

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

“You're a man, so you're out of place”: reflexive thematic analysis of focus group with Italian teachers and educators

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Ederoclite, M., Villano, P., Castro, A. (2025). “You're a man, so you're out of place”: reflexive thematic analysis of focus group with Italian teachers and educators. *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION*, 28(1), 1-27 [10.1007/s11218-025-10020-0].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/1003651> since: 2025-01-30

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10020-0>

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

“You’re a man, so you’re out of place”: reflexive thematic analysis of focus group with Italian teachers and educators

Mario Ederoclite, Paola Villano, Aurelio Castro

Department of Education Studies, University of Bologna

Abstract

The following paper aims to understand how masculinity is endorsed, performed or subverted in educational and school contexts through the narratives and discourses of an Italian sample of teachers and educators of multiple genders. To investigate these relevant educational issues, we conducted a Thematic Analysis of four focus groups. Findings portrayed a complex social scenario marked by profound ambivalence towards masculinities and rigid gender hierarchies in pre-primary and primary schools. While men are highly considered to be role models of agentivity and authority, they also embody positive expectations of dismantling gender stereotypes and different types of sexual stigma: the mere presence of a male teacher in primary schools might raise concerns regarding physical contact and sexual deviance. Furthermore, men in teaching institutions face both privileges from their gender, perceived as more competent, practical, and authoritarian, but also discrimination via subtle forms of sexist devaluation as they are not considered “naturally suited” for childcare.

These relevant psychosocial processes have been recently put in the spotlight within broader conversations on sex/gender issues in educational settings, media narratives on masculinity, and diversity management practices. The following paper provides recent qualitative data from the Southern-European context to shed light on the social constructs of gendered scripts within the narratives of teachers and educators, analysing within this broader social framework how to

uncover representations, stereotypes, and biases regarding the schools' roles in fostering fairness and equal opportunities, both for educators and students.

Keywords: masculinities; school; male teachers; teaching; gender in education;

1. Introduction

Educators actively engage in functions that require and foster caring attitudes, nurturing skills, emotional awareness, while also creating positive relationships to support the development of children and infants. Although choosing a teaching career and being able to pursue it should be a rewarding choice free from gender-related pressures, historically this has been barely possible due to the rampant pressure of gendered structures and hierarchies of masculinity and femininity both in society and educational institutions (for a review of this theme, see Connell, 1996; 1989; Skelton, 2001; Arnot, 2002; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). Depending on one's own gender identity, for women, non-binary, and men educators a teaching career violates prescriptive norms and stereotypes of binary masculinity and femininity (i.e., STEM subjects for women). Regarding male teachers and educators, national data from the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (2022) reports that the percentage of male teachers, both temporary and permanent, in the first two levels of the state education system (i.e. kindergarten and primary school) hovers around 4.3% of the total. A scenario transculturally confirmed by the OECD Education at a Glance 2023 report which highlights significant gender imbalances in education, with men constituting an average of 15% in Primary Education and just 0.3% in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Male representation in these fields remained largely unchanged between 2013-2020, varying by country—12% in Brazil, 13% in the USA, 31% in Mexico, and 36% in Japan. The report emphasizes the

underrepresentation of men in ECE, questioning societal gender norms, the reasons for men's reluctance to pursue this career, and the impact of this segregation on broader gender dynamics.

These processes reflect gendered power dynamics throughout society and organizations where essentialist views of sex/gender frame masculinity in opposition to the feminine “domains” of caregiving, childcare and early education. The work of Moss-Racusin and Johnson (2016) highlights how the absence of men, besides representing a barrier for future teachers/educators, can also be problematic for minors of all genders. They suggest that the lack of exposure to well-prepared, competent, and relationship-oriented male teachers could influence the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and their future career aspirations, as similarly noted by Priulla when stating that: “The student is confronted with the fact that the more cultural content rises and specializes, the more it is entrusted to men” (2016, p. 15).

Historically, Early Childhood Services is linked to traditional gender roles since teaching has been considered an acceptable and less demanding job for women because it provided them with the opportunity for emancipation while still fulfilling family and social roles. Ironically for a learning institution, schools represent some of the most resistant contexts in adapting to both diverse gender performances and modern principles of gender equality, despite European organizations urging concerted efforts to achieve gender parity (Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda). In the Italian context, some policies date as far back as 1997 with a Directive from the then Prime Minister Romano Prodi (March 27, 1997) committed to creating conditions for “*a culture of gender differences*”. Although in recent years Italy has experienced significant changes across various domains, including work organization, family structure, and perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood (Minello, 2022; Cannito, 2023), the country still ranks unfavourably in global assessments of gender equality. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2023), Italy ranks 79th out of 146 nations

surveyed. This discrepancy between societal shifts and gender parity outcomes underscores persistent structural challenges and barriers to achieving equality in Italy (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023). Unfortunately, gender segregation is often seen as a women's issue, with educational initiatives focusing on encouraging girls in STEM while leaving masculine norms unchallenged as proved by the fact that there are no national strategies to address gender stereotypes affecting boys' educational choices, and instead, school militarization targeting male children is increasing. These findings emphasize the ongoing need for concerted efforts to address gender disparities and promote greater equity across all sectors of Italian society (Biasin et al., 2020), which still lacks any antidiscrimination laws for sexual orientation and gender identity; therefore, gender binaries are enforced against the identities and wellbeing of gender-non-conforming and queer children and students (Bourelly et al., 2022).

Researchers seeking to address the underrepresentation of men in schools, while acknowledging their structural privileges (Connell, 1987; 2003), are encountering significant challenges. The shortage of male staff in schools is often attributed to motivational or cultural factors, like the "feminization" of education. While both genders choose teaching based on personal values and market conditions (Argentin, 2013), the role of gendered dynamics and segregation is rarely critically examined.

For these reasons, following an intersectional perspective the present paper aims to investigate how the performances of teaching and the process of becoming a teacher are socially constructed and represented in Italy by analysing which models of masculinities are available within the school environment, how are they signified and how they shape the relational dynamics and the negotiation processes that occur in schools. Adopting this perspective entails creating a space for reflexivity on privileges, power, and identity within a deeply gendered setting. This specific area

of research appears to have encountered limited interest in Italy (Mapelli & Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2012; Biemmi & Leonelli, 2016; 2018; Carrera, 2013; Argentin, 2013; Ottaviano & Persico, 2019), given that the increasing predominance of female teachers in schools is not perceived as a major issue. Also, we engage with the latest research on "caring masculinities" (Elliot, 2015), "hybrid masculinities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), and "inclusive masculinities" (Anderson, 2009) not as mere "opposites" to hegemonic and toxic ones, but within a spectrum of socially constructed and culturally situated practices of masculinity. Therefore, we cannot assume that engaging in caregiving activities automatically leads men to challenge traditional or hegemonic views of masculinity. Studies on straight masculinities show that specific framings and counternarratives of masculinity are not inherently revolutionary: men can adhere to some form of "heroic masculinity" where they challenge traditional stereotypes and ways of "being a man" because it is regarded as a harder choice that few men can achieve (Castro, 2021). Indeed, the caregiving sphere is a space where power dynamics are extremely embedded, and where representations and rigid role divisions have been solidified (Nayak, 2023), between the idealized heroism of men who have choices and the naturalness of women who, instead, are obligated, pushed, directed toward care provision.

Finally, the present research should be contextualized in the Southern-European context of Italy where huge cultural, economic, and material differences exist between the country's northern and southern regions. For example, due to a greater proportion of full-time primary school classes in the North (49.5%) compared to the South (19.6%) there is significant internal migration from the southern regions (Associazione per lo sviluppo dell'industria nel Mezzogiorno [Svimez], 2023). While facing high cost of living and the lack of affordable housing in northern cities, pre-primary and primary school teachers in Italy earn less on average than secondary school teachers. In fact,

according to the Eurydice study (2023) in thirteen European education systems the average teacher's income is more than the GDP *per capita* for teachers at all or most educational levels; in Italy, it is lower only for pre-primary and primary education. These elements outline a scenario where several inequalities intersect with socioeconomic status, gender, and class factors: engaging in occupations traditionally associated with femininity means doing underappreciated and underpaid work.

