of primary education? (%)



Source: Research data.

Representation guides our actions imperceptibly by transmitting to us early on what attitudes are appropriate to each gender and repressing the ones considered inadequate. Note that I understand the term *representation* according to the constructionist approaches such as that of Hall (1997). In this sense, to represent

is to define what counts as real, as knowledge (which involves power relations), it is “an attempt – always frustrated – of fixing, of closing, the process of signification” (SILVA, 1998).

In the emergence and description of such types of discrimination, I noticed that they do not appear alone but are closely

related to other references (such as race<sup>7</sup>) and other forms of social divisions (e.g., class, age). As noted by Scott (1990), it is only possible to redefine and restructure gender along with a vision of social and political equality (including sex, class and race) because gender is deeply linked to issues of power.

According to Williams (1995), the career aspirations of children suffer social segregation; children control other children and marginalize anyone who does not conform to gender-appropriate behavior. But boys experience more social disapproval when they show interest in the activities of the opposite sex and, therefore, it is not surprising that so few men consider pursuing careers considered feminine. Women are also confronted with negative stereotypes of female professions and are forced to defend their choice of profession. However, the negative reactions they face do not call into question the integrity of their characteristic, as it often happens with men.

Thus, some attitudes and judgments that we think are ours actually come from *prejudice*, a process we are not aware of. Thus, the relation of representation with prejudice can help us understand many of the discourses which circulate about male teachers in the early grades of primary education.

As Williams (1995) explains, popular culture reinforces, through prejudiced representations, the belief that these men are abnormal. Moreover, men are rarely portrayed in occupations considered feminine, and when they are, they are represented in an extremely stereotypical way, for example, associated with homosexuality, pedophilia and/or clumsiness, including in movies. Because of this, men experience some discrimination, such as not being hired for fear of male sexuality, but “most discrimination is more subtle” (Williams, 1995, p. 13), like being pushed to other positions due to stereotypes

**7-** Racial discrimination will not be detailed in this article because it was rarely mentioned in our study. However, the fact that it is mentioned shows that it cannot be ruled out. On this subject, see the work of Connell (2005).

(e.g. leadership positions or areas which deal with older children or adults). While some men may feel uncomfortable with these expectations (and may therefore leave the profession), others remain and resign themselves to them and often receive rewards.

However, as Williams (1995) states, when a man enters predominantly female professions, despite the representations he is subjected to, he does not abandon his masculinity (whether hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, pro-feminist etc.). Nor does he lose his interest in supporting male privilege in society (on the contrary, he takes advantage of being the dominant sex). In other words, in spite of such prejudices, men do not lose their masculinity in these occupations, often dodging popular representations (for example, showing that they are not gay, pedophiles or awkward teachers), and other times reinforcing such representations.

I will analyze, then, the representations expressed by the interviewees and questionnaire respondents.

### **Homophobia against male teachers working in the early grades of primary education**

Male dominance and heterocentricism are the paradigms which have conditioned our representations and our practices (Welzer-Lang, 2001). They make virility be sought by men by moving away from femininity, i.e.:

One *is not born* a man, nor *is* one a man, one strives constantly in pursuit of *becoming* a man. Virility represents precisely the investment in a network of relationships seeking recognition of masculinity. (Areda, 2006, p. 1)

As explained by Welzer-Lang (2001, p. 465)

[...] in male socialization, to be a man, it is necessary not to be associated with a woman. The feminine even becomes the central pole of rejection.

Thus, social relations between men are structured in the hierarchized image of the relationships between men and women and produce homophobia so that, through threats, men act according to the so-called normal schemes of virility. In this sense, the author defines homophobia as:

[...] discrimination against people who show, or to whom one attributes, some qualities (or defects) attributed to the other gender. Homophobia tightens boundaries of gender [...]. Male dominance produces homophobia so that, through threats, men act according to on the so-called normal schemes of virility. (Welzer-Lang, 2001, p. 465)

Homophobia applies, thus, not only to homosexuals, but also to anyone who has (or seems to have) some quality that is attributed to the other sex. Perhaps because homosexual people may hide themselves, we realize that homophobia toward men is more applied to small details of body, voice and attitude / options.

