

## Men in childhood education teaching: an analysis from the children's perspective

*Sandro Vinicius Sales dos Santos* 

### ABSTRACT

In this article, the ways in which children attribute meanings to the presence of a male teacher in early childhood education is analyzed. The theoretical-methodological framework articulates new childhood and gender studies, serving as a conceptual basis for an ethnographic study carried out in an early childhood school in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Twenty-five children (7 girls and 18 boys), a female teacher and a male teacher participated in the study. It was identified that the relations established by the teachers were based on gender stereotypes. The female teacher often attributed part of her responsibilities to the male teacher, based on representations of hegemonic masculinity, and causing the children to appropriate these meanings. We conclude that it is not enough to insert men into the teaching of children as a way of producing gender equity policy. In order to combat prejudices based on gender differences, everyone involved must recognize themselves as agents of change.

### KEYWORDS

men; teaching; masculinity; early childhood education; children.

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Universidade Federal dos Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri, Diamantina, MG, Brazil.

## *HOMENS NA DOCÊNCIA DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: UMA ANÁLISE BASEADA NA PERSPECTIVA DAS CRIANÇAS*

### RESUMO

Neste artigo, analisam-se os modos como as crianças atribuem sentidos à presença de um professor homem na educação infantil. O quadro teórico-metodológico articula os novos estudos da infância e os estudos de gênero, servindo como base conceitual de uma etnografia realizada em uma instituição de educação infantil de Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Participaram do estudo 25 crianças (sete meninas e 18 meninos), uma professora e um professor. Identificou-se que as relações vividas pelos docentes se baseavam em estereótipos de gênero. A professora, muitas vezes, atribuía parte de suas responsabilidades ao professor, baseando-se, para tanto, em representações da masculinidade hegemônica, fazendo com que as crianças se apropriassem desses significados. Conclui-se que não basta inserir homens na docência com crianças como forma de produzir uma política de equidade de gênero. Para se combaterem preconceitos baseados em diferenças de gênero, é preciso que todos/as se reconheçam como agentes de mudança.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

homens; docência; masculinidade; educação infantil; crianças.

## *HOMBRES EN LA DOCENCIA DE LA EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL: UN ANÁLISIS DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DE LOS NIÑOS*

### RESUMEN

En este artículo se analizan los modos en que los niños atribuyen significados a la presencia de un docente masculino en la Educación Infantil. El marco teórico-metodológico articula los nuevos estudios de la infancia y los estudios de género, sirviendo como base conceptual para una etnografía realizada en una institución de Educación Infantil en Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Participaron en el estudio 25 niños (7 niñas y 18 niños), una maestra y un maestro. Se identificó que las relaciones vividas por los docentes se basaban en estereotipos de género. La maestra, muchas veces, atribuía parte de sus responsabilidades al maestro, basándose, por lo tanto, en representaciones de la masculinidad hegemónica, haciendo que los niños se apropien de estos significados. Se concluye que no basta insertar hombres en la docencia con niños como forma de producir una política de equidad de género. Para combatir los prejuicios basados en diferencias de género, es necesario que todos/as se reconozcan como agentes de cambio.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

hombres; docencia; masculinidad; educación infantil; niños.

## INTRODUCTION

The presence of male teachers in early childhood education institutions is currently being discussed in the media and even attracting interventions, not always very assertive, by the political class. By gaining strength and expression, the issue has provoked investigation and critical reflection on the part of the academic community, promoting much discussion also in the context of early years settings and preschools.

Despite the still small number of investigations on the presence of male teachers working with young children, these studies have grown quantitatively and qualitatively. This progress is directly related to the advancement of scientific production in the educational field. Among other issues, such production has aimed to understand the processes experienced by boys and girls when they are with each other and in the company of adults, in addition to examining the different variants involved in the public offer of early childhood education, among which the complex gender dimensions permeating the teaching profession in early years settings and preschools stand out.

Theoretical production on men in early childhood teaching (Cruz, 1998; Sayão, 2005; Ramos, 2011; Monteiro and Altmann, 2014; Silva, 2014; Jaeger and Jacques, 2017; Silva *et al.*, 2018; among others) has highlighted the differences demarcated by gender specificities in the relationships established in this field of professional activity. Thus, research has made important contributions to the area, especially at this time in political history, when gender relations have been thrust to the forefront of the national debate, especially in the educational field, driven by ultra-conservative sectors that insist on withdrawing rights historically conquered by minority groups in Brazil<sup>1</sup>.

