

Women and men in education services: comparison of *gender* representation in Italian pre-school (0-6) services.

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Abstract

Questo contributo presenta una parte degli esiti della ricerca “*Stereotipi di genere, relazioni educative e infanzie*” condotta, dal 2010 al 2012, da un gruppo di ricercatrici del CSGE (Centro Studi di Genere ed Educazione) dell’Università di Bologna, finanziata dalla Regione Emilia-Romagna (Assessorato Pari Opportunità e Assessorato Politiche sociali). La ricerca si è proposta di rilevare idee e rappresentazioni sui generi e sui rapporti tra i generi in adulti educativamente significativi per i bambini e le bambine in età 0-6 anni, e di sviluppare una riflessione sul tema delle immagini stereotipate relative all’identità femminile e maschile che ancora persistono e si trasmettono sin dai primi anni di vita. In particolare, in questo articolo, si presenta il focus di analisi sulle rappresentazioni di genere nel lavoro educativo dal punto di vista dei professionisti delle scuole e dei servizi 0-6 coinvolti, mettendo in relazione i dati quantitativi con le considerazioni emerse dai focus group, sul maschile e femminile in educazione.

This contribution presents a part of the results of the research project entitled “*Stereotipi di genere, relazioni educative e infanzie*” (“*Gender stereotypes, educational relationships and childhood*”) conducted between 2010 and 2012 by a group of researchers from¹ the CSGE (Gender and Education Study Centre) of the University of Bologna, funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region². The research aimed to measure the ideas and representations of gender and the gender relations among adults who are educationally significant for preschool children (0-6 years), and to develop widespread reflection on the issue of the stereotyped images of female and male identity that still exist and are transmitted from a very early age. This article particularly focuses on the analysis developed on gender representations in educational services 0-6 years by the professionals working in the centres involved, relating quan-

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titative data with the considerations that emerged from the focus groups, about the female and male in education.

Parole chiave: Gender representations in educational services, Relationship between women and male educators in pre-school institutions, Early childhood care, Feminisation of care work and stereotypes, Professionalism of the female and male educational figure

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1. Some research data

Before specifically discussing the issues analysed in the wider research project, we should briefly illustrate the method used and the type of data gathered.³

The research project lasted for 18 months until June 2012, covering several phases, each of which focused on the different investigation tools used within an interdisciplinary perspective. To summarise the phases:

1. Documentation phase: analysis of international and national literature; reconnaissance of data and research concerning the involved educational services.

2. Quantitative research in the territory: delivery of a questionnaire to educational service workers (nurseries, pre-schools, family centres, parent-child centres); data entry; statistical data processing. In this phase, the research group probabilistically sampled the regional educational services and pre-schools; it drafted two different semi-structured questionnaires, one targeting educational and school services workers and one for the parents of children aged 0-6 registered with the regional preschool services;

3. Qualitative research: focus groups targeting educational coordinators, operators, parents, grandparents, investigating the most significant topics emerging from the questionnaires.

4. Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data: through the development of a common method - in any case enhancing the many disciplines covered by the research – we analysed the qualitative and quantitative data gathered in a strictly interrelated manner. In this way we identified some particularly important issues

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present in the material gathered, starting from the proposed second level analysis to connect the results of the quantitative data with those of the qualitative data.

Quantitative phase

524 questionnaires were completed by educational services staff and 2803 by parents, a total of 3327 questionnaires and 120 services throughout the region were sampled, divided as follows:

Type of service/school	no.
Nurseries	32
Micro nurseries	6
Nursery classes integrated in pre-schools	10
Child minders	2
Children's centres	4
Child-parent centres	5
Family centres	2
Non-state run pre-schools	42
State-run pre-schools	17
Total	120

Almost all questionnaires, from both educational services and families, were answered by women: 98.1% female educators and 82.8% mothers. As regards the schools and services, the data deriving from a representative sample confirmed the actual, well-known framework of poor male representation in the educational and care professions of the reference population. As regards the families, the self-administered questionnaire could have been filled in by either parent, but mainly the mothers were more interested in the research subject.

Qualitative phase

The focus group tool was chosen to implement the **qualitative phase**.

The objective was to investigate in-depth the representations inherent in the subjects identified by the research (male/female educators, collaborators, teachers, fathers and mothers, grandparents) as emerges from the "viewpoint" of a certain number of subjects voluntarily taking part in the survey, through the analysis of the words, expressions and verbal interactions gathered in a group situation specifically arranged by the researchers.

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36 focus groups were held in total, divided as follows:

Type of schools/services	No. of focus groups		Total
	Education staff	Families	
Nurseries and other 0-3 services	9	8	17
Pre-schools	8	8	16
Family centres	1	2	3
Total	18	18	36

262 people were involved overall. The division of the participants by group (educational staff and family figures) includes 134 participants in the first and 128 in the second; stronger participation of women is recorded not only among the educational staff where there is effectively a larger number of female workers, but also among the family figures, as already noted for the questionnaires.

