

Gonçalves, Ricardo & Sales dos Santos, Sandro Vinicius (2026). **Children's gender constructions in Brazil**. Paper presented on the 34th Annual EECERA Conference, Funchal/Madeira, Portugal, 27.8.2026.

Abstract

This paper explores how four-year-old children in a Brazilian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting construct gender. Traditional beliefs and conservative ideas that can reinforce gender stereotypes are prevalent in many spheres in Brazil and may have consequences on how children construct gender in ECEC (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). Gender is used as a theoretical approach to understand that children's different notions of gender are shaped by the social practices through which they are socialised and by the contexts in which they participate (Connell & Pearse, 2015). A qualitative case study was conducted, including observations and interviews with 15 children, their female and male teachers, and other adults closed to the children both inside and outside the ECEC setting. Data analysis was performed through thematic analysis with an inductive approach. Participants were informed both orally and in writing; their anonymity was maintained, and consent was negotiated throughout the research process. The findings show how the organisation of pedagogical activities and the varied roles taken by male and female teachers may shape children's ideas about gender. Children's interactions with teachers and adults reveal that stereotypical gender beliefs are both reinforced and challenged during play and other activities in the ECEC environment. These results suggest that the lack of a systematic pedagogical focus on gender may impact children's perceptions of gender when they interact with adults and even other children in ECEC. Broader educational policies addressing gender, together with ongoing teacher training in Brazil, can support children in expanding the diverse ways in which they construct gender.

Keywords

gender, Brazil, constructions, children, context

Presenter:

Ricardo Gonçalves, Uppsala University, Sweden

Non-presenting authors:

Sandro Vinicius Sales dos Santos, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Children's gender constructions in Brazil

Ricardo Gonçalves de Sousa – Uppsala University (Sweden)

Sandro Vinicius Sales dos Santos - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brazil)

Overview

- Introduction
- Background – A Brazilian context
- Theoretical framework
- Methods
- Findings
- Discussion
- Conclusions



Introduction

- This presentation focuses on a case study where we sought to understand children's different ways of constructing gender in a Brazilian ECEC setting.
- **Research questions:**
- 1) How do children construct gender in the interplay with their teachers in ECEC spaces?
- 2) How can children's interactions with adults inside and outside the ECEC setting affect their gender constructions?



Background

- From a macro- and historical perspective, perceptions of gender in Brazilian society are shaped by colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy, which remain embedded in social and political structures, reinforcing stereotypical gender ideas (Dimenstein et al., 2020; Lugones, 2016).
- Brazil, like other Latin American countries, has experienced significant developments that have problematised a binary, heteronormative conception of gender and sexuality.
- Despite the democratisation and expansion of public education in Brazil during the 21st century and the introduction of protective laws that strengthened children's rights, the country has also seen a conservative backlash in the educational field in recent decades (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023).
- The influence of conservative groups, such as the one called "School without a Party," on politics has negatively impacted the development of projects that promote progressive discussions of gender and sexuality in Brazilian educational settings (Moura & Salles, 2018).
- Previous studies reveal a lack of systematic pedagogical attention to gender in ECEC settings in Brazil and that gender-related questions are not actively discussed during university training (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). Since gender isn't part of the curriculum, teachers rely on their personal experiences and beliefs to address children's gender-related issues.



Theoretical framework

In this study, **gender is used as a theoretical approach** to shed light on how children can construct different notions of gender that **emanate from their social relationships** with adults both within and outside an ECEC setting.

Gender is viewed as performance, created and reproduced through daily actions and subject to reflection (Butler, 1999). While subjective, it is also systematic and relational (Connell & Pearce, 2015), shaping individuals as men, women, boys, girls, or other categories beyond binaries.

Gender is understood, therefore, as a consequence of cultural, historical, and socially elaborated meanings of how bodies are socially signified (Connell & Pearce, 2015; Connell, 2016; West & Zimmerman, 1987).