2. Schools as hegemonic contexts

According to Connell's perspective (2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), educational institutions contribute to the perpetuation of the "gender regime," which encompasses various mechanisms and attitudes reinforcing the binary system (Abbatecola & Stagi, 2017), including favouritisms against male figures. Connell (2006) posits that all societies have a "gender order," which is an organized domain of human practices and social relationships that shape masculine and feminine patterns within a given historical and cultural context. It could be argued, following Sargent (2005), that schools are "gendered" in two ways: firstly, due to the presence of a structural asymmetry between genders, and secondly because the teaching profession itself is typically imbued with gendered meanings and defined in gender terms (cf. Henson & Rogers, 2001). The notion of schools as a "neutral environment" is contradicted by instances of discrimination, violence, and stereotypes (Cosma et al., 2024) because schools operate on two levels: the explicit curriculum (what is directly taught) and the hidden or implicit curriculum (the underlying messages conveyed). The hidden curriculum, a concept developed in the 1980s by Apple (1979) and Giroux (1981), subtly teaches power dynamics, social norms, and values that reflect and reinforce the culture of dominant classes, perpetuating social inequalities. This means that

education can't be neutral but is influenced by socio-political factors which leads teachers, often unaware of these implications, to avoid questioning the knowledge they impart, leading students to conform to or resist the school's official culture.

3. What we know about masculinities in school

Schools convey and reinforce hegemonic sexual and gender binaries, including how male educators and teachers are given certain specific fields that trace the domains of traditional masculinity (cf. Bourdieu, 1998). Research analysing the psychosocial factors deterring men from pursuing teaching careers (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cushman, 2005) identifies several recurring themes. These include the perception of teaching as a biologically "female" profession, justified by lower salaries, reduced authority, and limited social recognition compared to higher-level teaching roles. Additional barriers include stigma from others for choosing this career, sexual prejudice due to assumptions that male teachers are gay or bi+, resulting in minority stress for those within sexual minorities, and persistent fears of being accused of inappropriate behaviour, given the physical interaction required with young children. (Berrill & Martino, 2002; Moosa & Bhana, 2022). Between privileges and stigma, the male presence in primary schools is often framed as a necessary figure to establish more discipline in the classroom and to foster in children and kids a positive identification with a role model that represents the heteronormative masculine gender and/or a father substitute (Cushman, 2008; Mills 2008; Skelton 2009; Cruickshank et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2020; Davis & Hay, 2018; McDowell & Klattenberg, 2019).

Studies suggest an underlying ambiguity in the attitudes of male teachers in performing their masculinity. Some scholars like Brookhart and Loadman, (1996) theorize that men interested

in teaching at elementary schools tend to be more caring and considerate, they often have prior experience in the caring and nurturing of children and youth (and would therefore be more likely to pass on these qualities). In contrast, empirical studies have shown that male teachers often engage in “hypermasculine” behaviours to compensate for the perceived feminine nature of their occupation (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). It seems that men employ strategies to maintain a sense of otherness or superiority over female colleagues, thus helping to sustain and reinforce the gender system that divides men from women in a way that privileges men (Williams, 1995 p. 122). In a comparative study between South Africa and Australia, McGrath et al. (2019) state that in such social contexts, within the broader patriarchal macrosystem, it is mainly the sexuality of male teachers that is questioned and assumed as not heterosexual since they link the idea caring as a form of sexual and gender inversion.

The most recurrent argument to support the need for more male teachers and educators refers to the possibility that they should serve as vicarious fathers and gender role models. Reactionary and conservatism discourses in which the “death of fatherhood” or the “evaporation of the Father” has long been announced (Recalcati, 2011; 2010). This ill-concealed nostalgia for paternal authority (Bellassai, 2012) translates into hiring more male teachers to provide “surrogate fathers” to children of single mothers, and widows (Cruickshank, 2016; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006). The binary assumption that “children need a fatherly figure” also applies to the dimension of “discipline,” since in a female-dominated context, the male teacher is experienced as the patriarchal representative of order and discipline also thanks to his physical characteristics and vocal power (Palmer et al., 2020; Mills, 2004, 2008). Dominance is a pillar of hegemonic masculinity, and in the teaching context men are considered best suited to managing problematic classes, granting them considerable social power over the

assumed ability to dominate others; whereas those men who do not fit in this model are degraded and mistreated (Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl, 2014). Moreover, several studies have highlighted the correlation between men and sports also in the school context (Mills, 2008; Cushman, 2008; 2010; Palmer et al. 2020) and many teachers are automatically confined to the realm of sports, especially football, as an active performance of masculine competitiveness and dominance. Other aspects concern the domain of technology and STEM as being typically masculine whereas women are better suited for childcare and humanities (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015); manual labour and the expectation in schools to be highly skilled or, as summarized by Cruickshank (2016), to “fix and carry”; men are privileged to receive automatic attribution of managerial skills and being "natural" leaders (Skelton, 2002).

Finally, according to some studies male teaching is often seen as a “stepping stone” to a better career. In Williams’ sociological analysis (1992) this phenomenon represents the opposite of the “glass ceiling” since, in his research, men in traditionally female professions (e.g. elementary school teachers, secretaries, and nurses) are pushed up a “glass escalator.” Despite their intentions, they often face invisible pressures to move into work positions considered more appropriate and prestigious for a man. Overall, male teachers are described as task-focused, technically proficient, physically strong, adventurous, competitive, emotionally neutral, and fond of “boyish” activities, and heterosexual (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Foster & Newman, 2005).

4. Reflexivity

The current study is an exploratory, qualitative research, serving as a part of a broader project on the social construction of masculinity of male teachers and educators in Italy.

Conducting research from a "gender-sensitive" (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016), constructionist, and intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1990) allows us to analyse the social categories of sex/gender as intertwined social constructs that deeply influence all aspects of human life (e.g. social and intimate relationships, power dynamics, access to work environments) at the intersections with other axes of oppression like class, race, sexual orientation, citizenship, spirituality, disability, etc. The first author positioned himself as a former teacher and educator in primary care contexts in the South of Italy. Drawing from both personal experience of teaching in primary schools and having a background in psychology, the first author worked reflexively to critically examine certain events that occurred in his professional career: from having to justify his motivations for applying to work in early childhood education to being regarded as "one less womb to manage" in a predominantly female environment to being urged to leave primary school to fulfil more suitable ambitions for a man. By experiencing throughout his career path both forms of privilege and benevolent sexism, it was possible to further situate the participant's narratives and build trusted relationships with those who took part in the study and might have shared some of these experiences (i.e. internal migration). Whereas, the second author Professor Paola Villano has a background in social psychology of discrimination and dehumanization in general societies and educational contexts: her work focuses on the promotion of health and wellbeing in institutional, scholastic and vulnerable contexts from a cross-cultural perspective. Lastly, the third author Prof. Aurelio Castro is a social psychologist and queer scholar focusing on studying sexual orientation, masculinities and work discriminations from a social constructionist, queer, intersectional, transfeminist perspective; having experiences on leading experiential workshops on masculinities and mixed-method research, they supported the research design, process and analyses.

Finally, the collected interviews and focus groups should be situated through a historical, pedagogical, and socio-psychological lens linked to the southern European context of Italy, where schools have become semi-privatized organizational contexts (with ungraded internal evaluation processes for workers, like in private companies, and students with the INVALSI tests); therefore, these contexts are not exempt from processes of dominance, inequality and social hierarchy of class, gender, and race among other identities. Indeed, deeply rooted images of femininity and masculinity are reinforced via schools and curricula which are "affecting the workplace processes and ordinary decision-making that perpetuates gender differentiation and inequality" (Acker, 2012, p. 218). The research team, composed of members from different regions of Italy (the insular south, central-south, and north-west), engaged reflexively on how their diverse backgrounds may have influenced the study and participant's responses. Considering the significant cultural differences between Italian regions and the impact of both internal and external migration (Castro & Carnassale, 2019), these factors, particularly the migration of southern Italians to northern cities have shaped social dynamics and career paths. For example, in some metropolitan cities like Milan and Bologna are so high that, especially in the public sectors and educational contexts, there could be more internal migrants from different southern regions than local northerners within one individual social and work networks.