Two interviewees described this surveillance. Vinicius<sup>8</sup> (RJ-BR, 24) states that he is not homosexual, but that, since childhood, he has suffered several accusations that he is because of his voice, his clumsy way of moving his hands a lot and his sensitivity. He says:

I am very affectionate, so men are not affectionate, men don't cry, men aren't good at cutting, pasting. [...] They want to call us fags? As for me, they can call me, I have nothing to prove, today I'm already at this stage, I was also very afraid of all this, so I had to assert myself as a man.

Teacher André (RJ-BR, 38), who assumed he is gay, said he also faced problems due to his gestures and his gait. He had a school teacher who called his grandmother to say that he was different, had he female mannerisms, and

perhaps that was due to the fact he did not have a father and that he would have to change that way. After that, she began trying to control him, correcting his gait all the time, which should be "Straight. Upright. Like that of men".

Apart from gestures, the body and the attributes commonly associated with women (such as sensitivity, crying or patience), the very fact that these teachers have a profession socially considered *feminine*, with the *need* for the so-called *feminine* qualities to do the job, is a target of homophobia. This becomes evident in interviews, questionnaires and other situations: in Rio de Janeiro, for example, we hear prejudiced statements even on the part of education management sectors, suggesting that there are only gay teachers in this segment.

Homophobia also causes problems regarding the employability of male teachers in the early grades of primary education. Teacher Vinicius (RJ-BR) has lost his job at a private school because of prejudice; moreover, he has had to "reinforce his manhood" before a student's mother who thought he was a homosexual person and also before the sweepers of the school. Teacher André (RJ-BR) also reports that he experienced homophobia in the private school where he taught, but "luckily he was supported". He believes there may be many homosexual teachers, but that does not influence the education given to children.

Teacher Roberto (RJ-BR, 49) has never been offended and explains that prejudice has never harmed his life and has never made him give up, saying that he has never "allowed that, you have to assert yourself". He believes that prejudice exists, also because "affection and caress are not considered male things", but he argues that homosexuality does not interfere with one's professionalism because, "despite being married and having no tendency to be homosexual", he believes that he would be the same teacher if he were homosexual.

Several justifications of teachers of Rio de Janeiro who responded the questionnaire confirm the existence of prejudiced representation in

**8** - The names are fictitious to preserve anonymity.



society and the discrimination they suffered for having made this career choice and for working as teachers. Such justifications show that the prejudiced representation that the teachers' education course for primary education or the work itself is for homosexuals marks teachers so much that they often end up considering the possibility of leaving the profession.

Other justifications indicate that such prejudice leads to suffering and an attempt to assert masculinity. As already mentioned, our respondents Vinícius and Roberto evidenced the need to "to assert yourself as a man". Several authors and investigations show that men working in professions considered feminine have the need to assert their masculinity (even seeking heterosexual relationships) because, as stated by Torrão Filho (2005, p. 144), "for men, the greatest anxiety about homosexuality is this identification with the feminine". So men want to show that they are not feminine.

Welzer-Lang (2001) argues that the existence of pro-feminist men, homosexual men and other men who somehow transgress the definitions of masculinity exposes an extreme variety that challenges objectively and/or subjectively the homophobic and heterosexual definitions of masculinity. "Boundaries of gender have a tendency, on the side of men, to decompose, to explode, and the masculine shows itself in all its states" (p. 471). Therefore, transgressions of masculinity do not always mean that they put into question the social relations of sex/gender, because

[...] when examining certain forms of emergence of new male figures in the light of the social relations of gender, there are numerous examples showing that positions of male dominance are not called into question. (Welzer-Lang, 2001, p. 471)

It is necessary to question whether it is necessary to assert oneself as a man and whether there is any impediment for homosexual men to be teachers. As Sayão (2005) explains,

compulsory heterosexuality torments people because in the school culture homosexuality is still considered a problem. However, the interactions of boys and girls with adults of any sexual orientation do not determine their own orientation, since the attribution of gender is insufficient to gender identity, which is a subjective construction, a feeling developed throughout life.

Probably, while homosexuality is considered abnormal and there is homophobia, the need to assert oneself as a man will be present in our society. However, we must be careful about how we perceive what is normal, because, as Novena (2005) described, although repression and non-acceptance of homosexuality are more evident in current representations, the discourse of normality is also present and may represent what Foucault named normative power. Yet, the discourse of normality can allow broadening and deepening discussions on alternative sexualities, providing the possibility of change towards the assimilation and acceptance of the different other, and impacting on the production of subjectivities. As stated by Torrão Filho (2005), homosexuality itself is not a problem to history or society; the problem lies in its repression: homophobia.