If, on the one hand, this recent production presents advances in research on the presence/absence of male teachers in education and care for children up to five years old, on the other there is still little research investigating the ways in which boys and girls, the main recipients of the country's early childhood education policy, perceive, understand and relate to the male teachers with whom they spend time with on a daily basis within early years settings and preschools<sup>2</sup>.

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1 The discussion of gender and sexuality has occupied the political agenda since the rise of conservative movements such as *Escola sem Partido (School Without a Party)*, which, among other issues, have sought to reverse gender equality policies — historical achievements of women and homosexual minorities in Brazil. The discussion reached its peak when, in 2019, state congresswomen Janaína Paschoal, Letícia Aguiar and Valeria Bolsonaro (Liberal Social Party — São Paulo — PSL-SP) registered Bill No. 1,174, prohibiting male professionals from providing body hygiene care to babies and young children in early childhood institutions (São Paulo, 2019).

2 By performing a search on the website of the work group Child Education from Zero to Six Years Old (GT 07) of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Education (ANPEd), a single paper was found (Sousa, 2015) that deals with the children's view of male teachers. This shows that the theme constitutes a gap in scientific production concerned with early childhood education.

Therefore, this paper seeks to contribute to the field of studies on male teaching in early childhood education insofar as it intends to highlight the point of view of boys and girls on their relationships with men and women within the institution of early childhood education. As noted, this approach still represents a gap in academic production.

In this sense, we explore the following questions: how do male teachers, in their interaction with teachers and children, enact gender relations? What gender representations<sup>3</sup> emerge from the relationships between men and women co-working as teachers in early years settings and preschools? And: how do children perceive the presence of male teachers in early childhood education? How are the gender relations experienced by adults in the context of early years settings and preschools appropriated by boys and girls?

To discuss these and other issues, this paper, produced with data from a doctoral thesis<sup>4</sup>, seeks to analyze the gender representations arising in everyday relationships in an early childhood education institution, which involve, above all, the ways in which boys and girls perceive the relationships experienced by female and male teachers — a task carried out through an approximation to their reference universes.

The text is divided into four sections. The first presents the methodological design of the study. The second outlines the conceptual contributions of the research. The third presents and discusses the research data produced in dialogues with adults and children during fieldwork, which provide evidence of how the children perceive and attribute meanings to the presence of a male among female teachers. The fourth and final section presents the final remarks, in the hope of contributing to the debate on the presence of male teachers in early years settings. It considers the importance of establishing more equitable relationships, based on respect for differences, and focusing on the multiplicity of subjects interacting daily in early years settings and preschools, especially if we are to view gender issues as necessary for an understanding of social relations inside and outside early childhood education institutions.

## METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES TO UNDERSTAND THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHILDREN ON MALE TEACHING

The desire to understand how children perceive and attribute meaning to the gender representations emanating from the relationships established between the

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3 Symbolic representations of gender comprise the set of culturally organized forms that allow subjects to allude to, classify, show or name themselves, people and things based on the historically built differences between masculinity and femininity (Santos, 2016, 2017).

4 This is the doctoral thesis titled *Socialização de gênero na Educação Infantil: uma análise a partir da perspectiva das crianças* (Gender Socialization in Early Childhood Education: an Analysis from the Perspective of Children) (Santos, 2016), defended in October 2016, in the Graduate Program in Knowledge and Social Inclusion of the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), under the supervision of Isabel de Oliveira e Silva, with financial support from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES).

male and the female teachers of an early childhood education institution posed a double theoretical-methodological challenge. From a theoretical point of view, it was necessary to build contributions capable of increasing visual acuity in view of the specific age of children. Thus, to analyze the meanings produced by five-year-old boys and girls regarding the gender relations experienced within the institution, it was necessary to articulate theories and authors of new childhood studies (Thorne, 1993; Morrow, 2006; Alderson, 2008; among others) with feminist and gender studies authors (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2013; Connell and Pearse, 2015; Connell, 2016; among others).