Methods

- We used a mosaic approach during data collection (Clark & Moss, 2017). The mosaic approach, developed by Clark and Moss, is a method that enables researchers to capture young children's voices through multiple data collection methods to create a comprehensive picture of children's perspectives.
- *Participant observation* documented by fieldnotes at the beginning of the fieldwork.
- *Interviews with children* (15 four-year-old children) *and adults* (a male teacher, a female teacher, a pedagogical coordinator, a vice-principal, a questionnaire with children's family members).
- *Photos taken by children.*
- *Drawings.*
- An inductive approach and a thematic analysis were employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns from the empirical data collected during fieldwork (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



1) Children's gender constructions based on teachers' roles in the ECEC setting

Findings from children's utterances indicate that when they perceive male and female teachers as taking different roles in the ECEC setting, this can shape how they construct notions of gender. They also associate different teachers' roles with different spaces; for example, the male teacher is often with them during outdoor activities, while the female teacher is responsible for giving them pedagogical activities in the class.



Researcher: What do you like to do in the ECEC setting?

Bianca (girl): We come here to play, have fun and learn things, many things.

Researcher: You have many teachers here, right? Which one do you like to play with most?

Bianca (girl): I like Cleber (male) and Helena (female).

Researcher: And why do you like them?

Bianca (girl): It's because they take care of us!

Researcher: How?

Bianca (girl): We learn to write our names with Helena. We like to play with Cleber in the playground. He is funny!



The playful role mostly associated with male teachers is also expressed by the female teacher when she speaks about the division of the pedagogical work in the class:

Helena (female teacher): The division of work in the class depends on the person we work with. For example, if you find a male teacher who genuinely enjoys teaching, that's different from someone who only wants to play.

The male teacher also expresses that females and males can have different attributes that may affect how they approach and work with children:

Cleber (male teacher): I think that there is a difference between how male and female teachers work. I can see here in the school that women, for example, like decorating things, tend to decorate excessively, and worry too much about certain things.



2) Children's gender constructions based on their interactions with teachers

In the investigated ECEC setting, the gender socialisation experienced by the children, especially in the presence of men working in care and education practices, sometimes aligns with, and sometimes distances itself from, the gender socialisation experienced in other social contexts outside the ECEC. Children also perceive the male teacher as less disciplinarian than the female teacher.

Hélio (boy): Cleber's hug is different. My father does not hug me. But Cleber is a man, just like my father, and he hugs us.

Marcela (girl): My father hugs me, but just a little; my mother hugs me more. But Cleber has to hug us! I think that is cool!.

Nuno (boy): Cleber is nicer. Helena is nice too. But she gets upset when we make a mess in the class.

Ana Maria (girl): Ah, Cleber is good. Helena is the one who teaches the most, but she is angry. She is telling us off a lot.



Children learn and apprehend the world around them and become aware of the complexity that governs it from the relationships they establish with others (both adults and children) in their social practices. In this way, how children attribute meanings to the teachers' care relations can sometimes diverge from adults' views, as stated below:

Valéria (pedagogical coordinator): When we think about the differences between the teachers, I think that the female ones tend to show children more affection than the male ones.

Joana (vice-principal): It is strongly associated with care in the feminine sphere, and the man is the one who helps; he is, like, doing ... like... helping.



3) Children's gender constructions shaped by adults inside and outside the ECEC setting

The findings show that children construct gender through their interactions with adults around them when they perceive expectations based on stereotyped gender assumptions.

Vilma (girl): Look, can I tell you something? There are times when Evelyn and Stéphane from the other class come here. They fight with us. They even show us their middle finger. When they do this, Helena says, "You behave like a boy!"



In the ECEC setting, children can explore different options for constructing gender, challenging cultural beliefs and fixed gender norms they encounter outside it.

Juliana (girl): Our teachers even let us play with a car, but mom says it is not a girl's toy.

Enzo (boy): Here, in the ECEC setting, the teachers let us play whatever we want. Those who want to play with cars can do it, and those who want to play with dolls can do that too.