Importantly, no one in Aveiro mentioned prejudice against homosexuality. The absence of this prejudice was questioned in interviews with Portuguese teachers, who confirmed its absence. Therefore, we ask: are gender boundaries less rigid in Portugal than in Brazil?

Perhaps that is because in Portugal there is less homophobic violence than in Brazil, which according to Venturi and Bokany (2011) is probably the country with the highest number of homophobic crimes. However, this does not mean that there is no homophobia in Portugal, since the study organized by Nogueira and Oliveira (2010) shows that Portugal is a very homophobic country, which is manifested in insults, repeated *jokes*, comments in the media, domestic violence etc. Thus, we relate the lack of prejudice against male teachers in the early grades with the low association between *feminine*

*attributes* and this profession<sup>9</sup> in Portugal. In our data, this is demonstrated by the absence of such prejudice and by fewer discrimination cases mentioned by the Portuguese teachers in comparison to the Brazilian ones.

### **Discrimination for being a man: *men have no knack for dealing with children***

The second largest type of discrimination described by teachers in Rio de Janeiro and the largest in Aveiro was the fact that being a man generated distrust of the ability to be a teacher. The basis of such discrimination is the same gender criteria that lead someone to believe that a man is homosexual, i.e., it refers to the qualities associated with each gender. But in this case the view is the opposite: he is a man and therefore he does not have the female characteristics essential to be a good teacher of the lower grades of primary education.

Some of the teachers surveyed and interviewed mentioned both prejudices (homosexuality or ineptitude), because they have feminine characteristics and are considered homosexual (and thus *bad examples* that can not teach children); or they have male characteristics (which are not good for the job) and therefore have no aptitude for teaching. In other words, male teachers in this segment are discriminated (in most cases, by female teachers themselves) because they are different (different bothers), because they are young/immature/inexperienced/irresponsible, because they are authoritarian, impolite, clumsy or devoid of vocation.

Due to this type of demand, teacher Vinicius (RJ-BR) reports that he tried to “imitate the way female teachers taught, but then he turned into a caricature and his colleagues laughed at his clumsiness.” Teacher André (RJ-BR) was also under “suspicion that he wasn’t a good teacher”: “the guidance counselor in the normal course wanted to

<sup>9</sup> - Similarly, in other countries, certain professions are not associated with feminine attributes. For example, ballet dancers are not associated with homosexuality.

transfer me because I was messy”. That same school claimed that it was “necessary to distribute one man per class to avoid mess, to prevent men from being together and making a mess”. Also according to André:

The teaching coordinator suspected that someone helped me plan lessons, because she did not believe that I was able to come up with certain lessons because I was so creative.

Thinking of men as unable to teach leads to various forms of exclusion, including not hiring professionals because of their sex. Some authors (e.g., Abreu, 2002) report that men who work in typically feminine areas have difficulty getting jobs. However, our interviewees did not feel such difficulty. But they were discouraged by others who said that they would. Teacher André (RJ-BR) even heard,

[...] from some training colleagues, that I would never find a school to teach, one of them even hurt me and discouraged me. [...] A guy on my street also said that I was studying for nothing, because I wouldn’t be able to get a job. But I soon got it.’

### **The assumption that all teachers of the lower grades of primary education are women**

Perhaps this representation seems not to *discriminate so much*, because one just believes that the profession is feminine and, due to this belief, one does not expect to see a man working in the early grades.

In this regard, teacher Paulo (AV-PT, 29) describes:

Parents are used to female teachers, but they quickly adapt. The shock is sometimes greater for the kids than it is for their parents, because kids may be afraid because I’m tall, but I try to change that impression quickly.

Vinicius (RJ-BR) also realized the following:

When children first see me, they find me different and expect an attitude different from that of female teachers. More mothers attended the first meeting because at first they are afraid of a male teacher, want to know whether I could mistreat pupils, whether I would demotivate them and asked me to speak cautiously with the class.