In line with such theoretical framework, it was equally essential to define a methodological design that would allow approximations with the social meanings produced by children about gender relations. Thus, at the methodological level, it was necessary to undertake an interpretive reading of the children's experience through the alterity of childhood. For that purpose, a design for the investigation was elaborated that enabled an understanding of the specificities of the social experiences of gender lived by adults and children in the institution under study.

An ethnographic study (Spradley, 1979; Geertz, 1989; Graue and Walsh, 2003) was conducted in such institution to address our concern with accessing the perspective of children in order to apprehend the complex and multifaceted ways in which they understand things and, in a sense, experience gender relations, whether in their relationship with peers or in their interactions with adults. The ethnographic descriptions developed in the dialogue with these children allowed us to understand the meanings they “build in their everyday situated actions, that is, situated in the cultural context and in the mutually intentional states of interaction of the participants” (Graue and Walsh, 2003, p. 59).

Fieldwork was carried out from March to December 2015 in a municipal early childhood education school located in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The data production process, within an empirical scope, had the participation of 25 children (18 boys and 7 girls) aged five, the reference female teacher and the support male teacher of the class<sup>5</sup>. In order to access the children's point of view, it was necessary to articulate participant observation and field notebook records with other data production techniques (Cohn, 2005). With that in mind, we had the children produce drawings which, when combined with their statements, allowed us to interpret the different ways in which the gender relations established by their male and female teachers were perceived by boys and girls. In addition, interviews were conducted with children as

5 In the organization of early childhood education in Belo Horizonte, reference teachers are those who are with the class most of the time and generally respond administratively and pedagogically for it. Support teachers, on the other hand, are those who usually “pass by” the class on a daily basis — at the times when the reference teachers leave the classroom for collective activities of planning and evaluation of school work. This time corresponds to one third of the working day and complies with the determination of the *National Education Guidelines and Framework Law* — Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, and Law No. 11, 738, of July 16, 2008 (Brasil, 1996, 2008, respectively).

a way to understand the specificities of gender relations experienced by adults and children in that context. The articulation of data from such research instruments aimed to enable the construction of a dense description (Geertz, 1989) of the social processes that, mediated by gender relations, were experienced by children and their teachers within the institution.

The combination of these different research instruments allowed an interpretive reading of the children's experiences with regard to the gender relations established in teaching by men and women in the institution — which confirms the relevance of data triangulation in research with children (Graue and Walsh, 2003; Rocha, 2008). The analysis of gender relations from different angles (instruments) and from the perspective of different actors (adults and children) allows for a better understanding of the specificities of learning as it relates to the construction of masculinity and femininity, since “a good record of data contains views collected from as many perspectives as possible” (Graue and Walsh, 2003, p. 127).

## PLACING THE ISSUE OF MALE TEACHERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON GENDER AND MASCULINITIES

Studies that show the male presence in early childhood teaching, although not consensual, have some positive points: either because they expand the notions of masculinity in children, since it is the men who provide care (Cruz, 1998), or because they present an optimistic view in relation to professional valorization (Sayão, 2005), or because they demonstrate changes, albeit timid, in everyday relationships between men and women (Jaeger and Jacques, 2017). However, in these same investigations, there is the fear that these professionals might represent danger for children and, therefore, their reputation is questioned within the school community (Ramos, 2017).

There are, however, other specificities involved in this group of emerging research studies in Education. Among their main themes are: the life trajectories of male teachers working in early childhood education (Monteiro and Altmann, 2014; Jaeger and Jacques, 2017); the forms of insertion of male teachers into a mostly female profession (Sayão, 2005; Silva, 2014); and the strategies used by these teachers to remain teaching young children (Ramos, 2011, 2017).

Regarding the choice of profession, Monteiro and Altmann (2014) state that the paths taken by male teachers who decide to take up teaching in early years settings and preschools as a locus of professional activity are heterogeneous. According to them, the reasons why men choose such a profession range from early influence — inspired by the role of close relatives in teaching careers (mothers, aunts, family and friends) — to, in the case of a late arrival to teaching work, a long history marked by different occupations. In spite of this, there are arguably common characteristics in male teachers' insertion in the professional space of education and care for children up to five years and eleven months old.