5. Methods

5.1. Framework

Four focus groups were conducted from a socio-constructivist perspective (Burr, 2015). This theoretical framework considers social categories as perceived and constructed by the interactions among humans and between them and their social contexts instead of considering social reality as an *a priori category*. Instead, categories are performed and produced by speech, symbols, meaning, and actions that, continually and recursively, reproduce and reinscribe categories, norms, constraints, and requirements. These constructions also concern discourses on sex/gender as historically and culturally situated categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). The meanings that individuals and groups attribute to these categories stem from culturally available discourses, some of which have more ideological and hegemonic power than others. From Foucault's socio-constructivist perspective, each institution, including schools, has diverse discourses about sex, gender, and sexuality. They perpetuate a fixed binary and heteronormative understanding of gender regarding the attitudes of the teaching staff and the educational methods and practices employed: what is conveyed through teaching, the languages and images used, and the teacher's subjectivity are always influenced by the axis of oppression and privileges like sex/gender.

Our viewpoint emphasizes how gender differences are sustained through daily encounters in which people negotiate social categories, highlighting the flexibility of identities, and opposing essentialist ideas. Yuval-Davis (2015) advocates using intersectionality analysis to better understand how different aspects of social power overlap and influence people's social identities. To prevent exceptionalism, this approach should be applied generally, rather than only to marginalized groups, with the goal of understanding how diverse social divides affect people's

lives. Hancock (2016) emphasizes the relational nature of power formation, claiming that intersectionality-like thinking precedes Foucault's theories of power. According to Lombardo (2016), an intersectional lens that considers socioeconomic class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, enhances social constructivism by shedding light on power relations. Intersectional viewpoints broaden social constructivist theories by recognizing many types of inequality, enhancing the relationship between gender approaches and social constructivism in the analysis of changing social constructions and power dynamics (Lombardo in Abels et al., 2021).

To investigate the social construct of masculinity, we adopted an in-depth approach with three levels of analysis: an intrapersonal component examined by the process of retelling and narrative construction of the motives and decisions that led these participants to embark on a teaching career; a relational aspect related to the perceived support or ostracism from other social actors (e.g., colleagues, peers, managers, parents of students) as well as the thorny dimension of corporeality and physical contact with children and their perception from adult actors. Finally, an organizational dimension was evaluated through an in-depth analysis of the representations, stereotypes, and prejudices attributed to teachers as workers in the public and private sectors.

By adopting an intersectional framework, we view men's career choices as a co-constructed process influenced by individual agency and sociocultural factors. The interaction of gender, class, migration, sexual orientation, and professional seniority shapes their experiences, creating a complex landscape that either challenges or reinforces existing gender norms as men navigate their identities and careers. Considering these reflections, the present study inquired the following research questions: *how do educators and teachers establish and validate scripts masculinity within an environment characterized by femininity? Are traditional/hegemonic models of*

masculinity enforced in schools and teachers' narratives to avoid challenging gendered norms and roles?

5.2. Participants

Eighteen participants took part in the four different focus groups conducted for the present research. Of these, 12 were male teachers and educators of nursery, kindergarten, and primary school in service in Italy. The participants' average age was 41 years, all of them native Italians, and some among them had experienced internal migration from the southern regions of the country to the northern ones. The remaining 6 participants were female educators and teachers from different regions of Italy. The female participants' average age was 50 years, and, on average, had more job experience compared to the men, often having started teaching at a very young age.

Tab. 1 Participants

1° Group men	2° Group men	3° Group men	4° Group women
Ntò, 38, T-PS *	Boris, 58, E-PS	Ale, 37, E-K *	Koala, 40, T-PS *
Falco, 43, T-PS	Paperinik, 54, T-PS	B0Juss0, 28, T-PS	Lila, 58, T-PS
Edmond, 53, T-PS *	Brancaleone, 39, T-PS	Crep, 23, T-PS	Luisa, 47, T-PS
Silver, 38, E-PS	Matita, 48, T-PS	Gennaro, 43, T-PS *	Lara, 63, T-PS
			Lenù, 50, T-PS
			Piupina, 44, T-PS

T teacher; E educator; K kindergarten; PS primary school; * Internal migration.

The decision to include a group of women in the research stems from the aim of gaining a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon: not only because of the relationality of the genders but also to try to explore masculinity as a performance, which includes a set of attitudes

and behaviours that can also be enacted by women (Halberstam, 1998). To paraphrase Cook and Fonow (1990, p. 80), if feminist research is not research about women but for women, we might say that research on men is research *with* and *for* men, aimed at bringing to light beliefs and representations and initiating processes of critical reflection.

Unfortunately, no gender diverse and/or non-binary teachers or educators were found through the participation module shared online and via the snowballing procedure. The online form contained a description of the research objectives, references to confidentiality, and an invitation to provide some biographical data; participants could provide interest in taking part in an online FG (Study I) and, possibly, an interview to be conducted later (Study II). The small sample size might be due to how male primary school teachers and educators are a hidden minority of individuals not motivated by collective action or identity; even the snowballing procedure was hindered by the fact that many male teachers did not know any other colleagues of their gender and sector. To address the challenges of recruiting a "hard-to-reach" (Chamberlain & Hodgett, 2018) population, a mixed-methods approach was employed, leveraging existing relationships and respondent-driven sampling. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the understudied nature of the topic, a respondent-driven sampling strategy was deemed the most viable approach to recruit participants from this hard-to-reach population.

After collecting the responses, participants registered on a calendar three different dates for the focus groups but after initial interest several participants declined the invitation or chose not to participate. Perhaps this dropout element is likely due to a lack of political self-awareness as research subjects. Being "just" men, thus part of a privileged group, without further intersectional characteristics (e.g. young, disabled, racialized, queer, etc.) may have hindered their motivation to participate. After the focus groups, participants completed a questionnaire with

socio-demographic (e.g., age, geographical area of work, work experience in years, any prior employment history, sexual orientation) and contextual data, including what subject they teach, if any, the headteacher's gender, whether any male coworkers were present, and a pseudonym for transcripts. On average, participants reported circa 15 years of job experience and mature experience as instructors and educators. The teaching field is extremely diverse, with little prevalence for scientific subjects (i.e., math and sciences). In the participant's schools, other male coworkers are present, albeit in low numbers and the management is largely female. All the participants identified as heterosexual.

5.3. Procedure

Between January and April 2023, the research team started recruiting and conducting four focus groups *via* the platform Microsoft Teams for interviewing, recording, and later transcribing *verbatim*. The focus group technique was highly effective in uncovering individuals' perspectives and discursive repertoires on specific issues, allowing for a deeper understanding of their viewpoints, motivations, and the underlying reasons behind their beliefs. In this initial phase of the study focus groups were used for exploratory purposes of the phenomenon in the Italian context, and how perceptions of masculinity are generated, negotiated, contested, or adhered among individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Wilkinson, 1998a; Hollander, 1994). Moreover, because they empower participants by providing a forum for individuals experiencing similar situations to engage in dialogue (Kitzinger, 1994), focus groups can serve as an opportunity for professionals to reflect on their own experiences. Smaller group size allows participants to be able to express themselves in a relaxed time while always having two researchers of mixed genders, as co-moderators. The groups were made up exclusively of individuals of the same gender selected

randomly for the men. Participants were eager to discuss sensitive topics (i.e., false accusations, embodiment) yet we employed discursive "safety nets" to avoid triggering negative experiences. The FG protocol explored: a) qualities and attitudes for being a good teacher; b) what attracted them to childcare; c) the concept of the "feminization of the school system," stereotypes and the representation of men; d) relational dimension: social and professional relations in the school; e) corporeality and physical contact. Each focus group lasted about two hours. The subjects' participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

5.4. Analysis

Analysis started after all focus groups were completed, using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2020; 2022). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) is characterized as an adaptable qualitative data analysis method that is well-suited for examining extensive datasets and elucidating patterns within the viewpoints and experiences of study participants.

Following the guidelines put forward by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2020; 2022) for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the iterative and inductive process of thematic analysis revealed how individuals, specifically the participants narrate, perform, or subvert their gender in the educational setting. Moreover, employing RTA enabled the researcher to incorporate personal experiences and subjective narratives to enrich existing theory, pose new research inquiries and synthesizing participants' experiences. Using a social constructionist epistemology enabled a nuanced exploration of gendered identity discourses, particularly masculinities, via online social research (Gergen, 1987). By incorporating intersectionality, the current analysis examined power,

privilege, and inequality, shedding light on the complex role male teachers play in shaping both their own' and children's educational experiences (Cho et al., 2013).