Lenilson (boy): The teacher Helena always says that we boys can play with the dolls. My grandmother says I cannot do that.

Families initiate children into cultural norms, including gender stereotypes, as we can see in the children's utterances. In the questionnaire sent to families, when we asked, "In what ways do you think gender has an impact on how children are raised?" some family members answered the question mostly in relation to how children should play and should be:

Mother of one child: Boys play with boys' things and girls with girls' things.

Mother of one child: In my family, for example, the older ones always say that girls wear pink and boys blue.

Older sister of one child: The adults sometimes impose what boys and girls should be. Boys should play with balls, and girls should only play with dolls.



Discussion

- The male teacher is often associated with larger ECEC spaces like the playground, while the female teacher is more associated with the classroom. These findings align with previous studies (Sumsion, 2005; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018) showing similar role divisions.
- We argue that dividing roles can reinforce gender stereotypes by assigning different roles to male and female teachers. How teachers organise pedagogical work influences how children perceive the roles of their female and male teachers in ECEC settings.
- The case study shows how a male teacher in ECEC contributes to shaping alternative masculinity by engaging in play, showing affection, and caring for children, distancing himself from hegemonic masculinity.
- Brazil's cultural and historical context is particularly relevant, shedding light on how deeply stereotyped and rigid gender assumptions, rooted in colonialism and patriarchy, can shape children's perceptions of gender, influenced by their families' beliefs.
- The findings suggest children understand flexible gender identities can be experienced in ECEC, highlighting its role in challenging stereotypes children bring from outside.



Conclusions

- We argue that ongoing gender diversity policies, discussions, and training for ECEC professionals are essential for supporting their work with children in Brazil. These should include integrating gender into curricula and addressing gender and sexuality in teacher training.
- It remains challenging when children encounter conservative beliefs that oppose flexible gender constructions in ECEC. Teachers need support and should not bear sole responsibility for engaging families and external groups on pedagogical gender issues.
- Therefore, it is vital that questions about gender be included in the local pedagogical plan for ECEC settings and that teachers receive support from principals when addressing gender with children and their families.



References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London, Routledge.
- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2017). *Listening to young children: a guide to understanding and using the mosaic approach* (3rd edition., p. 192). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Connell, R. (2016). *Gênero em termos reais* [Gender in real terms] . nVersos.
- Connell, R., & Pearse, R. (2015). *Gênero: uma perspectiva global*[Gender: a global perspective]. nVersos.
- Dimenstein, M., Silva, G. N., Dantas, C., Sales Macedo, J. P., Leite, J. F. & Filho, A. A. (2020). *Gênero na perspectiva decolonial: revisão integrativa no cenário latino-americano* [Gender from a decolonial perspective: a literature review of Latin American scenario] *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 28, n. 3.
- Huber, J. & Traxl, B. (2018). Pedagogical differences and similarities between male and female educators, and their impact on boys’ and girls’ behavior in early childhood education and care institutions in Austria, *Research Papers in Education*, 33:4, 452–471.
- Lugones, M. (2011). *Hacia un feminismo descolonial* [There was a decolonial feminism]. La Manzana de la Discordia, 6(2), 105–119.
- Moura, F. P., & Salles, D. C. (2018). A escola sem partido e o ódio aos professores que formam crianças (des)viadas [The school without party and hate against teachers who educate deviant children]. *Periódicus*, 1(9), 136–160.
- Sousa, R. G., & Nogueira, N. A. S. (2023). Gender and sexuality in early childhood education in Brazil. In Bhana, D., Xu. Y, Adriany. V, *Gendered and Sexual Norms in Global South Early Childhood Education: Understanding Normative Discourses in Post-Colonial Contexts*. Routledge.
- Sumsion, J. (2005). Male teachers in early childhood education: Issues and case study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 20(1), 109–123.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151.



Thank you!

Ricardo Gonçalves de Sousa: ricardo.goncalves@edu.uu.se

Sandro Vinicius Sales dos Santos: sandrovssantos@gmail.com



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET