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This case study focuses on Brazilian ECEC aiming to understand children’s perspectives on their teachers through a gender lens. Brazilian society, much like that of other Latin American countries, emerged from a binary division of gender and sexuality based on heteronormative ideals and patriarchy (Lugones, 2016; Dimenstein, et al., 2020). Stereotypical ideas prevail and have consequences for gender construction in ECEC (Reis, 2016). This qualitative study is based on gender as a social construction, situational, fluid, and performative, while subject to reflection and questioning (Butler, 1990; Connell & Pearse, 2015). A Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017) was conducted by using observation open-ended interviews with pictures and drawings as photo elicitation with 15 children, a parent questionnaire, and teacher interviews with female and male teachers. Thematic analysis of data was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Information letters and consent forms were provided to all participants, including children, parents, and staff. A negotiated consent process was employed during data collection, and data were anonymized. Preliminary findings indicate that children perceive their male teacher to engage in play, while the female teacher to teach. Results demonstrate how children construct and deconstruct gender in relation to home and the ECEC setting. Male teachers can illustrate to children that care is not inherently gendered. ECEC institutions play a crucial role for the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Consequently, there is a pressing need to advocate for Brazilian public ECEC policies that integrate gender into official curricula and incorporate gender and sexuality themes into teacher training.

Keywords

ECEC, children, Brazilian, teacher, gender

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“He Plays and She Teaches”: Perspectives of Brazilian Children on their Teachers

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Overview

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Introduction

This presentation focuses on a case study where we sought to understand children's views of their ECEC teachers through a gender lens in a Brazilian context.

The international research project **Children's Perspectives on their Teachers (CPT) Who Identify as Men or Women** frames this presentation.

Research Questions in the CPT project:

- 1) What are young children's perspectives of their teachers who identify as men and women?
- 2) How are the immediate and broader socio-cultural contexts surrounding early childhood settings reflected in young children's perspectives on gender?

Theoretical framework

Children's agency:

We start from the assumption that children are competent social actors with a strong potential for active participation in the relationships in which they are involved. They can express their perspectives and are equally capable of speaking for themselves (Alderson, 2008).

Gender as a theoretical concept:

Gender is a construction that, although subjective, is systematic, recurrent, and established in an interpersonal manner. It is also understood as a product of a broad, complex network of meanings. Conceptions of gender are even constructed and deconstructed based on different ways in which bodies are socially and historically perceived (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

Methods



We approach the Brazilian context through a gender lens based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Onwuegbuzie, 2013). It allows us to understand how macro, meso and micro contexts may shape children's perspectives on their teachers in ECEC.

The mosaic approach guided the data collection process (Clark & Moss, 2017).

- *Observation with field notes of the setting.*
- *Interviews with children (15 children between 4-5 years old) and adults (a male teacher, a female teacher, a pedagogical coordinator, a vice-principal, a questionnaire with children's parents).*
- *Photos taken by children.*
- *Drawings.*

Ethical considerations: The research project obtained ethical approval from London College. Children also gave assent to their participation, and adults gave informed consent. Children's needs and requests were respected during the data collection. Data was anonymized.

A thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes from the empirical data collected during fieldwork (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Background – A Brazilian context

Macro: The Brazilian society is formed based on a patriarchy inherited from colonialism. Binary gender structures permeate different areas of society (Lugones, 2016; Dimenstein et al., 2020). Besides some achievements, Brazil still strives to guarantee gender equality/equity rights. A growing conservative wave negatively affects gender discussions in society, preschools and schools (Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). Gender and sexuality are neither subjects in the curriculum nor the teacher training programme. There are no active national educational policies, only a few local initiatives.

Meso: The ECEC setting is located in a big city in Brazil (over 2.7 million people). It is localized in a large area with families from different socio-economic backgrounds and family formations.

Micro: The female teacher is the primary teacher and spends more time with the children. The male teacher works as a co-teacher who stays with the children for hours during the day.

There is no systematic work on gender in the setting. The pedagogical work is mainly based on children's curiosity. Most families appreciate that male teachers work in the preschool, but there are few adverse reactions based on cultural beliefs against men working with small children.

Findings

We identified common patterns during the analysis process, which allowed us to create three themes:

- Children's perspectives on their teachers: "He plays; she teaches".
- Children's perspectives on gender constructions and deconstructions in ECEC.
- Children's perspectives on caring relationships with their teachers.

