

# **Narratives about the insertion of male teachers in the early childhood education: deviant sexualities, heteronormativity and masculinization of the education**

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## **Abstract**

*Based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Oral History and Gender as an analytical category, this article analyzes the insertion of male teachers in Early Childhood Education. Two physical education teachers and two directors of the private school system participated in this study. From the memories of the deponents it was possible to perceive that the presence of men in Early Childhood Education was legitimized by the 'need' of a masculine reference for the children. Despite this, the deponents reported that they had their sexuality put under suspicion, after all, they would be breaking gender norms for the male gender.*

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education. Gender relations. Male teacher.

## **1. Introduction**

The desire to understand gender relations in the process of insertion of male teachers in early childhood education, an environment conceived historically and culturally as female-dominated, is what motivates this study. The interest in this subject emerged at the time of my first insertion in a school where there were, sovereignly<sup>1</sup>, female teachers, and being a man put me under suspicion. My presence caused a feeling of discomfort among the students' families and thus, insecurity among the school board. These feelings displayed their discomfort and doubts regarding my actions which suggested that my being in that

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<sup>1</sup> The theme, problematization and analysis of this study have no intention to place men in a condition of vulnerability or victimization, let alone to subjugate the historical importance of women in the field of Education. Although this text departs, to a certain extent, from the complaint about the obstacles to the insertion and maintenance of male teachers in Early Childhood Education, it is not intended to place women in privileged condition. When we use concepts from Gender Studies in this text, we politically place ourselves in a field of research that is highly connected to feminist movements and confrontations with the asymmetrical relations of power that, in general, privilege men to the detriment of women.

environment required constant supervision.

Far from being an isolated case, the discomfort stemming from my process of inclusion in Early Childhood Education was shared by other teachers, which led to an initial search for reports that allowed the understanding of this phenomenon. These reports demonstrated that in schools where there was greater parental interference, the inclusion of male teachers became more problematic. In this regard, attention was focused on private schools, where questions and suspicions concerning male teachers seemed more evident.

In a preliminary survey, only two male teachers were identified in the sphere of private schools who work with Early Childhood Education in a county of approximately 240 thousand inhabitants<sup>2</sup>. This data indicates possible obstacles when it comes to recruiting male teachers at this stage of basic education. Another observed factor points out that, as the teachers remained at the schools, the discomfort caused by their presences became more tenuous. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the beginning of teaching at Early Childhood Education schools was favored since it is when gender barriers seem to be greater. For this text, the two male Physical Education teachers previously mentioned and two female directors, who followed the process of insertion of these teachers in the schools, were heard.

Thus, this article analyzes the gender relations in the process of insertion of male teachers in private schools of early childhood in a county in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil).

### **1.1 Methodology**

Based on the Oral History theories and methodologies, interviews were conducted<sup>3</sup> with two male teachers and two female directors who followed the process of insertion of the teachers in the schools. As a technique, method and source of research, Oral History allows narrating stories and reconstructing memories<sup>4</sup> (ROUSSO, 1996). The reports of the collaborators of this research are conceived as narratives permeated by other memories, oblivion and by the strong "presence of the past in the immediate present of people" (MEIHY, 1998, p.13). Hence, the material nature of memory evidenced in the interview transcription constitutes possible versions which allow us, in articulation with the gender concept and through "Content Analysis", to narrate one of many interpretations of the text that follows (JENKINS, 2004).