Family members	no.
Mothers	83
Fathers	31
Grandmothers	10
Grandfathers	4
Total	128

	Teachers	Educators	Operators	Collaborators	
Women	39	56	5	22	
Men	5	4	1	2	
Total	44	60	6	24	Total 134

2. The framework for discussion: what *gender* of teacher and educator?

Tackling the issue of representation of educational professions in preschool services means widening the debate on the complex situation of *feminisation* of teaching in Italy, and that generally of all the so-called *care* services.

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For different reasons, there is an almost paradoxical dynamic of men working in education, above all in early childhood: on one hand we are faced with a paradox of upturned working "segregation" - the almost total absence of male figures despite the explicit and urgent demand of the educator market; on the other hand, this data seems to contradict the current trend of so-called "new fathers", more and more involved in rearing their children, right from an early age, expressing the need and desire to experience new forms of affectivity. It is as if this current relational transformation of the propensity of men-fathers has not yet translated into professional terms, or the possible skills to be invested in professionally are not yet recognised.

The educational profession thus belongs to that area of occupations which are valued differently according to their male or female versions (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002).

Indeed this issue mirrors and corresponds to the professional and educational "segregation" of women, also defined as *vocational separateness* (Mapelli & Olivieri Stiozzi, 2012): the "*Teachers of Italy*" (Amore *et al.*, 2010) are female if we consider the data of the Ministry of Education (MIUR) for academic year 2008/2009, with a very high female presence in preschools - 99.4% - present also in later stages but progressively dropping to 33% in senior schools.⁴

This data refers to a much wider problematic debate on women's work and current work policies: the female presence falls proportionally to the increase in responsibility and prestige of the professional role. This is certainly not due to the incompetence of women in these areas, (ISTAT statistical data confirm a shape increase in women with higher qualifications) but is rather the dramatic sign of the strong discrimination that is still present towards women - above all of child-bearing age - in Italy, where the choice must be made between children and a job: you are either a mother or a career woman. Moreover, referring to data *Harmonized European Time Use Survey* (HETUS), Italian men do less domestic work - or unpaid - than men of other OECD nations, while Italian women are among those which carry more hours of domestic work⁵.

As Chiara Saraceno explained (Saraceno, 2005, p.2), "having children first and foremost accentuates the father's role as *breadwinner*, symmetrically to what happens for mothers towards their role as *caregiver*".

In addition to this, the current economic crisis and the extreme irregularity and temporariness of the labour market; statistical data and research confirm an increasing number of temporary jobs among women.

In Gianini Belotti's historical but extremely current text, he describes an educational reality in our country (but which concerns much of Europe⁶) which the training of the educational professions must tackle (Gianini Belotti, 1973, p.142):

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“In preschools, children face the clear confirmation of the social situation and division of male and female roles, as men are totally absent from their care environment. And like the mother’s job, that of the teacher is not perceived as an actual job, but rather a service, more or less authoritarian and benevolent, yet in any case totally free. This identification of preschool teacher and mother damages young girls, also as it drives them to identify themselves also with the teacher. From the same situation, boys will draw the conclusion that women are negligible, as they do nothing prestigious other than look after them, far differently from men, who with their mysterious, fascinating work away from the home produce well-being for the family and prestige and consideration for themselves within the family and the social group they belong to”.

It is not by chance that when the authoress wrote this, preschools were still, intentionally, called "maternal schools", because as she explained, this name was chosen over *infant school* when the new state school was set up under Italian law no. 444 of 18 March 1968. This institutional choice reconfirms the idea of *naturalisation* of care work as women's work, deriving from instinct, inborn motherly love, and natural talents possessed only by women in their role as procreatrix. Thirty years on, therefore, the name of preschool services has changed, many positive steps forward have been made in the field of welfare, educational approaches, the awareness of cultural gender stereotypes, but the presence in work contexts concerning care, education and training do not appear very different.

Also this research carried out across Emilia Romagna confirms this national trend: out of 524 male and female educators in the 120 0-6 year services/schools sampled and to which the questionnaires were delivered, 98.1% are women mainly aged between 30 and 49 years. This also bears witness to the widespread trend throughout Europe (EURYDICE Report, 2009), where many young people, after school, continue to make stereotyped work choices, the majority of staff involved in the quantitative phase had a high school leaving diploma (more than 68%) from social sciences or psychology-educational schools, and 25.8% university degrees in education sciences or humanities.

Referring to the quantitative data gathered on the motivation for choosing this job, passion was the most common element in the answers (90.5%), followed by continuity of studies (75.8%), curiosity (35.8%), necessity (28.9%) and the possibility to start work immediately (20.0%). Therefore the majority of educators and teachers have a passion for their job, but extrinsic reasons such as need and the chance of a job immediately also - although marginally - affect the choice of profession.