Because of the representation that all teachers of the segment are women, documents bring the word *professora* (female teacher), rather than a form of writing that includes men and women (such as *professor/a*). Teacher Roberto (RJ-BR), for example, notes:

[...] formerly all documents were as follows: name of the *professora*. Only that, you know? A newspaper hiring: "We need a *professora* (female teacher) for 1st-4th grades." Not today. The other day I noticed this: now all the documents say *professor* and the "a" comes in parentheses. Today they have another view.

Other teachers (RJ BR-and AV-PT) also stressed that discrimination in the form of writing.

In the open questions of the questionnaires, the responses indicate that the profession is considered feminine. Some teachers do not describe discrimination associated with this idea; others mention that the association of the profession with women leads them to suffer obloquy, contempt, ridicule, discrimination, prejudice, chauvinism etc. Some of the explanations of respondents associate the idea that the profession is feminine to the thought that men are not capable or are homosexual. So despite the fact that this is a gender prejudice less explicit than the others, it may hide other prejudices.

## Pedophilia and sexual harassment

As we have seen, the general representation is that teaching in this segment requires feminine attributes; if a man has the so-called feminine characteristics, he is not suitable to teaching in the early grades; if he has masculine characteristics, he does not fit because he lacks the necessary feminine characteristics and has others which would hinder the work. Suspicion or concern that male teachers working in the early grades of primary education could be pedophiles or harass students follows the same *logic* of these gender prejudices and goes further, because such representation contains the fear of *male sexuality* and continues to believe that women lack sexuality<sup>10</sup> (i.e., they do not possess sexual impulses which cause corruption).

Teachers from Aveiro describe the existence of this concern with the sexuality of male teachers. Joaquim (and AV-PT, 36) explains:

I don't touch children, especially after the pedophilia scandal which happened in Casa Pia<sup>11</sup> in Portugal, because obviously I am much more exposed.

The situation is complicated for him:

I can't go alone to swimming lessons because I can't go to the girls' locker room and help the girls undress and dress, especially when they're young. Some of my colleagues go and change them, but I wouldn't like a male teacher to do this to my daughter, despite his good intentions.

José (AV-PT, 49) also claims that "due to the problem of pedophilia in Portugal, now he is a little more careful because people both in villages and cities have begun to see things they

**10-** As described by Araújo (2000), since the late nineteenth century people began to believe that only women could integrate both sexes at school without corrupting their bodies and minds.

**11-** For further information, see the dossier on the case (PÚBLICO, 2013).

did not see". And he says that "in the past male teachers could fondle a boy, but now people see it differently." Because of the conversation he had with other teachers, he even says that his

[...] relationship with boys and mainly with girls has changed a lot for fear of being seen as a pedophile. So I think more before making a caress or kissing, something that I usually did, and now I don't.

In Rio de Janeiro, the fear of pedophilia is alternated with the prejudice against homosexuality. Are then *not feminine men* considered dangerous? In this sense, pedophilia may be more feared than homosexuality, since, as Sayão (2005, p. 227) points out, homosexuality is not always seen as dangerous. The author suspects "that prejudice and stigma against homosexuality can be considered representations closer to the 'middle class'". She mentions some cases in which people see no problem in having a homosexual teacher, stating that "what is a concern or problem for some is not for others".

Teacher Vinicius (RJ-BR) says a schoolteacher discriminated him against during the internship. She took away her daughter because she was afraid of what he could do to her. The interviewee explains that:

I feel more comfortable at the school where I work now and don't want to change especially because I would have to win people and assert myself as a serious professional who won't harass children, because there are suspicions about male teachers in this segment, [...] parents' biggest concern today is the issue of sexual harassment of minors - pedophilia, rather. So I have to demonstrate and build trust.

Teacher André (RJ-BR) also reports that he suffered this kind of prejudice: "When I started teaching in a public school, the school principal

said she did not want to see me with children on my lap." He also reports that he fought

[...] with the principal about it. I told her I was going to complain, saying I was suffering embarrassment at work, because she wouldn't say that to a female teacher. Wickedness is in the mind of the person who suspects.

Thus, the narratives of these teachers confirm what Sayão (2005, p. 261) describes in her thesis: the difficulties inherent to the institutional culture require attitudes from teachers because

[...] the male body considered sexually active should be deprived of closer contacts with children. Few professionals are able to overcome such difficulties. Many prefer to adhere to the institutional culture.