Content analysis, as a set of communication study techniques, permits, through means of its procedures, an overview of the content of the reports of the deponents, leading their organization into analytical units (BARDIN, 2009). This process is based on the concept of gender as an analytical category

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<sup>2</sup> Novo Hamburgo is located in Vale dos Sinos (in the southernmost Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, located in the Metropolitan area of Porto Alegre), neighboring the municipalities of São Leopoldo, Estância Velha, Ivoti, Dois Irmãos, Sapiranga, Campo Bom and Gravataí. Novo Hamburgo currently has 29 state schools, 76 municipal schools and 27 private schools. Data gathered from the official website of the municipality: [www.novohamburgo.rs.gov.br](http://www.novohamburgo.rs.gov.br). Accessed on May 25, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> After the interviews, the statements were transcribed and sent to each employee for review and further adjustments. The recorded documents, after being validated, had their use authorized through the Informed Consent Form (ICF). The interviewees' names were changed by the authors in order to assure anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the use of Oral History as a research tool, this text does not constitute a historical narrative. The Oral History proved to be useful in providing theoretical and methodological support to understand the intricacies of memory, due to the fact that the insertion of teachers in Early Childhood Schools dates from 2004 and 2007.

that conceives the differences between men and women as discursive constructions; therefore, not biologically determined. Thus, according to Louro (2008, p. 07), "Gender and sexuality are built through a variety of learning and practices, undertaken by an inexhaustible set of social and cultural range, in an explicit or camouflaged way, in an always unfinished process." As a mechanism that assigns meaning to social practice, gender is produced through power relations, constituted in the specificities of each group and historical moment (VEIGA and PEDRO 2015, SCOTT, 1995).

For that reason, signifying practices, places and distinct hierarchies are produced along with multiple gender identities through linguistic mechanisms. As an effect, expectations arise stimulating and constraining ways of being and behaving. These will produce desirable identities and as a consequence many other identities<sup>5</sup> (ANJOS, 2015; MEYER, 2004).

## **2. Male teachers in early childhood education: from the fear of deviant sexualities to the intentions of a heteronormativity**

The enlargement of early childhood education in Brazil, begun in the 1980s, was firmly based on the argument of equal opportunities for lower classes children in elementary school. This goal, however, demanded an increase in the number of teachers who would be in charge of pedagogical processes and care of young children, which generated, as a response, the reification of the phenomenon of feminization in Early Childhood Education. It is worth pointing out, however, that until the mid-nineteenth century, teaching was a masculine profession aimed, above all, at the education of boys. As a result of the quantitative expansion of the Brazilian educational field, women came to be seen as an alternative to the need of teachers (ALMEIDA, 1998). However, according to Louro (2007), this process did not go smoothly; whereas women were considered incapable of educating the "children of Brazil," because they were intellectually unprepared, the "feminine nature" had functioned as a legitimate argument for their insertion in this field. Blessed with "vocation, love and dedication", the "maternal essence", besides having contributed to the process of feminization of the teaching profession, has since helped to hide the poor working conditions in this environment, in the same way as a resource that compensates for deficiencies of students, schools and the pedagogical training itself (AMADO; BRUSCHINI, 1988; WERLE, 2005; ROSEMBERG, 1999).

This process has developed the non-recognition of Early Childhood Education as an opportunity for male teachers to be inserted in, which seems to be intensified when these teachers come from the Pedagogy major (ZANETTE, 2014). Although biological sex (male) has historically been an obstacle to the insertion of men in this phase of schooling, these crossings seem to be attenuating to functions such as school management and Physical Education teaching<sup>6</sup> (CARDOSO, 2007). Therefore, if it is possible to

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that the processes and procedures of gender are polysemic and, once produced in power relations, suffer resistance and operate constant adjustments in social practices. This dynamic generates multiple experiences, thus producing other projects, other representations and diverse subject identities (FOUCAULT, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> During the research process in the city investigated, there were no male teachers acting as "Class Regents" (responsible for a class group's behavior and academic performance throughout the school year) in private schools.

perceive the presence of male Physical Education teachers in Early Childhood Education, as Varotto (2015) suggests, this process should not be seen as placid or even preferable.