The coding was stratified in three levels and the primary coding strategy used was *inductive*, involving the direct inquiry into themes drawn from the data content. Furthermore, a *semantic* approach was adopted to maintain a close adherence to the participants' language and provide a descriptive account of their experiences. However, in certain circumstances, the coding process delved into the *underlying coding level when tackling* assumptions and scripts of the data, offering a more conceptual interpretation guided by literature. Braun and Clarke (2022) posit that Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) can capture meaning across a spectrum, ranging from surface-level semantics to deeper, latent concepts. Semantic coding explores the explicit meanings expressed in the data, while latent codes delve into implicit or conceptual understandings (Braun et al., 2016). These levels are not mutually exclusive but rather points along a continuum. An interpretative approach has enabled us to identify a pattern of individualization in the participants' narratives: for example, how male teachers appear less inclined to acknowledge a collective experience or to mobilize resources for social change based on a shared marginalized identity. While TA has faced criticism regarding the potential influence of researcher bias and subjectivity on data interpretation, Braun and Clarke acknowledge that such subjectivity is not merely inescapable but constitutes a valuable attribute of this methodology. They assert that the researcher's subjectivity and their interpretation of the data are considered assets for knowledge generation, inherently shaping the resulting knowledge, rather than representing an inherent threat to the method's credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This approach involved one researcher gaining insights into themes by reviewing the existing literature and discussing them with the research team. These preliminary themes were then honed through coding and repeated scrutiny of the data.

Similar codes were organized with relevant data and formed into coherent clusters of meaning. The researcher continued to refine these themes until they accurately and comprehensively reached saturation and group consensus.

6. Findings

Through our analysis, we constructed four major themes concerning the diverse aspects of education institutions, gender performances, engagement at work, and practices in teaching careers and contexts: Ambivalence of the school system; Physical and emotional involvement; Educational and didactical practices; Representation of feminization and virilizations.

6.1. Ambivalence towards masculinity

Like any socially institutionalized context, schools and educational environments are organized by expected roles and hierarchies that should be maintained: gender performances and binaries are incurred and reproduced by all, whether one is a teacher, a director, a student, or janitor. When discussing how masculinity is constructed, we should look at its scripts, valence, and relationships towards other genders and identities. In the present research, we suggest that schools are perceived as ambivalent systems that see masculinity (rarely pluralized) as something that must be preserved and managed, confined to certain roles, or treated like an adornment or accessory.

An underlying theme connected to this ambivalence throughout the study has been the following:

Are male teachers and educators in schools an accessory or an added value?

This issue represents a relevant challenge for understanding the experiences of male teachers and educators in both schools and educational services, as it shapes how masculine genders are treated and the potential impact of having a positive gender identity on workplace well-being. Being

perceived as accessories implies, for teachers, the attribution of a marginal position in a context that is numerically dominated by females, symbolized – in Edmond’s (primary school teacher) opinion - by the absence of a dedicated restroom for male teachers. The experience of being "used" for practical matters, small tasks, or to resolve technological problems often – according to Matita a primary school teacher - conceals a lack of esteem for their educational and teaching capabilities:

Because you're a man, you should know how to fix the shutters, which might even be true, but, well, I came here with a degree, with training, winning a competition exam. I mean, it's fine, I can even fix the toilet because I'm a man, but it's not very professionally fulfilling.

On one hand, feeling like an added value may be a reference to the privilege associated with being male (e.g., assumptions of credibility, and competence) whereas the ambiguity associated with men's interaction with children might render masculinity a factor that 'plays against you' (E. Primary school teacher). A participant notes the valorization and appreciation of the few male colleagues reflecting a kind of exclusivity due to their presence, also highlighting how it is associated with a high level of trust and an abundance of responsibilities, plausibly attributed based on gender rather than actual skills:

[...] Parents are pleased to have a man; you are taken into consideration because you are the rare one. It's a market factor, in the sense that if salary liberalization were to come about, I would probably earn more than women because there are so few of us (Matita; man, 48, primary school teacher from Northern Italy).

By portraying stereotypes and inequalities within the school environment, the participants highlighted how societal expectations based on gender roles influence tasks and responsibilities. Their contribution demonstrates how gender imbalances tend to privilege the male component,

whose contributions are considered more valuable compared to female figures (Peeters et al., 2015).

6.2. Nuances of bodiliness and physical contact

Fearing the stigma of latent paedophilia and anticipating potential accusations, male teachers set strict boundaries to avoid any suspicion. They take precautionary measures such as keeping their distance from children and being alert to the perceptions of others. This pressure to validate the purity of their actions, especially regarding bodily functions and touching, leads male teachers to be hyper-vigilant in their behaviour to safeguard their integrity amidst gender expectations.

The issue of masculine embodiment in education continues to be a source of debate (Jones, 2003). Idealistically, the educational nurturing of young children is founded on the educator/teacher's compassionate and loving interaction with youngsters. Children frequently demonstrate the need for physical connection by reaching out for a hand to grasp, a hug, or sitting on their instructors' laps to get a sense of security, relax, or just show affection: "If a young girl asks me for a hug, I give it to her" (B. a young primary school teacher). While similar nurturing actions are naturalized as essential and biologically-driven in women, they are disregarded, stigmatized, and repressed for men due to hegemonic patriarchal norms. These processes can also be traced back to how physical touch reignites the embedded ambiguity of contact as sexual and predatory rather than a sign of care, revealing a "double gender standard" (Cruickshank, 2019 p. 250). The following extract from a focus group introduces us, via an *underlying level* of coding, to this controversial theme in the experiences of male teachers:

It's a concern I had at the beginning of my career. I started when I was 27-28 years old and I was quite reserved, even in just offering my hand to the little girls who sought my

attention, holding a six-year-old girl's hand to show me around. However, as time passed, I became more at ease with certain expressive behaviours, partly because people got to know me, and they knew that I had a family and that I was a 'normal' person. So, now I'm much more at ease about this (P.; man, 53, primary school teacher in North Italy, married). It's significant how their family life, the way they are perceived by others, and their sense of normalcy as a person all contributed to their ability to handle relationships with children. This process may be an indication of a cultural shift in the way male professionals view and handle gender issues at work.

To these Italian male teachers, self-monitoring their behaviours serves as a coping strategy to counter the anticipated ambiguity of certain physical proximity gestures toward children while they work as caregivers and tutors. Undoubtedly, this stigma impacts their work experience, well-being, enjoyment of teaching, and their ability to aid and support students. Furthermore, those teachers who may want to challenge the stereotypes that privilege men by assigning women the burden of caregiving and emotional support (Eldred et al., 2022) would hardly see their efforts succeed. The scholar J. R. King (2000, p. 17) raises a paradoxical question about this matter, which can be summarized as follows: "If care is considered as a desexualized action directed toward innocent and desexualized beings, how can a teacher express themselves professionally when viewed with suspicion and hostility?"

Considering this dilemma, the social control mechanism imposed on the sexuality of male teachers becomes more transparent with the different gendered roles involved; for example, Allan (1994) outlined the profile of the "perfect suspect" of child abuse: young, single, childless, and displaying passion and enthusiasm for their work with kids. Particularly among the younger participants, there is a concern regarding how physical contact between a teacher and a student (i.e., hugs,

holding hands) can be interpreted, mostly due to the potential repercussions that an inaccurate or malicious perception by colleagues, janitors, etc. can have on one's future career. Still, male teachers seem to know how important it is to show affection and share positive contact with children, serving as an indicator of well-being in working with children. The following quote from a focus group highlights the emotional significance of children's gestures in the classroom, specifically the value of hugs and smiles from contented children. It emphasizes the profound impact of these expressions on teachers and their perception of their efficacy in creating a positive learning environment.

Children's hugs are the greatest gift that they can give to teachers, much like the smile on a Monday morning from children who don't cry. Every time, it truly warms my heart because I think, 'Oh my, I didn't remember being this happy to go to school, so it means we're doing a good job (Gennaro; man, 44, primary school teacher, has an experience of internal migration from a southern region).

The passage emphasizes the significant value teachers attach to the emotional bonds forged with their students. It highlights the role of non-verbal cues such as hugs and smiles in assessing student contentment within the classroom. The teacher's sincere reaction, linking personal childhood experiences with the present classroom ambiance, signifies a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with their teaching role. Overall, it underscores the reciprocal dynamic between educators' efforts and the emotional responses from children, cultivating a nurturing and favorable learning atmosphere. This aspect needs to be framed within the Italian context, where there is no specific legislation regarding physical contact with children at school, unlike in other countries that have codified this aspect with specific policies.