Children's perspectives on their teachers: “He plays; she teaches”

The findings suggest that children perceive a division of pedagogical work in the group. Maria, the female teacher, is the one who teaches, and José, the male teacher, plays with them.

Researcher: What did you draw, Douglas?

Douglas (boy) : We are playing with the bingo of letters.

Researcher: And who is playing with you? Who prepared this game?

Douglas (boy): Maria.

Researcher: But your colleagues are saying that it is José who plays mostly with you.

Douglas (boy) : We play with him on the playground, and we play learning games with Maria.

Researcher: And is there any difference?

Douglas (boy): We learn things like letters and numbers when we are playing learning games.

Children's perspectives on gender constructions and deconstructions in ECEC

ECEC serves as a social arena where children can experience and construct different understandings of gender when they freely can choose which kind of toy they can play with, allowing them to challenge gender-stereotyped ideas connected to certain toys. These possibilities are evident in the children's statements:

Lia (girl): Here at school... we can [play with cars]. Maria always allows us to do that.

Eduardo (boy): Here at school... the teachers let us play whatever we want. Those who want to play with cars can do so, and those who want to play with dolls can do that, too.

Children's statements also reveal the convergence and tension in the gender socialization they experience in the ECEC setting and other social contexts, such as their meso context (family, peer group, neighborhood, etc.).

Julia (girl) : Maria allows us to [play with cars], but my mother says that playing with cars is not for girls.

Luan (boy) : Maria always says we are allowed [to play with dolls]. My grandmother says boys cannot do that, but Maria says I can.

Children's perspectives on caring relationships with their teachers

Children's statements illustrate how the presence of men in ECEC challenges stereotypical gender representations (Sumsion, 2005) when they can meet diverse types of masculinities, especially the ones closer to a more caring masculinity:

Harold: José's [the male teacher] hug is different. My dad does not hug me. José is a man like my daddy, but he hugs us anyway.

Manuela: My daddy hugs me, but not so much; my mom hugs me more. However, José has to hug us! I think that is cool!

Children also express how female and male teachers have different approaches towards them, particularly concerning group control and discipline:

Nando (boy): José is kinder, Maria is as well. However, she gets upset when we make a mess in the class.

Amanda (girl): Ah, José is kind. Maria teaches the most but is usually angry and often reprimands us.

Discussion



The male teacher is often associated with the larger spaces of the ECEC setting, such as the playground. In contrast, the female teacher is more connected to the classroom context. The findings align with previous studies (Sumsion, 2005; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018) that show a similar division of roles in the pedagogical work in ECEC settings.

We argue that such a division can perpetuate gender stereotypes by assigning different roles to male and female teachers (Nielsen, 2017). Therefore, how teachers organize and divide pedagogical work in the group contributes to how children construct their understandings of the roles their female and male teachers have in the ECEC setting.

The case study illustrates how including a male teacher in the ECEC setting can contribute to constructing alternative expressions of masculinity. This occurs when the male teacher distances himself from hegemonic masculinity by engaging in play, showing affection, and demonstrating caring practices toward the children.

Brazil's cultural and historical context is particularly relevant, shedding light on how deeply ingrained and rigid gender assumptions rooted in colonialism and patriarchy can reflect in children's perceptions of gender based on their families' beliefs.

The findings suggest that children understand that more flexible constructions of gender identities are possible and can be experienced in the ECEC setting, emphasizing the essential role of the ECEC in challenging and problematizing gender stereotypes that children bring from outside. Based on children's statements, the findings show that teachers allow children to play with all kinds of toys, such as dolls and cars, regardless of gender.

Conclusions

We argue that continuous gender diversity policies, discussions, and ongoing training for ECEC professionals are essential to effectively support their pedagogical work with children in Brazil. These policies should encompass various aspects, including integrating gender into the official early childhood education curricula and incorporating themes related to gender and sexuality into teacher training programmes.

However, it remains a challenge when teachers need to address conservative thoughts and cultural beliefs that oppose the discussion of gender in ECEC settings by themselves. In this case, it is essential that teachers receive support and do not bear the sole responsibility for approaching families and other external groups regarding pedagogical gender issues.

Therefore, it is vital that questions about gender be included in the local pedagogical plan of the ECEC settings and that teachers receive support from principals when addressing gender as a subject with children and their families.

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Thank you!



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