And moreover, if we examine the qualitative part of the research, i.e. the focus groups carried out in 36 preschool services/schools in the various provinces targeting their staff, only 12 out of 134 participants were men.

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How is the male presence configured in this professional dimension? Which representations do both they and their female colleagues have of the educational care role in early childhood?

The research on the relationship between the experience of being a female carer/teacher in the presence or absence of male colleagues in the "0-6" age group underlines the existing extreme complexity of the professional and social role towards the construction of gender identity: why is working in this sector still so unpopular among men in our society? Which cultural representation persists around the concept of care and education? Instinct, vocation or the formation of professional skills? Undoubtedly we increasingly need to reflect on and build new professional models, both for female educators (who continue to consider themselves such for *innate* reasons) and above all for male educators, to unshackle them from the risk of *self-feminisation* in order to be accepted in this educational role.

Equal opportunities imply the economic and cultural redefinition of these professions, but also the recognition of an underlying, necessary, diversity.

The problem of educational work and segregation of gender is undoubtedly a cultural one of self-representation, social self-identify, expectations produced by society in the process of *naturalisation* of care tasks (Finch 1989; Acker 1994; Griffin 1997).

Provokingly, Gianini Belotti (1973, p. 132) stated that "*we wrongly recognise the "maternal instinct" of all women, and for this reason alone we rely on them for early childhood education, while men are wholly denied their paternal instinct. Prejudice supports the idea that men are not "naturally" paternal, but they conquer this sensitivity slowly and with effort (and in any case not always) [...]*".

The complex relationship between education, care and gender demands reflection on the relations of corporeity: an element in the debate also between parents concerning their fears and worries over male educators, as well as the media representation of the male body and its overwhelming virility, the raper, the abuser... While there is an historical construction of the *virilisation of citizenship* starting from the mid 19th century as a reaction to women's social conquests, continuing well into the 20th century "considering citizenship as a statute of male belonging from which women are excluded"(Bellassai, in Mapelli & Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2012, p. 51), leading to the crisis of such virilist condition in the 1960s and 70s, there is now a need to rediscover new expressions and experiences of the male self in this current and absolutely new opening to the world of children.

The male body in educational relationships still holds ancestral taboos which reveal the paradox of the perceived asexual dimension of women in these working contexts: as strongly emerges from the focus groups, female bodies are silent and

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do not communicate desires, while male bodies are always connoted by their performing, desiring features.

Thus while the historical models of gender relations have been shattered, there is a need to restore and recognise a male culture and practice in the care of others, which for too long has been hidden or denied by the very concept of virility and the consequent social prejudice (Connell, 1995).

3. The absence of male models: the need for thought on men

The problem arises of the lack of male models for children, indeed at European level several countries are attempting to implement policies and initiatives to attract more men to these professions⁷. To increase the presence of men in educational contexts, in Sweden, for example, the main causes of this absence were analysed and have been linked to three main reasons:

- males starting university studies in education science are more likely to abandon their studies because social expectations make them uncertain of their choice;
- as the educational environment is experienced as culturally female, men have to either adapt to this model or rebel, and this creates difficulties for them;
- the serious lack of professional male models in this field is a highly destabilising factor for students

Many other EU countries also state the main reason to be the problem of low wages in these professions, as well as the lack of career prospects.

In a recent research on contemporary women's professions, Mapelli (2010, p.100) states that "[...] in Italy there are extremely low investments in childhood services; as far as employment is concerned, the job market is highly segregated by sex and divided into female and male occupations, with very few passages from one sector to the other. It appears obvious that women are particularly present in care services and jobs, market sectors that are poorly paid and socially unattractive".

One interesting fact emerging from this research concerning the services in Emilia-Romagna is that the staff replying to the questionnaire (almost all female) state that the presence of males in preschool services is very low because "**men are not educated to look after children**" (56.3% the majority of whom are aged 40 and above) also due to the "**low social value attributed to care**" (55.8% the majority of whom are aged 40 and above).

These answers are even more significant for supporting the hypothesis that we are undergoing a veritable process of social change in role models and identities,

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but as this is a slow mechanism and has only just begun, the possibilities for cultural transformation that can lead from it have not yet been consolidated.

So have men never learned to "care" or is it an experience they have been denied? Can a culture and practice of male care be found or not?

If we place the above mentioned answers in correlation with the percentages responding to the question **"How far do you agree with the following statements on the involvement of women and men in educational roles (%)"**, it emerges that 67.1% of all respondents do not feel that "there are more women in childhood services because they are more suited to care work with 0-6 year olds", nor because of the low wages (66.4%), nor because their presence causes diffidence among parents (66.9%) or problems with female colleagues (who are often in coordinating roles and are therefore "dominant"- 91.7%), nor because the working hours can be reconciled with family needs (56.6%). The fact is rather underlined that the reasons lie in and can be attributed to cultural dynamics and the symbolism and meanings attributed to the concept of care.