We believe that in most cases the fear of facing these difficulties leads to a precaution which ultimately distances male teachers from children, which paradoxically ends up confirming the prejudice that women are more affective and men have no affection. But that is not always the case, and the examples of two teachers interviewed in Rio de Janeiro (Vinicius and André) allow us to think that, despite fears they can assert their affectivity, although they may sometimes need to assert their competence before.

### **A job that pays so little is not for householders**

Another gendered representation that affects male teachers is that the teaching profession is not for men because it pays low salaries and *heads of household* cannot earn so little. However, I demonstrated in a previous article that teachers in Portugal are not so poorly paid in comparison to other professionals; and in Brazil, teaching pays so little as other occupations which are considered masculine (RABELO, 2010). Therefore, this representation

is no longer entirely justified in either case and correlates gender prejudices, because presently men in general are no longer the only ones who support families.

Pincinato (2004) states that, between the 1950s and the 1980s, male teachers in São Paulo faced difficulties because the occupation was assigned feminine meanings, because it was not socially valued, offered low pay and due to the prejudice that anyone who enters such profession had not been competent enough to perform other activities of greater prestige. The author also states that

[...] such representations are confronted therefore with a set of attitudes usually attributed to men, such as being powerful, brave and getting success and recognition. (PINCINATO, 2004, p. 7)

Even today these representations circulate and affect men in teaching. They often present themselves as discrimination against male teachers and influence them to give up this area. In his narratives, teacher Roberto (RJ-BR) says that the fact that the teaching profession is underpaid in Brazil generates the discourse that the job is for women, because they can earn little, whereas men cannot, after all “how can men support a family?”. But that has not been a problem for Roberto: “Thanks God I can manage because my wife also has a job, also has two *matriculas*”.<sup>12</sup>

José (AV-PT) says that the only aspect about which he felt discriminated against and downgraded was

[...] money, because when I chose the profession, most teachers of the 1st cycle were women because we got paid very little in the profession. Men did not choose because they wouldn't have money to start a family [...]. In 1978, when I started teaching, I earned so little that my friends

and neighbors “made fun” of me saying they earned more. I earned the same as my father (who was a blue collar worker) and less than a mail carrier. The difficulty was so great that if I could back down at the time I wouldn't have taken the teacher's course, but I liked to teach and I remained in the profession almost for “reasons of faith” because all my friends said I would never advance. Today I work fewer hours and earn more than they do.

The issue of depreciation / appreciation of the teaching profession is very complex and involves many factors. In 1989, the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) elucidated that the loss of prestige of teachers lies “in three main aspects: the large number of teachers, their qualification level, which has never been very high, and the increasing and prevalent feminization of the profession” (quoted in CORDEIRO-ALVES, 1994, p. 33). But the explanation may be more complex than this, because the feminization occurred later than the low financial status and qualification has always been low.

In my article on the subject (Rabelo, 2010), we analyzed several issues (economic, social, local, school, cultural, educational expansion, anti-seculars, mediatization, among others) and concluded that in Brazil the issue of low pay is associated with the fall in the prestige of the profession. However, the financial and social prestige, still exists, especially among the most disadvantaged sections of the population, who still perceive education as a form of social advancement and see teaching as one of the best occupations accessible to them. In Portugal, despite the increase in compensation, some of the reasons for the decline are the increasing number of professional and the fact that teachers are losing knowledge monopoly. Such aspects make it difficult to increase compensation and also make teachers no longer be rare and make them lose their status of *the only prestigious ones*, especially due to

**12-** Having *two matriculas* means having two jobs as a public school teacher, each with a workload of 22 hours a week.

the expansion of mass schooling. However, feminization cannot be pointed out as an important factor for the depreciation (mainly financial) of the profession because such decline predates the entry of women into teaching.

Thus, the representation that this profession is poorly paid and therefore is not for men discriminates against them and may be a stimulus for men not choosing or *escaping* teaching, but it is not as strong as the other representations mentioned. As Williams (1995) analyzes, a higher salary would probably not attract more men into *female occupations*. Therefore, we also consider that it is not only the salary that distances men from this work, which we can see even more explicitly in Portugal, where the pay has improved,<sup>13</sup> but the proportion of men remains low.