The presence of a male teacher in early childhood education has caused a lot of distaste, considering the "imbalance" provoked by the way masculinity has been represented historically (manly, strong, ill-timed) and by the assignments of a teacher of Early Childhood Education (affective, patient, maternal) - elements that, according to the deponents, seem to distrust the sexuality of these teachers. According to the report of Director 2, a student's mother, during a conversation, had questioned:

Ok, but is he gay? (looking perplexed) Then I say, of course you have to be careful about what you say, right? Because my question is: What if he is? What's the problem? Because then, you are dealing with another prejudice, so, I first hear what they say, but when I ask them, the person defends themselves and says: No, it's okay, it was just curiosity, others say, I do not want my son to be taught by a gay teacher, because he will "get" gay.  
(SECTION OF INTERVIEW OF THE DIRECTOR 2)

According to teacher 2, similar situations had been frequent in their process of insertion into Early Childhood Education:

In the beginning, I had to answer quite often [...] about my sexuality. Actually, I think they would query, and the direction asked me to always talk about it. So I always had to say, I'm straight. It looked as though it'd pull 50 tons off the kids' parents' back. (TEACHER INTERVIEW SECTION 2)

Targets of numerous prejudices, "deviant" individuals are represented in deprecatory ways, and schools, as normative spaces, have reproduced and echoed negative concepts about non-heterosexuality (PETRY, MEYER, 2011). Since its inception, "modern schools are marked by differences and are also involved in the production of these differences" (LOURO, 2008). Thus, to identify and avoid deviant would mean, at the same time: to lead students to a "stable" ground, evidencing heterosexuality as a "healthy" form of sexuality practice; to set the deviant as eccentric, due to their distance from what is considered the center / standard of sexual conduct. In this perspective, the presence of those who "dare" to make themselves distant from the expected sexual behavior could be considered nefarious for the formation process of small children. In this respect, the collaborators's reports highlight the concern of family members about the sexuality of their sons and daughters, perhaps because deviant sexualities, inserted there, could have an influence on them. By disturbing the stable ground of compulsory heterosexuality, apparent in the "assumed" harmonic relationship between sex (female) and gender (caring, caring and mothering) evidenced in the presence of female teachers in these schools, families trigger the historical process of surveillance exercised in child sexuality (FOUCAULT, 1997). Thus, the "gay" teacher seems to convey materiality to what Dal 'Igna (2011) calls risk, manner through which contemporaneity has been related to the future. Uncertainties of different forms such as supernatural threats, diseases, catastrophes, fatality, misconduct and fear of the unknown cause feelings of insecurity that produce the need to be prevented or avoided. Knowing about the sexuality of teachers and expressing distaste about their presence works as a mechanism to verify the presence of danger, as well as to signal the attention and vigilance of the families on those teachers and on the school, a procedure that evidences risk management.

Furthermore, the cultural and historical construction that men have the "weak flesh," are "instinctive" and cannot dominate their desires is also a concern. The example of this is the report of teacher 2 who, in a conversation with one of the mothers, informed that he had changed her son's diaper.

Her face fell. She was laughing, but when I said I'd changed her son's diaper, she got a straight face. She kept staring at me, I was calm, I kept talking to her, and then I asked her if her husband would often change their son's diapers, she said: no. I think that caused the astonishment. (INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER 2)

In a similar situation, teacher 1 says:

[...] the families would be apprehensive. They would go, "ah, who is going to take the child to the bathroom?" "Is he going to have to take care of this?" "Will he see the child like that, is he going to be responsible for taking the child to the bathroom if there is no one else?" The families felt some concern, [...]. (INTERVIEW OF TEACHER 1)

While on the one hand, male instinct has often been a justification for behavior, affirming inequalities between men and women, on the other hand, it puts the treatment of adult men with young children under suspicion<sup>7</sup>. Historically conceived as endowed with animalistic sexualities, male desires should not be put to the test, which demands civility in women's clothing, as well as not allowing them to have any physical contact with children. Such conceptions have been described since the late nineteenth century, when theories about sex and sexuality gained scientific connotations. Sex, therefore, came to be believed as a "natural impulse", "absolutely overwhelming force and energy", which demands satisfaction (WEEKS, 2013). Male sexual appetite, understood as something of physiological needs, or natural tendency, should be satisfied regularly, otherwise, there would be the risk of losing control over standardized behavior, leading to practices such as rape and pedophilia.

Settled over the years and reaffirmed within current models of masculinity, such representations seem to make present and legitimize fears under the conduct of teachers towards children, unable to understand and manifest possible abuses. If, on the one hand, the fear of deviant sexuality is a barrier to the insertion and maintenance of male teachers in Early Childhood Education, on the other hand, their presence alongside the teachers and students seems to function as a metaphor of a constituted family by "mother, father and children". The roles occupied by both female and male teachers of children's education often legitimize the heteronormative conception of men, women and children, elements that, throughout the interviews, emerge as a justification for the existence of the male figure in this environment. According to teacher 2:

[...] it is also importante. Since children, in schools, are not close to their fathers, both male and father representations are very important for that, it causes another feeling involvement in this, that at the same time that it is respect, theoretically, historically it seems that men put more limit by the power of their voice, right, and at the same time, it is the affection that is different, another kind of love [...]. (TEACHER INTERVIEW SECTION 2)

The choice of male teachers to represent fathers allows the notion of family to be reiterated

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<sup>7</sup> Although it seems unusual to families, teachers have reported that this is an ordinary practice in the school and that, whenever asked, they do it.

according to heterocentered concepts. Based on normative models, schools are environment where it is constantly reaffirmed what is defined as "central standard", since they appear in their curricula<sup>8</sup> and in their practices. On this point, heteronormativity ends up being "reproduced" more frequently and remains as the "ideal" model, pursued since modernity. (ARAÚJO, 2005)

The justification for men in those spaces refers precisely to patterns that reproduce and structure models in which male teachers / fathers become a reference for heterosexual men. Subjectivated by this argument, the male teachers collaborating in this study perform their masculinity according to what is expected from men in the process of educating children: obedience and the imposition of limits to conducts. This understanding gives meaning to what employees have reported: "I've heard that the school management prefers men teaching physical education" (teacher 2) or "men are able to have more class control" (teacher 1). According to Director 2:

Yes, you have to be careful not to have prejudice against women, right? But it's because, specifically here, we already have many women as teachers, right? We've even had a male music teacher, too. That's the reason we ought to bring male representation to the school sphere, I think our children will benefit a lot from it. I don't mean to talk nonsense, but I see it just like that female physical education teachers anecdote, of course there are techniques, but male teachers are different from the female ones, their hands are heavier, their leaps higher, they provide freedom, and today our children are so overprotected. Men will defy them more. Fathers do this, right? Mothers go "oh, look out for the stool, it's too high", and fathers go there and put another one so the child goes (laughs), you see what I mean? Men do make difference. (SECTION OF INTERVIEW OF THE DIRECTOR 2)

Culturally invested with the exercise of the disciplining function, the male figure in the school space seems to claim for himself the notion that men, endowed with strength, are capable of exercising an attitude of imposing obedience to children. Insofar as the teacher performs the "father function", as well as women, "the role of mother", it is possible to see in the area of Early Childhood the (re) production and teaching of behaviors expected and desired by society. After all, while male teachers are placed in the role of fathers, authority, and therefore, female teachers are responsible for care and affection, it is possible to witness a heteronormative curriculum that places those in the margin outside that reference (JUNQUEIRA, 2010).

The research collaborators, however, do not seem to have clarity about these processes of "normalization" and operate by reiterating this model without further questioning.

The school management strongly believes that the insertion of the male representation in early childhood education, in this maternal environment, where children live most of the time with women, is crucial. They see the importance of having this representation, of the man, acting almost paternally with children, so that is why they have done it this way. Besides that, they rely on our theoretical and technical knowledge. (INTERVIEW OF THE

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<sup>8</sup> In this text, the concept of curriculum comes from Silva (2003) who defines it as a set of discursive and non-discursive practices that operate pedagogical processes in different instances and places. In addition to the "classical curricular components", curricula are based on social dynamics, on institutional spaces and equipment, on the disposition of individuals, on expectations about their behavior, teaching "truths" about markers such as gender, race, generation, social class, etc.



TEACHER 1)

Those conceptions find support in the practical actions of teachers who seem to respond, quite often, to what families expect. Thus, gender relations established between men / male teachers and women / female teachers at schools end up teaching such models to girls and boys and, since schools do not bring up other forms of masculinity and femininity, they reaffirm those already praised as the standard. (LOURO, 2012). Consequently, schools become an environment that only (re) produces such norms, reaffirming itself as a disciplinary institution, spaces of organization and formation of children and young people according to current norms.

Historically, schools have functioned as a space that constituted a genderized curriculum, establishing boundaries between being a boy and being a girl, placing women in places of subservience, suggesting that girls should be sensible, pure, reserved and sweet, while stimulating boys to be aggressive, competitive and manly (FELIPE, 2007). These constantly reiterated representations of masculine and feminine have contributed to the construction of "truths" about gender. In this model, the presence of male teachers who occupy, through their prerogatives, the role of "fathers" who make students be quiet, listen and obey them is a key tool in the operation of a heteronormative curriculum.

## **5. Conclusion**

Conceived as a feminine occupation, teaching in Child Education has not historically been a profession assigned to men. Since the nineteenth century, the teaching profession has been the target of disrepute, low payment and qualification (WERLE, 2005), elements that support the argument which places women as "naturally capable" for the exercise of the teaching function. As a result, these gender perceptions, as said, have made the poor working conditions invisible and made it, almost exclusively, aimed at women who, on behalf of "care and maternal love", would surrender themselves to those arguments. In the center of this process, studies such as those of Cardoso (2007) have pointed out that, out of the few male teachers inserted into Early Childhood Education, many of them have distanced themselves from teaching and become responsible for other educational functions, positions that grant them higher status, far from being target of constant suspicion about their sexuality and direct physical contact with children.

Specifically in the context investigated, families' apprehension about "deviant sexuality" has concerned teachers and management teams about the risks of instinctive, wild sexualities that act impulsively and cannot dominate their desires. These representations aroused distaste about children being taken to the school restrooms, changing of diapers and the teacher's actions, when alone with the children. On the other hand, the "family metaphor" demands the presence of the father portrayed by the teacher male, following a socially and culturally expected gender model.

The argument for the presence of male teachers becomes, throughout the interviews, a common concern, suggesting the necessity of reaffirming their presence in that space. From this perspective, it is possible to notice that while the gender crossings are placed as obstacles, they are also the most used arguments to make legitimate the presence of men in Early Childhood Education. Thus, on the one hand, one has the fear of deviant sexualities, on the other, the need of the male representation to reiterate the heteronormative model of society. The possibility of exercising masculinities when male teachers enter the

universe of Early Childhood Education, at the same time that emerges as something to be watched, ensures the maintenance of masculinity and desired femininity.

However, analyzing the gender crossings in the process of insertion of male teachers in early childhood education has brought up questions throughout the process about my own experiences, about what I have represented in these places, and the importance of being in those schools. The reflections on my practice, as a teacher of Physical Education inserted in Early Childhood Education, indicate the reproduction of situations that perpetuate the maintenance of heteronormative conceptions, in addition to living up to the families' expectations by a teacher who represents such norms. It allowed me to think about distaste and gender crossings in my workplace, which was crucial to understanding my role and what I mean in that space. To understand gender relations in the curriculum, to think about the masculinization of infantile education, through the representation of men as "fathers", "paternal", causes restlessness to arise, after all, what is expected from male teachers? What reason are they there for? Are gender relations relevant to the presence of men in these settings? Regarding some circumstances as problems which require solutions, such as dealing with children, bringing gender issues up, and discussing them with students and the school community, in general, can be effective ways to address family distaste. These, perhaps, may be the first steps towards building a space that should receive professionals interested in the pedagogical processes of its students, without thereby suffering any kind of gender damages.

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