6.3. School as a Microcosm of Gender Equity?

During the focus groups, male participants claimed to implement cooperative approaches in their daily classroom management practices, aimed at fairness and developmental opportunities for students of all genders. When discussing work relationships between colleagues, they report that they fill the roles of mediators, whether they might want it or not. Likely, this occurs because of perceiving and presenting themselves (proudly) as a minority, which may signify greater sensitivity. It is also worth noting that this specific relational dynamic is supported by the idea, held by female colleagues, that the male figure could redress female 'dominance' due to being less competitive and more inclined to casual conversation. As the next extract shows, coded interpretively to highlight the underlying value placed on student-teacher relationships over traditional hierarchies, the teachers' primary objective is focusing on engagement rather than the assertion of authority.

(Families) look at you with a bit of curiosity, with interest. Many are pleased because they think, 'Ah, this class needs some straightening out.' 'I can't control my child.' 'The male figure asserts itself,' this is another stereotype, isn't it? I believe that most of us teachers have no desire to assert dominance but, above all, to engage (Ale; man, 37, kindergarten educator).

The dialogue captures one assumption about male teachers pressured by families to “naturally” provide discipline and control within the classroom setting, whereas teachers can have the shared goal of prioritizing engagement and connection with students over enforcing authority. This insight reflects the teachers' commitment to creating an inclusive and collaborative learning environment rather than conforming to stereotype-based expectations.

The gendered dimensions of developing methods for managing the classroom are culturally scripted, and individual teachers find themselves adhering to, altering and/or challenging some or all these scripts. Within the focus groups, this is where the narratives of male and female teachers differed the most. For these male teachers, participating in the classroom embodies a progressive process that involves teaching children to take on responsibilities, guiding them in their personal growth, and focusing on others. According to F., an experienced teacher, the female message can be translated as: “With my help, you can do it. Period. While the male message is: ‘You can do it’ with the appropriate detachment.”

This self-narrative often serves to gain distance from the image of the infantilizing and over-caring teacher. As our first research question posed, seems that male teachers construct a masculine script of being a “male teacher” who should interact with young children without succumbing to the sentimentality and infantilization attributed to female colleagues by themselves. To the participants male teachers, children should indeed be guided and accompanied with care while, at the same time, instilling into them a sense of discovery, curiosity, and increasing autonomy which is, in these stories, not perceived in the typical script of female teachers. In this push for autonomy, play, independence, and controlled risk, they are scripting their gendered interactions within the school context and between social actors (i.e. colleagues, parents, janitors, society, etc. etc.) a gender performance that “must” be different from those of their female colleagues. In the next extract, a teacher discusses what he perceives as the dominant and feminine way of presenting activities and communicating with children:

I see many tutorial videos on YouTube by female colleagues suggesting activities and, when addressing children, they use a somewhat ridiculous way of speaking [...] Instead, if there is a male figure who perhaps doesn't speak with a booming voice, I'm not saying that,

but maybe has a more normal attitude, the child appreciates that, they relate to you on an equal footing, without all this pretense (Brancaleone; man, 38, primary school teacher).

As shown here, they compare feminine, exaggerated and theatrical, and masculine, credible, and goal-oriented, scripts. Once again, it perpetuates an essentialized nature to women as being “dramatic”, while the “male style” of teaching is portrayed as grounded in acquired knowledge and skills.

The issue of the educational relationship with children focuses here on the diverse methods, strategies and embodied performances of which just how to use your voice is one of many figurative aspects. Male participants remarked on a sense of necessity when discussing the presence of male teachers with “masculine values,” following the idea that children intrinsically “need” an authoritative, adult figure capable of considering and treating them as individuals who need guidance, autonomy, and critical thinking. Conversely, when discussing the typical “feminine approach to teaching” the narratives of male teachers helped us understand how they socially construct the gendered scripts of “being a female teacher.” In our limited South European sample, femininity in school institutions is seen as both necessary and intertwined with a constructed “maternal sphere,” which is perceived as intrinsic to women's nature, particularly for those who choose this profession, stemming from both biological and cultural roots. Overall, instead of countering the binarism of gender roles, the male participants in our research focused more on “reconstructing” a niche where certain typically masculine characteristics become necessary again for the sake of children.

6.4. *"It's the DNA's fault."*

Gendered bodies, identities, and categories of sex/gender are socially constructed along two parallel tracks. In the first one, participants of all genders employed a plethora of discourses and references to essentially different genetics, hormones, DNA, behavioral patterns, and attitudes in men and women. Sexes and genders are viewed in a dichotomous way, especially for older participants (on average aged 45 and over) compared to younger teachers, with higher levels of education, which frames such differences through a more nuanced lens, framing them as individual characteristics rather than fixed essences. The following extract by M., a 48-year-old primary school teacher, highlights the complex interplay of gender perceptions and the challenge of navigating decision-making processes within a predominantly female environment:

In short, female colleagues tend to say, ‘Well, he’s a guy, he thinks that way, and since we’re the majority, we won’t bother trying to convince him.’ Besides, I must admit that I’m a bit impatient with unnecessary time-wasting, like when it takes more than 10 minutes to decide on Christmas songs.

As in this excerpt, *coded interpretatively*, a common topic among men educators is their self-described pragmatism by comparison with their female peers. During practical challenges in their daily tasks or in collegial situations these male educators appear to adopt the usual "action-oriented" attitude typical of the socialization of those assigned males at birth. Although they agree that what they denote as "pragmatism" may be misinterpreted as superficiality, it is portrayed as a "skill" or a manly attribute to recover in educational environments since it’s not fostered by their female colleagues, which are nevertheless perceived as more analytical, feminine, attentive, and profound. Answering our research questions about male scripts in teaching, male instructors may not realize how these gendered constructs perpetuate the same essentialized notions that disadvantage them when they choose to undertake caring, nurturing, and emotional roles at work

or in their personal lives. The construction of an essentialized "feminine approach," both diminished and deemed somewhat necessary, provides validation for maintaining and cherishing a "masculine approach" that has been marginalized within a gendered educational environment. Another extract about this Theme illustrates one of the circumstances in which the analysis delved into underlying assumptions and scripts. When participants' narratives relied on culturally anchored stereotypes, a deeper exploration became essential to uncover how these implicit beliefs shape the social construction of masculinity within the teaching profession.

It's true that we are a bit more pragmatic and provide that balance that sometimes isn't there among women, maybe because it's in our DNA, which makes us less envious of each other, right? And so, often — I say this negatively — women get lost in this, while we, up to a certain point, cut through, get to the point, and reach the goal. (Ale, 37, kindergarden educator)

On a semantic level, this statement reflects a perception of gender differences in professional behaviour, emphasizing pragmatism and focus on objectives as traits more commonly associated with men. This coding aligns with explicit content in the text, reinforcing a view of masculinity as a counterbalance to traits stereotypically attributed to women. However, at an underlying level extract like this one exposes a deeper cultural script that reinforces essentialist gender stereotypes, portraying men as pragmatic and goal-oriented while depicting women as emotionally conflicted or distracted. These assumptions reflect and perpetuate societal discourses that uphold binary gender roles, particularly in professional contexts.

The different representations of male and female teachers also transpire from the discursive repertoires that associate maternalistic/emotional characteristics with women and

paternalistic/practical to men in the relationships with children, parents, and other professional figures in schools (see Table 1).

Table 2 Dichotomous representation of teachers

Maestra/Female Teacher	Maestro/Male Teacher
Mother	Guide, companion
Moves in a comfort zone	Moves in a risk zone
Sensitive, attentive, gentle	Emotionally detached
Tendency to dramatize	Dedramatize
Competitive with (female) colleagues	Collaborative
Addictive	Pushes for independence and autonomy
Anxious	Takes risk into account

Two critical aspects, spanning across these themes, are the constructs of embodiment and physical contact: the perception of one's own body and the perception of how interpersonal contact is signified by social actors (i.e. students, parents, colleagues) holds a relevant and anxious corner in the narratives of these teachers, men, and women. During the focus groups, many reported surprise and, sometimes, discomfort especially in the early stages of their careers when, during their interactions with young children, they experience the difference in terms of size:

I found myself at the public preschool, and I remember my first day very fondly because I'm very tall, so I remember all these little kids beneath me, I looked at them, and they looked at me, thinking who knows what, and I thought, 'And now what do I do?' (Luisa; woman, 47, primary school teacher).