### Preference for men: positive discrimination

Conceptually, positive discrimination is to give competitive advantage to a group in relation to the same benefit. Today there is a major international discussion about the need to compensate for past discrimination and/or prevent the propagation of systemic discrimination by implementing positive discrimination measures or affirmative actions which promote preferential treatment for disadvantaged populations on the grounds of sex, race, ethnicity, social class etc. (CITE, 2003).

In this article, I do not wish to discuss or defend such actions, but demonstrate that male teachers in the early grades, despite suffering negative discrimination from fathers and mothers of students and other teachers, principals and school staff (as analyzed in previous sections), also experience some positive discrimination, mostly derived from fact that they are representatives of the dominant gender group in society. In our research, four interviewees and two questionnaire respondents showed a preference in this regard.

**13-** Our analysis was completed before the crisis Portugal has gone through since 2010.

Vinicius (RJ-BR) reports that people recognized his commitment and that, therefore, very early on he has worked in coordination at school. In turn, Roberto (RJ-BR) says that a group of students met with their mothers to say they wanted him to be their teacher in the following year. Because of this, he says that he has never felt prejudice; on the contrary, he has always felt that they had the greatest respect for him.

André (BR-RJ) says that in the public school where he works currently, students also want to him to be their teacher and most parents want their children to be his students. Students and their parents have even prepared a petition so that he continued to teach the class, but a female teacher decided to take the class. Because of this, parents and students pressured the education coordination, which eventually changed the teacher. André reports he was very happy to know that the community recognizes his work, which results in his being praised a lot by pupils' fathers and mothers.

Paulo (AV-PT) realizes the following:

Sometimes there's a certain admiration for our attitude, the way we stand in the face of things, we men, and for the clairvoyance – if one is allowed to say so – we have about things. Because despite the fact that pupils' fathers and mothers, teachers and principals do not expect a male teacher, they quickly change their opinion and some even say “I'm happy he is a male teacher because he will discipline better”.

Joaquim (AV-PT) also states that he has never felt discriminated against, because pupils' fathers and mothers usually treat him very well. Indeed, in his opinion, the opposite of discrimination takes place:

I have noticed something very interesting: there is, on the part of fathers and mothers, some added value in his being a male teacher. Discipline, rules, order... Perhaps

they are more associated with our figure. If I could explain, there are various reasons and each case has its own explanation.

This way, men find easy access to this profession and easy career progression. As Williams (1995) analyzes, the integration of men into female occupations does not change gender-based hierarchies, especially because men often continue taking advantage of being the dominant sex in our society.

### **Final thoughts: overcoming biased gender representations**

From the prejudices mentioned in this article, we realize that the simple fact that there is a male teacher in the classroom can cause various representations of gender. However, we have seen that such representations may be maintained or modified by teachers, mainly because they are within the category of persons whose profession produces representations from know-how that is encoded and transmitted, giving some authority to whom has such know-how. However, when they disseminate and produce representations, there is also the possibility of revolt against the stagnation of power through the questioning of certain representations that the teacher himself has.

It is impossible to escape representations, because we are born into a world that leads us to think in certain ways, but even so there is potential for changes and new power reforms. As one of our interviewees said, “prejudice is about being bothered by the different”, that is, a concern about the possible change of the existing order. Some of the teachers participating in this research claim they know that they are different because they are a sex minority in the profession, but they wish to break the standardization and prejudice by showing that men can also be committed and capable teachers.

Teachers are the people who are constantly at school and in the face of the

difficulties in the classroom, and they are the ones who can try to improve educational practices and school reality, and who can also boost effective educational transformations. But silence and biased gender representations have been much more present in schools. Therefore, we must formulate some questions about institutional educational practices and about how knowledge areas (including gender) are institutionally mediated.

As Sayão (2005) indicated, considering that boys and girls are born into a culture that produces inequalities to be overcome, the school is capable of progressing in many dimensions, which can be done through debate, the deepening of *gender* category and changes in teacher education. The author realizes “that the teaching work and profession cross gender boundaries, demystify concepts and redefine positions” (SAYÃO, 2005, p. 262).