To Ramos (2011), although they often follow different paths of insertion into the teaching career, they all go through a complex process of acceptance. The author

analyzed how male teachers in the public school network of Belo Horizonte were inserted and sought, daily, to remain in the profession. Ramos (2011) considers that, in addition to the probationary stage — intrinsic to public service —, these professionals go through another type of probationary period in which they have to prove that, in addition to having the skills to care for and educate children, they are reputable subjects with unblemished sexuality and, therefore, incapable of posing risks to the physical and sexual integrity of boys and girls (Ramos, 2011, 2017). The author also argues that this probationary period comprises a set of rituals that enable male teachers to be accepted as a constitutive part of the teaching staff of those institutions.

However, even though male teachers are accepted by the different actors found in early childhood education institutions (teachers, managers, children and family members), they are seen as disparate peers. This is because, although they have proven their pedagogical skills, they are constantly watched due to a supposed threat to the sexuality of boys and girls, either through sexual abuse or by being considered a pernicious reference from the point of view of the production of sexuality in children, especially boys. Therefore, few male teachers manage to prevent differences from becoming inequalities in their interactions with women and children in early years settings, thereby contributing to the construction of more equitable and egalitarian relationships between men and women and adults and children.

As a result of the historical specificities of teaching in early years settings, daily life in these settings and preschools is marked by female representations, and this is expressed in the worldview of professionals. As stated, unlike teaching at other levels of education, in early years settings and preschools teaching has emerged as an effectively female professional occupation, in that it was a social demand of working women welcomed initially by groups of women who were also from the popular classes (Vieira, 1986; Cerisara, 2002). In this way, the environment of the care and education institution “is conceived and organized by women whose conceptions form the set of relationships established there. The representations of female and male with which children relate to are, to a large extent, the representations of their educators” (Silva and Luz, 2010, p. 24).

Thus, when a male professional enters this space of professional activity, he starts to change the gender relations that circulate there (Ramos, 2011), helping to produce new meanings of masculinities and femininities as well as reinforcing social stereotypes. Such a position will depend on how much the subjects (men and women) involved with the early childhood education institution recognize themselves as transforming agents with regard to gender differences.

In this study, boys and girls are conceived as competent social subjects having the potential to intervene in the relationships they find themselves in and equally capable of speaking in their own right (Alderson, 2008; Carlos 2008). In this sense, the presence of a male among a group of female teachers does not go unnoticed by the children, and they come to signify gender relations not only through female representations, but also from the presence of the male teacher and the relationships he establishes with the female teachers.

In this context, the concept of gender and its derivations are configured as theoretical constructs capable of highlighting the variations existing in relationships between female teachers and their disparate peers, the male teachers. Furthermore, they shed light on the ways in which children perceive and signify the gender representations emanating from such social relationships.

As a category of analysis, gender is understood as an everyday performance open to reflection and questioning (West and Zimmerman, 1987). It is, therefore, a construct that, despite being subjective, is simultaneously systematic, recurrent and interpersonally established (Connell and Pearse, 2015). The understanding of gender stems from the appropriation of a set of social practices in which individuals build themselves as men and women, boys and girls, while, in everyday situations, they also build gender relations. Gender is understood, therefore, as a consequence of the weaving of a network of cultural, historical and socially elaborated meanings over and from the ways in which bodies are socially signified, while they are respectively constructed (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell and Pearse, 2015; Connell, 2016).

In the context of early childhood education — a social space structured by adults for children — gender representations are a structuring dimension of social relations. Therefore, gender is understood as a social structure with specific dimensions, in that it focuses on a multiplicity of cultural practices that regulate, adequate and adjust the differences between bodies — men and women, boys and girls (Connell and Pearse, 2015), although it must be recognized that there is a diversity of other ways of permanently and temporarily being in the world that go beyond this dualism<sup>6</sup>.

Connell and Pearse (2015) seek to understand the ways in which agency (which takes place through bodily practices) and social structures interconnect. According to them, gender relations “add to the historical process in which society is embodied and bodies are dragged into history” (Connell and Pearse, 2015, p. 112), a path they call *social embodiment*. Thus, since social practices (which take place in and through bodies) are experienced through the regularity of actions, they contribute to a hardening of the gender structure. The concept of *social embodiment* allows us to understand both the asymmetric insertion of the bodies of men and women in the social dynamics and the introjection of social processes in the bodies of these individuals (Connell, 2016).