The contrast highlighted by the participant, describing herself as very tall in comparison to the much smaller children, not only signifies a moment of self-awareness but also suggests the centrality of the bodily dimension within the educational context.

Once the initial phase of discovery and adaptation to the school environment is overcome, two opposite paths open up for teachers of binary genders. For female teachers, the relationship with children is also built from a dimension of physicality where contact is perceived as a source of positive intimacy and well-being:

I have 21 years of experience in early childhood, and I've been in primary school teaching for 3 years now, so that imprint of early childhood remains. In the sense that for me, the relationship with children was primarily established through understanding, looking into each other's eyes, and being comfortable together (Luisa; woman, 47, primary school teacher).

The emphasis on fostering relationships with children through non-verbal clues signifies a continued commitment to relational pedagogy across different educational stages. Whereas for male teachers, the perception of physical contact with children strays from those of their female colleagues and is met with suspicion, distrust, and, often, homobiphobia (Castro, 2021). These prejudiced attitudes are primarily exhibited by the adult social actors in schools like colleagues, and families, as we can see from the next extracts where male primary school teachers share their experiences, these excerpts provide valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges they encounter in educational settings. They illuminate the societal biases and perceptions surrounding their interactions with children:

I hadn't even set foot in the school, and I already had a paedophilia report against me because I was a male who accompanied children to the bathroom (Ntò; man, 38, primary school teacher).

At the beginning, I really didn't want to, I didn't feel comfortable if a child came to hug me, especially the girls, not so much because I didn't like it, but because of the social image of sexualizing the matter (Crep; man, 23, primary school teacher).

Both male and female teachers share a positive viewpoint regarding the significance of bodily experience within the realm of education. They acknowledge and value the importance of incorporating physical engagement and body awareness as fundamental aspects of the educational process and part of fostering effective and comprehensive learning environments. They also highlight the therapeutic and reparative component of contact for the teachers themselves: “Staying with the children has unlocked for me a series of physical aspects, as well as the dimension of contact. Now I'm a person who hugs a lot” (B0Juss0; man, 28, primary school teacher).

Overall, the discussed Themes allowed us to highlight two significant elements that are situated at a meta-level in the focus groups with men and women: the group with female teachers and educators displayed a higher and more recurrent level of interaction; in many cases, there were interruptions and heated exchanges among the participants, often in disagreement amongst themselves. Instead, in the three groups of male teachers and educators the level of interaction was lower and more focused on reasserting their agreement over shared experiences. Secondly, female teachers frequently discussed the challenges of balancing emotional and domestic responsibilities with their work, including family and childcare difficulties. These topics were notably less common among male teachers, suggesting that they might either not experience these specific

challenges or are less aware of the unrecognized burdens and unpaid domestic labour their female colleagues face.

7. Discussion

One of the aims of the present research was to inquire how a group of Italian male teachers and educators in pre-primary and primary school settings embrace, embody, and/or challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity within educational settings. During the focus groups both groups of participants, men and women in teaching careers, shared their personal stories and professional choices through different and gendered lenses, starting from their motivations and the retelling of their career paths. For men teaching and educational work represented neither the first choice nor the final goal of their career path (Cushman, 2005a), many participants started from different sectors, mostly STEM fields before joining the educational sector. Although some female participants shared similar stories, their narratives revealed a "vocational" and "naturalized" element when talking about working with young children even when pursuing other occupations. This conveys an essentialist script of teaching where women are "born teachers and nurturers," whereas men can only "become" primary teachers and aligns with the theme *It's DNA fault* which essentializes gender differences, reducing them to biological factors.

According to our findings, this sample of educators holds an ambivalent view of school institutions as concerns the presence of male teachers. On the one hand, participants of both genders harbor male-savior expectations of male teachers as authoritative figures who are always able to discipline children, serve as paternal role models for children with complex family situations, and take care of predominantly male domains such as sports, technology, and manual work: masculinity is framed as being more suited to "child management" rather than relational

labour. Conversely, male teachers openly acknowledge that being men grants them certain privileges like more validation and support from school administrators or, whether they realize it or not, starting their career with higher levels of trust from families just for being men. They readily concede that their scarcity in female-dominated fields could potentially lead to greater financial compensation compared to their female peers, especially if quotas were designated for men and salary scales were liberalized.

Between adhering and challenging hegemonic notions of masculinity, the male teachers in this sample strove to demonstrate their capability to perform tasks traditionally associated with women and femininity: from remarking their training and competence in taking care of children to showing no remorse for choosing to teach at lower grade levels instead of pursuing a career at higher levels of education, or even outside the school system. Performing counter-stereotyped masculinity does not automatically translate into constructing inclusive (Anderson, 2009), reflexive or queer masculinities beyond gender norms (Castro, 2021). Rather than challenging head-on the constraints of hegemonic masculinity and gender binary through collective efforts, the underlying analysis shows that these cisgender and straight male teachers employ individual mobility strategies by engaging only in physical education or science subjects. Interestingly, most of them report that the most challenging aspect of their work is the relationships with their female colleagues and middle management staff since, in their discursive repertoires, being a male can be used as a weapon against an instructor via the spectre of sexual misconduct (e.g. harassment and/or paedophilia) or the homophobic stigma towards queer identities, regardless of whether a person is LGBTQIA+ or not.

The dimensions of embodiment and physical contact with children was the most prevalent and discussed across the four themes. The theme *Nuances of bodiliness and physical contact*

clarified how women could freely be in contact with children due to hegemonic notions of femininity whereas male teachers feel ambivalent because it's fundamental to have positive relationships with children but it might also expose them to alleged accusations from parents and colleagues that could perceive some gestures as sexually charged and ethically inappropriate. Male teachers undergo a form of surveillance that could have negative effects on their wellbeing and careers, especially those who have and/or identify with a non-heterosexual orientation. To overcome this impasse, Sargent (2000) highlights three different dynamics, which we could describe as coping strategies (more or less functional) that teachers can implement: first, forgoing any physical proximity to focus exclusively on teaching; second, integrating caregiving actions and attitudes into their educational and teaching style; or, finally, finding alternative and compensatory ways, to reduce the gap with their female colleagues and develop caregiving strategies considered to be "more masculine." Consistent with studies like those of Cruickshank *et al.* (2018), sociodemographic variables like marital status, parenthood, or grandparenthood moderate this processes, as highlighted by P., a male primary school teacher in his late fifties, his perceived normality among parents and colleagues is linked to his heterosexuality, as well as his roles as a parent and grandparent. Younger participants narrate themselves as more physically affectionate but also more concerned about their actions due to their early career path, whereas the older ones are more at ease with the potential ambiguity of their actions, being parents or grandparents themselves.

Discussing ambivalence as a social construct highlights a "double-bind" for men, driven by hegemonic masculinity. Men are socially expected to maintain discipline, engage in competitive activities, and assume dominant and managerial roles, which reinforces the scripted stereotype of the emotionally detached, authoritative teacher (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Cruickshank

et al., 2021). These gendered behaviors perpetuate essentialist beliefs about both men and women, even in male teachers who face gender-based discriminations in the workplace, and that these binary beliefs are based on unproven biological, genetic and socialized differences between sexes/genders. These rigid binary views persist in educational contexts, particularly in conservative religious settings like Italy, that lack any gender inclusivity and scientifically rigorous sexual and affective education curricula in any form (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019; Prearo, 2024). It would be best to bear in mind that rigid binary notions of sex/gender are the norm in educational contexts, rather than the exception (i.e., open and flexible views of gender as a spectrum).