This tells us that there is strong female awareness on the centuries-old mechanism of care work as the exclusive and implicit competence of women, with their capacity of reproduction.

Not only, but the very concept of care - also still a prisoner of this institutional belonging to the female gender - is "liberated" and understood in its deepest educational meaning, i.e. as a professional dimension of educating, which must be *learned*, which can be learned, through the right training: 86.5% of respondents in fact stated that they did not agree with the statement that "the presence of men in childhood services will remain low: they have no skill for working with children aged between 0 and 6", thus demonstrating the clear criticism of male and female educators and teachers of the dominant model.

Precisely because they are not merely linked to the reproductive or material function, care skills are cultural matrices and can be possessed by anyone who cares to do so, through learning and practice also accessible to men.

Research on the relationship between the experience of female educators/teachers in the presence or absence of male colleagues is the framework on which we wish to base this part of the analysis of the focus groups held with the staff and teachers of the involved services/schools.

The complexity underlying these representations is highly relevant in understanding first and foremost how preschool education professionals construct not only their working role but also their social role in terms of gender identity.

As the staff are mainly female, we particularly looked into their perception of female educators compared to the involvement of male figures in the educational and care work

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- in relation to themselves: do specific genders have similar and/or specific professional skills? How (attention was paid to adjectives) are the effects of the presence of a male educator described within a majority female working team? How do these perceptions and interpretations affect the way in which female and male educators relate to each other in service and, generally, at work?
- in relation to the gender of the children: which dynamics and behaviour are used by males in the class towards boys or girls? What behaviour do the boys and girls have towards the gender of their educators?
- in relation to the parents: which behaviour and relationships are established between educators and parents, according to the gender of the latter?

4. Obligatory male colleagues? The male presence, between necessity and stereotypes...

In all the focus groups examined, everyone expressed positive opinions about having at least one male member in the team. This was stated both as a result of direct experience and as a hypothesis in which a more heterogeneous situation would be created, the "enrichment" (the most commonly used adjective to describe this possibility) offered by diversity, just as in family roles, played by the mother and the father.

This thought is also confirmed by the quantitative data gathered in the questionnaires: to the question, how far do you agree with the European Commission's proposal to introduce compulsory male workers in childhood services, 79.6% replied positively, despite the fact that "only" 51.2% stated that they had had experience of professional collaboration with male colleagues. The male educator figure is seen as functional to reducing the load in many situations created in the group both with the children and in the team of colleagues.

Predominantly female working contexts were described as excessively competitive, too complicated, as well as *invidious*.

In some particular contexts, where a mixed team has been in place for some time, the male and female educators both noted the importance of the presence of both genders also and above all in relation to the various family situations, with separated parents, or generally in families where the father figure is rarely present. This though also leads to the need to explore and observe the increasingly new and different family groups, no longer traceable to standard, static models, and the

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Services and Institutions have to provide a team of staff that is suitably trained to deal with new models and differences:

J., Teacher. Fem. 35 years: [...] I think that an added value has always been that we tend to offer a fairly balanced family model with no female or male figure who is always away, is not very present or often we find an authoritarian father and a much more accommodating mother, because here we change roles continually, often no figure is more authoritarian and one more accommodating, one who always says yes and the other always no, above all in the classroom but also in a broader sense, the timing is more or less the same, so we offer absolutely balanced figures, and for me this is an added value for them.

G., Teacher. Fem. 42 years: [...] Also the fact of being united as far as gender is concerned helps us a lot, nowadays a parent is often missing from the family, or there are too many ... So we manage to deal with situations in which the male or the female figure is missing, so working with the male member of the team is also helpful for us, we have an ace up our sleeve...

The quantitative data also confirms this representation: indeed 72.3% stated that the presence of male educators brought improvements to the working group as well as the educational style with both girls and boys and the team as a whole (63.7%). Only a slight majority (52.6%) stated that it found no particular improvement in the organisation of everyday work.

Concerning self-perception in relation to male professionals, it is interesting to observe the range of adjectives the female educators used to define the presence and professionalism of a man within the educational context. They are always, or almost always, superlative, underlying the "extraordinary" professional skills possessed compared to their own skills as female educators and teachers:

V., Teacher, Fem. 35 years: [...] both very charismatic, creative, so they certainly charmed the children more; this ability that I perhaps initially didn't have, so I noticed them more with the children rather than with me as a woman and him as a man, perhaps he helped them to grow more autonomous, they were more autonomous, he developed this skill more than I, I mean the goal was the same but the timing was different because.... there was a strong masculine component ...