To understand *social embodiment*, Connell (2016) explains that human agency (the capacity for social action) must be understood as a corporeal act that, through its regularity, allows the reproduction of the conditioning structures of social relations. Recognizing the regularity of these interactions allows us to understand the societal dynamics resulting from gender differences, in an approach that is capable of identifying the creation of sociocultural realities over time, since “social struc-

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6 It should be noted that we are now witnessing the emergence of different subjects in the social scene and that there are people who do not fit this polarity, as is the case of androgens, transex, intersex, in short, men and women in the process of deconstructing gender binarism.



tures are always in the process of construction, contradiction and transformation” (Connell, 2016, p. 49). Thus, it is understood that:

Social embodiment is not a mere reflection, not just a reproduction, not just a quotation. It is a process that generates, at every moment, new historical realities: new embodied possibilities, experiences, limitations and vulnerabilities for the people involved. (Connell, 2016, p. 49)

Although some theoretical traditions consider the term “gender” to be synonymous with, or even a substitute for, “women”, we cannot forget that men participate, from boyhood, in gender relations, and therefore patterns of masculinity are produced through *social embodiment*. From this perspective, Connell (2016) states that masculinities are patterns socially constructed through social practices arising from gender relations. The author speaks of masculinities (in the plural), as she considers that class, race and ethnicity, regional and generational differences cut across the categories “men” and “masculinities”, distributing the profits and dividends of gender relations unequally between men. In her view, this explains not only the existence of hegemonic masculinity (that which predicts and promotes the domination of men over women), but also of complicit masculinities (not aligned with the hegemonic assumptions of male domination, while still profiting from them) and subordinate masculinities (directly opposed to the hegemonic views of the concept). Although this classification may, in principle, give the false impression of relativizing the concept, it must be taken into account that:

Masculinity is not a fixed entity embodied in the body or personality features of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practices that are carried out in social action and, therefore, can be differentiated according to gender relations in a particular social setting. (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2013, p. 244)

Although boys and men have access to hegemonic or dominant patterns of masculinity through socialization processes<sup>7</sup>, they also have other possibilities of experiencing masculinity, which often involve more egalitarian and respectful relationships with girls and women — as is the case of the male teachers who choose to work in early childhood education.

Thus, by recognizing children’s capacity for social action and active participation in the societal dynamics, we understand that boys and girls can strategically use conventional definitions of dominant masculinities and femininities (Thorne, 1993; Morrow, 2006; Connell, 2016) emanating from the gender relations experienced by female and male teachers instead of being rigidly regulated by them.

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7 Gender socialization consists of the combination of different socialization processes with a view to produce engendered subjects. In the conjugation of these processes, children, as active subjects, interact with adults, with their peers, with culture and society from an ambiguous, conflicting and sometimes contradictory frame of reference (Santos, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Boys and girls are considered to be active subjects who, both individually and in the sphere of collective life, become able to speak, on their own merits, about the social experiences they share with their peers and adults (Alderson, 2008; Carlos 2008; Connell, 2016). They do not behave passively in the socialization processes they experience, since actions shape social practices. Boys and girls extract senses and meanings from a broad cultural framework (which involves, among other factors, language, material and symbolic elements, institutions and diversified social structures), and may (or not) be strongly restricted by them. This perspective is useful when the presence of male teachers is viewed as a factor that changes the configuration of the gender structure in an early childhood education institution (Santos, 2016).

It must be recognized, therefore, that masculinities are produced over time from the appropriations that children and young people make of gender relations. And, because gender structures differ between societies and social groups by changing over time (Connell, 2016), there will be a diversity of representations of masculinities when children in an early childhood education institution are faced with the presence of a man among the teachers.

## LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE MALE PRESENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE PRODUCTION OF GENDER EQUITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Given that gender is a relational category, the presence of men as teachers of young children is assumed to be given meaning not only by these subjects. Women and children, when interacting with these professionals in everyday life, produce meanings and contribute to the weaving of a semiotic network (Geertz, 1989) regarding the male presence in early childhood education, which is constituted from the reference universes of this collective.