Through intersectional lenses we have analysed how male educators and teachers contribute to children's development while, at the same time, being affected by the historical power dynamics and structural inequalities in educational systems and institutions, which impact people of different genders in the field of education in different ways. In one respect, male educators benefit from privileges linked to hegemonic authority and masculinity in society as they could be seen as natural leaders and valued role models, particularly by young boys; the skills and merits of male teachers are often overestimated in comparison to female teachers, and men receive praise for solidifying their respective gender stereotypes. On the flip side, they can find themselves in unfavourable situations when working in a setting where women have been historically secluded and, therefore, the presence or motives of a male teacher working with children might be perceived as suspect or invasive. Also, as female-dominated contexts primary schools are not exempted from hegemonic gendered relationships and praxis that marginalize individuals of underrepresented or underprivileged groups. Finally, scientifically valid curricula and critical studies challenging gender norms are unfortunately met with hostility, fear and repercussions from administrations, parents and politicians (De Simone & Pileri, 2022).

In summary, male teachers can help deconstruct the association between masculinity, authority and violence (see also Bhana & Moosa, 2016) but emphasizing naturalized gender roles, such as maternal and paternal figures, may inadvertently or voluntarily reinforce existing hierarchies (cf. Skelton, 2003). Instead, as shown by this intersectional research, it's possible to comprehend the complex role that male educators play in children's lives by considering the various facets of power, privilege, and inequality (Cho et al., 2013) that affect male teachers' experiences and impact children's education without framing the needs and experience of male and female teachers in opposition to one another. Further studies on the experiences of non-binary teachers will surely shed more light on how diverse genders perform in primary school settings.

8. Conclusions

Drawing from intersectional gender studies and Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2020; 2022) we analysed the social construction of masculinity in schools and early childhood educational settings via four different focus groups with 18 participants male or female teachers and educators. Our analysis developed four major themes on the interaction between the social construction of gender and working with children in primary school. First, *Ambivalence toward masculinity* participants framed primary school institutions as ambivalent contexts where male teachers must conform to traditional masculinity standards and roles while being disregarded as not naturally caregivers and nurturers. The second theme, *Nuances of bodiliness and physical contact* concerned both emotional and physical involvement with children, like self-surveillance, boundary setting and refraining from excessive emotional/ physical engagement to prevent any suspicions of sexual misconduct. The final two themes, *School as a Microcosm of Gender Equity?* and *"It's the DNA fault"* investigated the gendered perspectives on

teaching and, finally, the diverse representations and meanings attributed to male and female teachers.

Since educational institutions and staff often reinforce gender binaries by implicitly expecting traditional performances of masculinity and femininity, rather than favouring one specific gender (Connell, 1996, 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), research should critically inquire whether schools could be considered "feminized" solely based on numerical factors or if they align with hegemonic gender norms. Instead of focusing solely on gender balance, what should concern us about the school cultures is their capacity to embrace and respect differences, and their ability to create an inclusive and safe environment for those who do not adhere to a prescribed and normative gender model (cf. Griffiths, 2006). This frame could help us move to the conversation to the incorporation of gender equality into both hiring practices and school curricula together with breaking down heteronormative assumptions and sexism in the workplace; the less discriminations teachers face at work the more inclusive and safer educational environments they can create for all children, including cis, trans, intersex and gender-creative youth (Warin, 2019; Richards et al., 2017; Mejer & Leonardi, 2020). To do so, teachers need adequate resources, fair wages, stable contracts, and training to provide opportunities for children and parents to critically engage with social inequalities. This approach is crucial for developing "emotionally critical professionals" (Warin & Adriany, 2017) who can educate effectively in contexts where sexism and gender binaries are deeply ingrained.

In conclusion, since traditional notions of masculinity/femininity, intersecting with the axis of race and class, have been historically institutionalized in school contexts, the solution to build equal schools and communities will come neither from "feminization", a term mostly used as a scaremongering tactic in media narratives, nor from a targeted attempt to recruit male teachers.

Instead, researchers and policymakers should focus on dismantling the underlying processes and practices that generate inequalities in classrooms, schools, and, conversely, in society at large.

REFERENCES

- Abbatecola, E., & Stagi, L. (2017). *Pink is the new black. Stereotipi di genere nella scuola dell'infanzia*. Rosenberg and Sellier.
- Abels, G., Krizsán, A., MacRae, H., & van der Vleuten, A. (2021). *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Allan, J. (1994). *Anomaly as Exemplar: The Meanings of Role-Modeling for Men Elementary Teachers*. Iowa: EDRS. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED378190).
- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Argentin, G. (2013). Male routes to a teaching career: Motivations, market constraints and gender inequalities. *International review of sociology*, 23(2), 271–289.
- Arnot, M. (2002). *Reproducing gender? Critical essays on educational theory and feminist politics*. Routledge.
- Ashcraft, C., & Sevier, B. (2006). Gender Will Find a Way: Exploring How Male Elementary Teachers Make Sense of Their Experiences and Responsibilities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 7(2), 130–145. <https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2006.7.2.130>
- Berrill, D. P., & Martino, W. (2002). Pedophiles and deviants”: Exploring issues of sexuality, masculinity, and normalization in the lives of male teacher candidates. In R. Kissen (Ed.), *Waiting for Benjamin: Sexuality, curriculum and schooling* (pp. 59–70). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Bhana, D., & Moosa, S. (2016). Failing to attract males in foundation phase teaching: An issue of masculinities. *Gender and Education*, 28(1), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1105934>
- Biasin, C., & Chianese, G. (2020). Italy: Gender Segregation and Higher Education. In C. Fontanini, K. M. Joshi, & S. Paivandi (A c. Di), *International Perspectives on Gender and Higher Education* (pp. 75–92). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Biemmi, I., Leonelli, S. (2016) *Gabbie di genere: Retaggi sessisti e scelte formative*. Rosenberg.
- Bourelly, R., & Mariotto, M. (2022). Il Riconoscimento di studenti trans nel sistema educativo italiano: criticità e prassi per una buona scuola. *Pedagogia delle Differenze*, 51(2), 23-39.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Braun, Victoria., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, 8(3), 246–258.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134>
- Brookhart, S. M., & Loadman, W. E. (1996). Characteristics of male elementary teachers in the U.S.A., at teacher education program entry and exit. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12(2), 197–210. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(95\)00031-E](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(95)00031-E)
- Cannito, M. (2022). *Fare spazio alla paternità. Essere padri in Italia tra nuovi modelli di welfare, lavoro e maschilità*. Il Mulino.
- Castro, A., & Carnassale, D. (2019). Loving more than one color: Bisexuals of color in Italy between stigma and resilience. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 19(2), 198-228.

- Castro, A. (2021). Stories told together: Male narratives of non-monogamous bi+ and heterosexual men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(4), 1461-1477.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. Sage Publications.
- Connell, R. W. (1989). Cool Guys, Swots and Wimps: The interplay of masculinity and education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 15(3), 203–290.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. (pp. xvii, 334). Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2003). Masculinities, Change, and Conflict in Global Society: Thinking about the Future of Men’s Studies. *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, 11(3), 249–266.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge.
- Connell, R. W. (1996). Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools. *Teachers College Record*, 98(2), 206–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819609800203>
- Connell R. (2002). *Gender*. Blackwell Publishers; Polity Press.
- Cook, J. A., & Fonow, M. M. (1990). *Knowledge and Women’s Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research In Feminist Research Methods*. Edited by J. Mc Carl Nielsen.
- Cosma, A., Molcho, M., & Pickett, W. (2024). A focus on adolescent peer violence and bullying in Europe, central Asia and Canada. *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children*

international report from the 2021/2022 survey. Volume 2. World Health Organization.
Regional Office for Europe.

Cruickshank, V., Kerby, M., & Baguley, M. (2021). How do Pre-Service Male Primary Teachers Cope with Gender Related Challenges? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46, 74–88. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.749269058395529>

Cruickshank, V., Pedersen, S., Cooley, D., & Hill, A. (2020). How do male primary teachers negotiate expectations to perform gendered roles in their schools? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 47(2), 307–322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00337-z>

Cruickshank, V., Pedersen, S., Cooley, P. D., & Hill, A. (2018). Towards a measure of gender-related challenges faced by male primary teachers. *Australian Journal of Education*, 62(1), 49–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944117751440>

Cushman, P. (2005a). It's just not a real bloke's job: Male teachers in the primary school. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(3), 321–339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660500286176>

Cushman, P. (2005b). Let's hear it from the males: Issues facing male primary school teachers. *Teaching and teacher education*, 21(3), 227–240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.01.012>

Cushman, P. (2007). The male teacher shortage: A synthesis of research and worldwide strategies for addressing the shortage. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 4(1), 79–98.