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D., Fem. Coll. 38 years: A. [male educator] added a bit more sparkle, you could feel it when he arrived.. he was very playful as a person in his own right... when he fed a child who was just a little lazy, he managed to make them laugh...

F., Ed. F. 56 years: [...] I sense an extremely positive relationship. Both girls and boys are attracted to him [the male educator present in the focus group], to a figure of this calibre...

Sara, Ed. F. 27 years: [...] It's an added value!

The extraordinary nature of the presence of male colleagues in the services therefore emerges, their skills and "super powers" become extraordinary, almost as if they were *superheroes*, bearing witness to the trace elements of tradition, which blend in any case with elements of change. Equally, the exceptionality of the male presence in education services fuels the "backward" stereotype, with completely positive and high-performing expectations, no longer bound to actual professional skills but rather their value becomes the very identity of gender, different from that of women. Expressions such as "**very charismatic, creative**", "**skills I didn't have**", "**added a bit more sparkle**", "**attracted to him**", "**figure of this calibre**", "**an added value**" mirror how female educators, despite their specific professional training, still hold their own frames of judgement on the male involvement in education linked to the images inherited from the past. In the same relationship with the girls and boys, they show how a male presence in the service makes everyday attendance more fun and motivating.

Reflecting therefore on the construction of male educational models and above all on the lack of them, it is very interesting to consider Mapelli's thoughts (2010, p.89-90) on the male models *par excellence* present in everyone's life, i.e. fathers: "we are faced with a deeply problematic area and it could not be otherwise, as in family relations and with their children mothers and fathers live the experiences to which they have most deeply contributed - in the mother's case for a longer time exclusively, in building the identities of gender, the cultures and perceptions and self-perceptions of what it means and has meant to be in the world as man or woman, whatever their experience directly in the maternal or paternal role".

O. Op. F. 35 years: [...] There are no differences, but for example in my past experience when I used to work in the summer camps there were many male staff and they said that men were better at keeping the group together and they were better at being leaders, keeping people in line, so

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we also wanted to have a man in our group, in our team, but I don't think there is a difference.

A. Ed. F. 42 years: [...] It's true that often they [the children] bond with the female figure, also during the induction period, but in context they seek out the male figure! And follow him around, they're spellbound!

A. Ed. F. 42 years: [...] Once we had a male supply teacher. It was a great success! Because he played with the children... picked them up, threw them up in the air saying, "I'll send you to the moon!" And they all queued up for a go, "Me too, me too!". That's something I certainly couldn't do, pick up 20 children weighing 14 kilos each, one after the other! Because if you start you have to do it for all of them! But that's what they like, they're thrilled, and all queue up for a turn with the male teacher.

The representation of the male educator as a **leader**, able to lead both boys and girls, is very strong, enchanting like the "**piper of Hamelin**". This presumed sweetness is also linked to an idealised physical strength, typical of men: if it is natural and inborn for women to deal with educational jobs, men make this figure a magical one, perfect and positive in all senses. It is the archetype of the young hero, the charmer, able to attract and be attracted, filled with vital strength, but who runs the risk of staying an "eternal child" acting so similarly to children, perceived more as a playmate than a governing adult:

E., Teacher. F. 42 years: [...] Yes but I saw some working in the class a couple of years ago, they are people who, perhaps because they are young, really get down to playing with the children like they were peers, so clearly very successful... but these two boys weren't very good with rules, see what I mean?... But we have to deal with the rules too...

M. C., Ed. F. 56 years: [...] But [all the children] loved it [when the male educator sang] because his tone of voice went up and up, he was a really good mimic; I think they are more physical... I think the male educator plays a role that I, also due to my age, was never able to play ... all that part, they [the children] they need that too. That part, the physical part which I don't have, so I miss that bit out! But I mean that I really like it, I'm not exactly a mother hen, I like playing with them too, with movement...

M., Ed. F. 49 years: [...] When we ran the cooperative men often came too to run the workshops... they [the children] loved it! Seeing a male

figure with them, playing with them, offering a whole new educational style...they loved it... Really the piper of Hamelin!

Also the words of a male educator are particularly emblematic of the representation of their role in service:

V., Ed. Male, 37 years: [...] In my class, where I work too as an educator, maybe the children find a little more richness, extra willingness to accept and satisfy their needs by the male educator [...] Yes, I think so, every year, a boy or girl seeks me out more often than the other educators, or wants to do special things with me, much more often than happens with the others, there's always one. Then some children seek out a privileged relationship, much closer than with the others, but all children use the educator as a source of nourishment... Of nourishment, an intellectual resource, for reading a story or changing a nappy, used in some way by all the group for their needs.

Expressions such as "**richness and extra willingness**", "**the educator as a source of nourishment, an intellectual resource**" mirror a very strong representation of the values of male action, almost seeking a greater need of convincing and reinforcing of the role of a man in a nursery, as in the case of the educator interviewed.

It is however important to note how these "absolute positive stereotypes" - the fact that the mere fact of being male offers a representation of great professionalism, excellent if not superior to that of women professionals, who may have many more years' experience in educational contexts - are also contradicted by other considerations, which seem more the result of personal and cultural diffidence to the presence of males in childhood services:

A. Ed. F. 43 years: [...] I often work with a male colleague and I think, well, women are better, as... there are surely also good male colleagues and maybe I just haven't met them, there may be many and I haven't met all of them, or maybe they were young, and still had plenty to learn. In their favour their appeal to children cannot be denied, and when a man comes to the school he gets noticed.

In fact, from the quantitative data a unanimous opinion emerges both for 0-3 and 0-6 services, of the equal skill of male and female educators in the professional sphere of welcoming, relations, cognitive stimulation, active play and its affective area:

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Who is most competent in the various educational dimensions in the teaching age group 0-3 (%)

Dimension of the educational profession	Female educators	Male educators	Both equally	Total
1. Welcoming	22.4	0.2	77.4	100.0 (No. 477)
2. Relationships	15.5	1.3	83.2	100.0 (No. 476)
3. Cognitive stimulation	9.6	1.0	89.4	100.0 (No. 477)
4. Movement and play	6.3	16.0	77.7	100.0 (No. 475)
5. Affective area	26.7	0.6	72.7	100.0 (No. 475)

Who is most competent in the various educational dimensions in the teaching age group 3-6 (%)

Dimension of the educational profession	Female educators	Male educators	Both equally	Total
1. Welcoming	15.5	1.1	83.4	100.0 (No. 440)
2. Relationships	9.4	2.1	88.5	100.0 (No. 438)
3. Cognitive stimulation	4.1	3.0	92.9	100.0 (No. 437)
4. Movement and play	2.7	17.8	79.5	100.0 (No. 438)
5. Affective area	18.7	0.2	81.1	100.0 (No. 431)

Despite recognising the wealth and need for a mixed working context, the female stereotype of care work is reinforced by the female teachers and educators themselves - as well as by the males, where present in the focus groups - attribut-
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ing the low presence of males to gender and the social and economic implications of that type of work. This confirms the fact that the "female care vocation underlies women's reclusion to the home to look after children, the sick and the elderly [...] and male experience remains unsaid, confused with the patriarchal regulatory system and its historical representation" (Ciccone, 2009, p.169; 159):

A. Ed. F. 35 years: There is low male representation I think because they consider it the work of female educators, sincerely...

P., Ed. F. 58 years: [...] Maybe it is also a job that requires patience, perhaps men have less than women...

F., Male Coll. 31: [...] It's one of those jobs that... was born female, so...and because the nursery, the preschool... they're all designed as places of care, not so much an educational service but rather a place where children are looked after... and because the male figure had a different meaning, a different role until a short time ago. Let's say that now the male role has changed because today it's almost... domestic, so perhaps this also helped... and this certainly... should have been the case ... how can I say? Anyone who wanted to make such a choice was probably halted by this a bit.

The representation of how women's fate has always been to take care of others, looking after the home, clearly emerges, while for men this is a "new thing", things are changing now, because men have always *lived* outside, doing jobs that take them away from the home and from care.

In reflecting on the roles of gender in this profession, considerations also emerged on male behaviour, which has somehow reinforced the gender stereotype of being a girl or a boy. In detail, in several focus groups, it emerged from the female educators how the even temporary presence of a male educator, involved for them a "double job", as the "males" were not able to set rules, but placed themselves on the same level as the children, involving them in very active play and movement, which never happened with them:

L., Ed. F.,....: [...] Unfortunately M. [male educator] didn't set any rules and played with the children all the time and I had to set the rules and we also had a big row over this because he let everything pass, from even orthodox games to the strangest things because he knew he was supported by someone who would set things straight and remedy the damage caused.

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M.C., Ed. F. 56 years: [...] He had difficulty [the male educator], they have trouble respecting the schedules, sticking to the rules, doing things calmly, at least the ones that I have known, these male educators, you don't often see them with the smaller children and I've seen only a couple with the older ones, somehow they manage to cope and lead the group, but I saw the younger kids in difficulty.

Further exploring this resistance to accept males in a professional role for this age group, characteristics defined as "biological" or "instinctive", "part of their DNA" emerged, together with the sphere concerning the *maternal instinct* that belongs only to the female world:

M. C., Ed. F. 56 years: [...] I say this also of F., [male educator], who I worked with for a year and we worked really well together, but now, God willing, he's going to do something else, is already doing something else, because he didn't find it satisfying.

M., Ed. F. 50 years: [...] Some things they have a hard time with [male educators] when the children wake up, they're not very good with crying, it's true, they cope much less than we do...

M., Ed. F. 50 years: [...] For me it's not just a question of experience, because I think that you can gain experience, but you do in other things, the fact of standing children crying or other things I don't think that's anything to do with experience, if I think about it then I would have said that, really, it's a much more feminine thing.

M. C., Ed. F. 56 years: [...] Women have always been used to listening... [they are more able] to cope with certain negative things ...

E., Teacher. F. 42 years: [...] Sorry I don't mean to be nasty but let's say it as it is, they're not really any good at keeping an eye on 26 children like we do!

P., Teacher F. 57 years: [...] It's always a question of that little bit of DNA...

G., Teacher. F. 59 years: [...] Men can't multi-task, it's been demonstrated!

There is therefore strong ambivalence and contradiction among the female (and male) educators over the control mechanisms of gender models: while initially the care and education tasks are recognised as cultural skills, now, almost to give them greater strength and validity, they are recognised as natural and instinctive. It should also be underlined how there is further ambivalence in the answers

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to the questionnaires given by the educators (of both sexes), bearing witness to the fact that we are in the midst of a cultural *transition* concerning the identities of roles and genders, so models appear even more confused and mixed up, between processes of *naturalisation* and critical awareness. In fact, to the question if "**women are more inclined to take care of the home**", 56.8% stated they agreed with this statement, above all the staff of private catholic schools, but also among those who state that they have participated in gender education projects (63.8%).

This representation, which mirrors a division of tasks concerning the different times and spaces available to men and women, internal and private spaces for the women and public, social places for the men, has over time become a kind of *standard*, which has set rules over the individual and collective destinations of women and men. Even assuming the face of *naturalness* and "the right thing" because that's how it's always been: "*some things male educators have a hard time with, such as the children crying*", more than one female educator stated, because "*women have always been used to listening and coping with certain negative things*". In this way, they become authoritative features underlying the foundations of civil and political cohabitation, but also part of self-perception, as men and women, female workers more suited to certain jobs and male workers to others.

Prejudices also emerge concerning the type of distress caused by the presence of a male colleague: this could be considered an opinion deriving more from the influence of media stereotypes - above all over the fears linked to paedophilia and deviance, than from actual experience in the working context:

B., Ed. F. 40 years: [...] I think that a male educator would be a great resource and I believe that with the right training and experience he too can learn these things. However, as a person I have sexual prejudices towards a man who is interested in childhood, and if I have to tell the truth, from the gut, perhaps because... I don't like it... if you do it with your own child fine.. but a man playing with a little girl, I don't like it...

The difficulty and discomfort in thinking of the male body as capable of affection and welcoming considered the prerogative of the female gender emerges as a taboo. The mirror of these prejudices refers to the considerations of the male educators involved in the discussions, who state both the common experience of initial diffidence by female colleagues and parents, related to their being men within a care work, as well as the limited access to some working contexts, particularly with the 0-3 age group.

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M., Op. Male, 41 years: [...] As I man it's better not to ... for example 0-3 year parent and baby facilities are designed to be run exclusively by female educators. Nobody ever asked me if I would like to join...

And commenting, within a focus group, on the results of the quantitative questionnaires concerning the "**level of agreement with the European Commission's proposal to introduce compulsory male staff in childhood services**" from which it emerged that 79.6% of male and female educators agreed, while in any case 20.4% stated that they did not agree, one female educator stated:

C., Ed. F. 50 years: [...] You work hard and earn little... And then...hell, the only thing we're any good at and they want to take that away from us too?

This comment mirrors the ambivalence still present even in an era of important changes concerning the recognition of social and relational genders. It refers to the attention needed and the meanings of the current repositioning of men within childhood. It is important to examine the complexity and fears inherent in this process: "*the doubt is therefore if in this interest for a field historically delegated to female skills there may also be an attempt by men to conquer a position of power. A position that in other relational areas of the couple, this today seems less possible*" (Bellassai, in Mapelli, 2012, p.55).

The possibility for men in our society and above all in future society to become active players in educational and care fields without being subordinate to or mimicking a female style in order to be accepted and recognised as able, may only pass through a process of self-searching and processing, as well as constant and competent training.

This represents the true challenge for men, to find and build male models in the realm of care, in order not to lose their own legitimacy in this so-considered *private, intimate* dimension, due to the social diktats of virility. Only through educational action, training paths and raising awareness of the categories of equality and diversity, is it possible to begin a process of change in perspectives, without this, once again, fixing defined male and female models to be adapted to.

5. Possible horizons

The directly absent voice in this research is that of the children attending the services. They were not directly involved or observed as our focus of interest lay in the possibility to measure, in the adult reference group of relatives and profes-

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sional staff, the expectations, projections and ideas of gender education in progress, in everyday practices and in their thoughts over them and their training to become future citizens. We therefore focused on the team of preschool staff in Emilia Romagna, them in particular and their identities "in progress", through their opinions and gender models they, both women and men, hold in an aware or unaware manner, because "it is clear from what said that there is a bond between women and children and how important it is to observe the situation of women in order to understand the situation of children, as, also supported by a current within feminist thought, they are *interdependent yet mutually oppressed* subjects" (Satta, 2012, p.45).

To free boys and girls from stereotyped models of gender identity we must first of all free the exclusively female care professions from stereotype, requalifying them economically, socially and culturally. "*Equal opportunities implies the re-valuation of the more female professions, economically, culturally.[...] How do we define the differences between women and men? How do we make them appear as two yet irreducible, one from the other? Denouncing the oppression of one by the other is not enough.[...] Gender alienation occurs because of the reduction of two into one: the human gender, would-be universal and neutral. We cannot resolve this alienation by abolishing what remains of the two, but rather by stating the differences between women and men and giving equivalent values to both genders*" (Irigaray, 1994, p.130; 132).

Thus the possibility of change that can legitimise entry to the *places* reserved for one or the other, prohibited by the rules of gender built over time throughout history, lies only in this positive tension among genders, without risking mutual standardisation, but able to redefine new educational paradigms for the children of today and tomorrow.

The possibility of awareness, of change that protects differences yet increasingly reduces the cultural and social disparities between genders, can only take place through political choices concerning training and education, which on one hand involve the various school levels with institutional education programmes on gender, differences and equality, rights and the deconstruction of social prejudice and phobias; on the other that involve education professionals and families in forms of training workshops.⁸

The possibility lies in educational practices, because it is "*precisely the social, discursive and interational nature of gender identity that it is possible to find the key to overcoming the dichotomous boundaries. Precisely because these boundaries are not a gift of nature but rather depend upon how and how much individuals accept, legitimise or challenge the methods available for living as males and females. They therefore depend upon the practices rooted into individuals' daily lives, and the methods we use to build discourse on and knowledge of them. We therefore have the possibility (and perhaps also the responsibility) to transform the dominant models into*

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plural experiences which are able to analyse, describe and offer social space to the myriad of personified subjectivities and the infinite ways of crossing the boundaries of gender. While it cannot be denied that there is a gender order made of social standards, constraints and expectations, it is equally true that the "social world, thus, is never simply reproduced: it is always, continuously, reconstructed in practice." Therefore, "social practice can push the gender order in different directions, and create different relationships between social structure and body" (Poggio, Selmi).

The gender balance in education and teaching remains an important issue of equality. That is why the gender dimension must be an integral part of the thought on teaching and teacher education policies, opening up vocational education more and more to men and offering greater support for women in reconciling their multiple roles. As Smulyan stated (2004, p.540), this would help to *"provide students with opportunities for critical analysis of the teaching profession, the position of women both in the context of education and in wider society, their personal choices and the conflicts inherent in the different roles they experience in the field. We need these reflective practitioners, we need these women to choose to teach."*

Notes

¹ The research group includes: Chiara Cretella (Sociology), Francesca Crivellaro (Cultural Anthropology), Manuela Gallerani (General and Social Education), Giovanna Guerzoni (Cultural Anthropology), Stefania Lorenzini (Intercultural Education), Elena Malaguti (Special Education), Rosy Nardone (Teaching and Learning Strategies and Special Education), Federica Tarabusi (Cultural Anthropology), Elisa Truffelli (Experimental Education), Federica Zanetti (Teaching and Learning Strategies and Special Education)

² Specifically, the research project was promoted by the Equal Opportunities and Social Policy Departments.

³ For more information on all the data and topics analysed, please refer to the research report published on the link <http://statistica.regione.emilia-romagna.it/news/stereotipi-di-genere-relazioni-educative-e-infanzia>. Moreover, the book including the analysis of all the topics emerging has been published in Italy: : Cretella C., Crivellaro F., Gallerani M., Guerzoni G., Lorenzini S., Nardone R., Tarabusi F., Truffelli E., Zanetti F., X, *Generi in relazione. Scuole, servizi educativi 0/6 e famiglie in Emilia Romagna*, Naples, Loffredo Editore, 2013.

⁴ Source: MIUR programming diagram, September 2008

⁵ Statistic report *How is the time of woman and men distributed in Europe?* EUROSTAT, 4/2006 available on line:

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http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-NK-06-004/EN/KS-NK-06-004-EN.PDF

⁶ To investigate the issue of men in education in history see also the research TSFEPS- *Changing Family Structure and Social Policy: Childcare Services in Europe and Social Cohesion*, Italian coordinator E. Mingione, 2002-2003

⁸ An interesting reflection about this point is express in Drudy, S. (2008). “Gender balance/gender bias: the teaching profession and the impact of feminization.” in *Gender and Education*, 20(4), 309-323. Available on line: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09540250802190131?journalCode=cgee20#.VHW2sclNfAg>

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