Connell (2016) considers that the construction of masculinities involves the social position of men combined with their life stories. Such dimensions, when associated with the set of social experiences they encounter, constitute the main locus of production of masculinities. Thus, the relationships fostered by the male and female teacher in the context of early childhood education are appropriated by children, who start to partake of the social meanings circulating there. The representations of male and female that emerge from the relationships established by male and female teachers do not go unnoticed and are indeed apprehended by the children. During the conversation about the drawing task, some children made it clear that teacher Anselmo<sup>8</sup> had more “control” and vigilance over them than teacher Vania, as can be seen in some of the children’s statements connected with their drawings (Figures 1 and 2):

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8 For ethical reasons, the names of the participants (adults and children) were replaced by fictitious names to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided to the interlocutors.

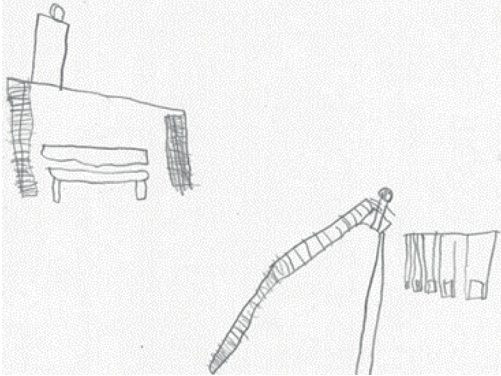


Figure 1 – Vitorio's drawing.

Researcher: – *And which teacher do you like most at school?*

Vitorio: – *Anselmo.*

Researcher: – *And why do you like him more?*

Vitorio: – *Ob... it's like that... he's angrier than Vania. He curses more. He curses even when Vania calls him to argue with us. It's just that he brings us some cool games.* (Vitorio — drawing: "Me at School", August 25, 2015).

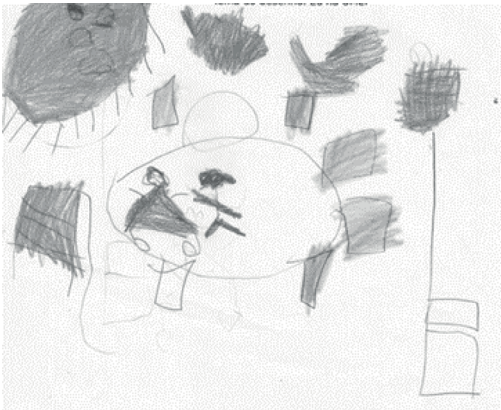


Figure 2 – Karolina's drawing.

Researcher: – *And what about adults? Who is your favorite adult at school?*

Karolina: – *Hmm... Vania. I only like Vania.*

Researcher: – *Only her? And nobody else?*

Karolina: – *Ab, there's Anselmo... I do like him, the only thing is that he gets mad at the kids, sometimes.* (Karolina — drawing: "Me at School", August 25, 2015).

This perception of greater control and a more rigorous posture of teacher Anselmo as compared to teacher Vania was also the subject of reflection in the interviews with the children: "*Anselmo is much angrier than Vania. He always talks angrily with us. If we make a mess, Vania calls him*" (Glaucaia, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015); "*Anselmo punishes me from time to time. When I say I didn't do my homework, Anselmo punishes me. Sometimes even Vania asks him to ground me*" (Saulo, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015).

These excerpts provide evidence that, in many cases, what distinguishes and differentiates women and men in daily interactions is justified by representations that, although symbolic, are not necessarily understood in the field of social constructions, of which men and women, boys and girls are an active part — a factor that contributes to the naturalization of these differences. Thus, both in the dialogues that followed Vitorio and Karolina's drawings and in the interviews with Glaucaia and Saulo, two factors are revealed about the relationships fostered by the teachers: teacher Anselmo is stricter than his professional partner, and teacher Vania makes a

concession when she uses this supposed authority of her colleague with the children as a control mechanism for their behavior.