Thus, I defend the idea that the presence of male teachers in the early grades of primary education is a way of including gender issues in education and demonstrating to children that men can also choose this activity and succeed. In the interviews, teachers stressed that most children (from their classrooms and from others) and their fathers and mothers like (or even prefer) male teachers because, contrary to stereotypes, they realize that they have the skills for the job. This has resulted in the disclosure that neither teaching nor the *traditionally feminine* qualities are specific to women.

In his book on men working in *traditionally female* professions, Williams (1995) concludes that the male presence in such professions cannot directly *transform* gender segregation in the labor market, because despite the prejudice men experience they usually *benefit from* the advantages of masculinity in society, and consequently their strategies for maintaining masculinity end up supporting *hegemonic masculinity*. Few participants of his study did not support hegemonic masculinity; moreover, few of them rejected the dominant expectations of society about what a man

should be like, visualizing their careers in non-traditional professions as a manifestation of their alternative perspectives.

In my work, the teachers interviewed showed that they benefit from the advantages of being a man in our society (after confirming their competence in the profession), which is demonstrated in their easy career progression or in the positive discrimination of men. However, they also resignified aspects that are socially considered feminine, stating that they have affection, patience, gentleness, education, and a knack for dealing with children, among other characteristics.

I do not advocate that there should be more men teaching to provide children with male role models, and I do not deem that the feminization of teaching can cause a lack of male role models. This argument is weak, as shown by Driessen (2007). In his study, the author confirms that the teacher's gender has no effect on the achievement, attitudes or behaviors of students, and stresses that advocating for the need for male role models in school risks simply reinforcing strong sex-role stereotypes. Driessen (2007) concludes that there is no empirical evidence that more men at the head of classrooms leads to better performance and/or more favorable attitudes and behavior on the part of boys and girls. Yet, he indicates that an even distribution of men and women in education should be encouraged, not only in teaching but also in all functions. That is, perhaps we should call for not only more men in teaching, but also more women in management.

I agree on the importance of the balanced distribution of men and women in education (as well as in other work areas) which ensures the equitable presence of women in positions of command and in activities considered masculine, as well as in professions considered feminine, demonstrating that both genders can perform any activities. Finally, we need to discuss our definitions of gender and question what is considered masculine or feminine in our society.

As demonstrated by Welzer-Lang (2001), we need to make room for discussion of a non-heteronormative analysis: which questions our assumptions about men and the masculine; which goes beyond differentialist heterosexism, but offering tools to deconstruct our univocal and very often uniform representations of men and the masculine; which questions the naturalistic assumptions which organize the invisibilization of homosexuals and other forms of masculinity and femininity; which criticizes what the current discourse hides, showing how it reproduces homophobic and sexist values.

The idea that a man is not suitable for teaching children or that, because he likes to work in this area, he is a homosexual person or a pedophile is based on such representations and homophobic and sexist assumptions of masculinity. Therefore, including men in activities deemed feminine can promote discussions about gender representations in society.

It is important to realize that, although men who work in traditionally feminine occupations symbolize an exchange of masculinity, they are not free from prejudice, because, most of them try to differentiate themselves from women and femininity often insisting that men and women are different, as pointed out by Williams (1995) in her study. Thus, in order to establish a sense for their masculine identity, they end up distinguishing themselves from women. However, the children these men (who work in female occupations such as teaching in initial segments) deal with could relate to the presence of new male models in such activities. The observation of these models may begin to modify the definition of masculinity and include in it the so-called *feminine* qualities.

So even though these men have not fully egalitarian conceptions of gender, their presence in these occupations may change the distinctions between men and women – which is an important step towards gender equality. In our research, we have noticed that although several male teachers consider themselves different from women, children like them very much, which probably



leads them not to consider that teaching in the early grades is for women only and that in the future they may consider the possibility of men choosing this career.

Thus, I emphasize that teachers are representatives of both *change* and *stagnation* because they have legitimacy to teach the curriculum. In this sense, hearing the teachers who are an absolute minority in the early grades of primary education allows showing that the aptitude for this profession does not depend

on sex and allows other male voices to rise in education, which emerge in the act of retelling/rewriting the intricacies of their professional choice and practice.

The potential of these new voices shows that discrimination of gender roles in education is caused by social forces but that there may be a resistance to such determinations, which is marked by the success of men in teaching and by the recognition by children and their fathers and mothers.

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