The above data shows that, in this study, the presence of a male teacher — finely adapted to the requirements of the institutional collective and therefore accepted by the school community (Ramos, 2011), as a result also responsible for the care and education of children in the institution under study — brings new implications for the reflection on gender representations circulating in such environment. The relationships established between the male and female teacher produce representations about masculinities and femininities that, if not questioned and reflected on collectively, can contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes derived from other social contexts in early years settings and pre-schools. The following account demonstrates how the teacher, in certain daily situations, transferred to the male teacher responsibilities that were hers as the reference teacher for that class. She often associated rigor, control and authority with teacher Anselmo — images commonly associated with representations of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2013) — as a way of bargaining for the good behavior of children, seeking to maintain control over the actions of boys and girls:

*As this morning was very windy, teacher Vania decided not to take the children to the playground. She decided to play a movie in the video room. After the DVD ended, the boys and girls asked the teacher if everyone could go to the playground. Teacher Vania told them that, first, they would write a card in celebration of Mother's Day. The teacher said that she could try to "convince" teacher Anselmo to take the class to the playground if everyone behaved correctly. The children calmed down for a moment, but soon returned to playing games and having other interactions with each other. As they were very restless at the end of the card-making activity and it was almost 10 am (teacher Anselmo's time to take over the class), teacher Vania, in order for the children to be quieter and calmer, spoke in a loud tone to the whole class:*

*Teacher Vania: "Guys, folks... Anselmo is already on his way. Ouch... oh... he will not like this behavior at all. And that's how you want me to convince him, right?". The children then began to settle down and bow their heads awaiting the arrival of Anselmo, who, at Vania's request, did not take the group to the playground due to bad behavior. (Notes from Field Notebook, 7 May, 2015).*

As can be seen in this account, the teacher told the children twice that the person who would decide whether they would (or would not) go to the playground would be teacher Anselmo. At first, when the children asked to play outside, the teacher said that she could "try to convince teacher Anselmo to take the class to the playground if everyone behaved correctly". Later, after the children had finished making cards in celebration of Mother's Day, in view of their restlessness, the teacher reaffirmed the "hypothetical power" of Anselmo to decide whether he would take them to the playground by saying: "Guys, folks... Anselmo is already on

*his way. Ouch... oh... he will not like this behavior at all. And that's how you want me to convince him, right?"*

In both situations, Vania uses Anselmo's "supposed power" to organize the children's good behavior. This shows that, from a very early age, children in education institutions are presented with representations that promote the idea that the differentiation between male and female is marked by essentialist and distinct notions such as that "women are, by nature, more delicate, docile and apt to take care of children than men. These, in turn, are represented by virility, strength and courage, unnecessary attributes for education and care for children" (Jaeger and Jacques, 2017, p. 546-547).

During the interviews, the male and female teacher in a sense confirmed what was registered through participant observation. When asked about how they saw the children's relationship with their colleague, Anselmo's and Vania's answers allow us to interpret their relationship as suggesting ways, sometimes stereotyped, of representing masculinities and femininities. According to the teachers:

*It looks like a family relationship, father and mother. I am that person who... I will always give in. Often, I will do or say something and the children will go: "No, teacher, oh, but Anselmo..." Then I say: "When Anselmo arrives, I'll ask him if you deserve it!". Then, for example, Mário says: "Oh!!! So we won't!". (Teacher Vania, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015)*

*I think this is something that comes (more or less) from home. I think it's in our culture that it's the father who sets the order, imposes respect. The mother is always more loving, more welcoming. And in the classroom, that's really clear. It's really clear when Vania brings up these everyday situations. (Teacher Anselmo, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015)*

In these interview excerpts, teacher Vania claims Anselmo has more control or "command" over the children's behavior than she does. She even confirms that she uses the teacher's "supposed" position of authority over the children when reporting what she says to Mario, one of the students: "*When Anselmo arrives, I will ask him if you deserve it!*". Anselmo, in turn, justifies his actions and assertions alleging that these attitudes, both his and hers, belong to the order of cultural productions: it "*is in our culture itself; that it is the father who sets the order, imposes respect. The mother is always more loving, more welcoming*". The reflections carried out by the male and female teacher during the interviews point to the fact that such actions are

a product of a culture, of the social relations in which [she] was socialized and in which [she] learned/built references about female and male, about what is allowed and what is not allowed for boys and girls. She seems to oscillate between the professional and the mother, as two identities that come into conflict with regard to educational practices involving boys and girls. (Silva and Luz, 2010, p. 35)

Thus, the pedagogical relationships between children and adults in early childhood education (which articulate social practices of care and education)

are produced by the teachers who organize them, based on conceptions from “broader social experiences, in which the educators [men and women] build their conceptions of male and female” (Silva and Luz, 2010, p. 27). Like the female teachers participating in the study by Silva and Luz (2010), it is clear that teacher Anselmo takes a stance towards children that alternates between a professional and a fatherly figure.

The set of data produced in the fieldwork shows two important issues involved in men’s insertion in early childhood teaching. The research excerpts presented show that the male teacher, in many situations, demarcates his difference in relation to female teachers by resorting to a hard pedagogy, that is, a set of educational and care practices differing from those performed by women, in that they are guided by elements of hegemonic masculinity and therefore marked by rigidity, authority and, above all, discipline and control of children’s bodies. Thus, although accepted by the different social actors present in early childhood education (teachers, children, fathers, mothers and relatives, managers, among others), male teachers present themselves as disparate peers insofar as they, together with the female teachers, tend to reinforce this difference.

The second issue, which arises from the first, concerns the lack of an institutional debate on gender in the investigated context, especially given that a male teacher therein works in the care and education of children up to five years old. We must stress not only the need for gender issues to figure in the pedagogical project of institutions, but for them to be the target of debate and critical reflection by teachers (men and women), thus operating as a driving force for the construction of a more egalitarian and fair society and expressing a project of human education that does not allow difference to be turned into inequality.

In short, through an approximation with the reference universes of boys and girls, as well as the perceptions they have about the gender relations built by their teachers in early childhood education, we have come to the conclusion that having men in the teaching profession is not enough; education professionals in general (men and women) ought to recognize themselves as agents of change where gender relations are concerned.

## AFTER ALL, ARE MEN NEEDED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHING?

This paper problematizes the ways in which, on a daily basis, boys and girls, men and women produce meanings about male teaching in the context of early childhood education. It is evident that male teachers, when inserted in a professional environment built by women, and due to a social demand of their own, alter the social relations that occur there.

It is understood that “teaching in Early Childhood Education is built through the daily work of men and women, and is not determined by a gender structure” (Jaeger and Jacques, 2017, p. 550), yet it is decisive for the genesis of the teaching function in early years settings and preschools, since it is a professional activity originally conceived, produced and exercised by women. In this way, as everyday constructions, the relationships between men and women can evoke

different expressions of masculinity and femininity as a result of processes that, in addition to being relational, assume pedagogical potential insofar as they contain varied possibilities of being permanently and temporarily in the world, with views of gender relations that can be introduced to children from an early age. However, it is necessary to know about the social place occupied by men and women who propose to care for and educate children and what the possibilities are of fully performing this task without reproducing social stereotypes around masculinities and femininities.

It is important to underline that gender relations, as they are fluid and dynamic, are experienced in early childhood education in ambiguous and sometimes contradictory ways by different subjects (adults and children, boys and girls, men and women). Therefore, gender issues as well as the debate on the presence of male teachers should be effectively included in the work plan of teachers (as well as in the pedagogical projects of early childhood education institutions), contrary to the position of sectors of society which, at present, mobilize and demand the suppression of the expression “gender ideology” from the curricula of care and education institutions.

In short, it does not suffice to include male professionals in the teaching of young children as a way to produce a gender equity policy. To combat prejudices based on gender representations, it is not enough to ensure the presence of male teachers in the education and care provided within early childhood education; it is not enough to be a man or a woman, because, beyond the human condition, respect for differences — of any nature — must be a permanent discussion in any of the stages of people’s education (not just in the context of school education), but above all it must be the object of constant debate in early childhood education.

In this process, all without distinction, men and women, must be imbued with the desire for change and recognize themselves as subjects involved in social transformation, especially with regard to the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of social gender relations.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRO VINICIUS SALES DOS SANTOS has a doctorate in Education from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). He is a professor at the Universidade Federal dos Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri (UFVJM).

*E-mail:* sandrovssantos@gmail.com

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