Cushman, P. (2008). So what exactly do you want? What principals mean when they say 'male role model'. *Gender and Education*, 20(2), 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250701805847>

- Cushman, P. (2010). Male primary school teachers: Helping or hindering a move to gender equity? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(5), 1211–1218.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.01.002>
- Davis, I., & Hay, S. (2018). Primary masculinities: How male teachers are regarded as employees within primary education – a global systematic literature review. *Sex Education*, 18(3), 280–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1400963>
- Decataldo, A., & Ruspini, E. (2016). Gender-sensitive data: The state of the art in Europe. *International Review of Sociology*, 26(3), 407–423.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2016.1244930>
- De Simone, S., & Pileri, J. (2022). Resistance to gender education: a case study of a kindergarten in Italy. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 41(8), 1243–1261.
- Eldred, L., Gough, B., & Glazzard, J. (2022). Male pre-service teachers: Navigating masculinities on campus and on placement. *Gender and Education*, 34(7), 755–769.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2022.2078794>
- Elliott, K. (2015). Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept. *Men and Masculinities*, 19(3), 240–259.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2012). *Sex/gender: Biology in a social world*, Routledge.
- Foster, T., & Newman, E. (2005). Just a knock back? Identity bruising on the route to becoming a male primary school teacher. *Teachers and Teaching*, 11(4), 341–358.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500137091>
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). *Social Construction In Context*. SAGE Publications.
- Giroux, H. A. (1981). *Ideology, Culture & the Process of Schooling*. Temple University Press.

- Glaw, X., Inder, K., Kable, A., & Hazelton, M. (2017). Visual Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Autophotography and Photo Elicitation Applied to Mental Health Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917748215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748215>
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(3), 491–512. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491>
- Griffiths, M. (2006). The feminization of teaching and the practice of teaching: Threat or opportunity? *Educational theory*, 56(4), 387–405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00234.x>
- Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press; JSTOR.
- Henson, K. D., & Rogers, J. K. (2001). «Why Marcia You’ve Changed!» Male Clerical Temporary Workers Doing Masculinity in a Feminized Occupation. *Gender & society*, 15(2), 218–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015002004>
- Hjalmarsson, M., & Löfdahl, A. (2014). Being caring and disciplinary – male primary school teachers on expectations from others. *Gender and Education*, 26(3), 280–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2014.901731>
- Hollander, J. A. (2004). The Social Contexts of Focus Groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(5), 602–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604266988>
- Italian Ministry of education and merit (2023) dati.istruzione.it/opendata/esploraidati/
- Ivanoff, S. D., & Hultberg, J. (2006). Understanding the multiple realities of everyday life: Basic assumptions in focus-group methodology. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 13(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11038120600691082>

- Jones, A. (2003). Primary Teacher Trainees: Identity formation in an age of anxiety. *Asia-Pacific journal of teacher education*, 31(3), 181–193.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0955236032000149337>
- Kenway, J., & Fitzclarence, L. (1997). Masculinity, Violence and Schooling: Challenging «poisonous pedagogies». *Gender and Education*, 9(1), 117–134.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540259721493>
- King, J. R. (1994). *Uncommon Caring: Primary Males and Implicit Judgments*.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of Focus Groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103–121.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023>
- Lavizzari, A., & Prearo, M. (2019). The anti-gender movement in Italy: Catholic participation between electoral and protest politics. *European societies*, 21(3), 422-442.
- Mapelli, B., & Ulivieri Stiozzi, S. (A c. Di). (2012). *Uomini in educazione. La scomparsa di un genere*. Stripes.
- McDowell, J., & Klattenberg, R. (2019). Does gender matter? A cross-national investigation of primary class-room discipline. *Gender and Education*, 31(8), 947–965.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1458078>
- McGrath, K. F., Moosa, S., Van Bergen, P., & Bhana, D. (2019). The Plight of the Male Teacher: An Interdisciplinary and Multileveled Theoretical Framework for Researching a Shortage of Male Teachers. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 28(2), 149–164.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826519873860>

- McGrath, K., & Sinclair, M. (2013). More male primary-school teachers? Social benefits for boys and girls. *Gender and Education*, 25(5), 531–547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.796342>
- Meyer, E. J., & Leonardi, B. (2020). Teachers' professional learning to affirm transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth: Experiences and recommendations from the field. *Trans Youth in Education* (pp. 129-143). Routledge.
- Mills, M. (2008). Being the «right» kind of male teacher: The disciplining of John. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 16(1), 71–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360701877792>
- Mills, M., Martino, W., & Lingard, B. (2004). Attracting, Recruiting and Retaining Male Teachers: Policy Issues in the Male Teacher Debate. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(3), 355–369. JSTOR.
- Minello, A. (2022). *Non è un paese per madri*. Laterza.
- Ministry of education and merit (2023). dati.istruzione.it/opendata/esploraidati/dati.istruzione.it/opendata/esploraidati/
- Moosa, S., & Bhana, D. (2022). «Troubling men who teach young children»: Masculinity and the paedophilic threat. *Pedagogy, culture & society*, 30(4), 511–528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1818117>
- Moosa, S., & Bhana, D. (2020). Men teaching young children: «you can never be too sure what their intentions might be». *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(2), 169–184. Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection.
- Moss-Racusin, C. A., & Johnson, E. R. (2016). Backlash against male elementary educators. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 46(7), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12366>

- Nayak, A. (2023). Decolonizing Care: Hegemonic Masculinity, Caring Masculinities, and the Material Configurations of Care. *Men and Masculinities*, 26(2), 167–187.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X231166900>
- OECD. (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>
- Ottaviano, C., & Persico, G. (2020). *Maschilità e cura educativa. Contronarrazioni per un (altro) mondo possibile*. Genova University Press.
- Palmer, C., Cruickshank, V., Drummond, M., & Reid, D. (2020). Male primary school teachers, masculinity and identity work in regional Australia. *Sport, education and society*, 25(3), 261–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1578207>
- Peeters, J., Rohrmann, T., & Emilsen, K. (2015). Gender balance in ECEC: why is there so little progress? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 23(3), 302–314.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2015.1043805>
- Pollitt, K., & Oldfield, J. (2017). Overcoming the odds: Exploring barriers and motivations for male trainee primary teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 62, 30–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.11.003>
- Prearo, M. (2024). Resisting the Epistemic Straight Gaze in the Anti-gender Era: Italian LGBTIQ+ Studies and Scholars, 2013–2023. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 52(1), 171-187.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2024.a924316>
- Priulla, G. (2016). *La libertà difficile delle donne. Ragionando di corpi e di poteri*. Settenove.
- Richards, C., Bouman, W. P., & Barker, M. (2017). *Non-binary genders*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sabbe, E., & Aelterman, A. (2007). Gender in teaching: A literature review. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 13, 521–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600701561729>

- Sargent, P. (2005). The Gendering of Men in Early Childhood Education. *Sex Roles*, 52(3), 251–259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-1300-x>
- Skelton, C. (2002). The «feminisation of schooling» or «re-masculinising» primary education?. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 12(1), 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210200200084>
- Skelton, C. (2003). Male Primary Teachers and Perceptions of Masculinity. *Educational Review*, 55(2), 195–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910303257>
- Skelton, C. (2009). Failing to get men into primary teaching: A feminist critique. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930802412677>
- Svimez (2023) Rapporto Svimez 2023. L'economia e la società del Mezzogiorno. Cittadinanza, lavoro, imprese: l'inclusione fa crescere. il Mulino. <https://doi.org/10.978.8815/411488>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/9814https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/9814>
- Villano, P., & Passini, S. (2018). Competent in the North, passionate in the South. Stereotypes and prejudices between northern and southern Italy. *Psicologia sociale*, 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.1482/90777>
- Warin, J. (2019). Conceptualising the value of male practitioners in early childhood education and care: Gender balance or gender flexibility. *Gender and Education*, 31(3), 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1380172>
- Warin, J., & Adriany, V. (2017). Gender flexible pedagogy in early childhood education. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26, 375–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1105738>

- Weaver-Hightower, M. (2003). The “Boy Turn” in Research on Gender and Education. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(4), 471–498. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543073004471>
- White, S. (2011). Dads as Teachers: Exploring Duality of Roles in the New Zealand Context. *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 19(2), 173–186. ProQuest One Academic; Social Science Premium Collection. <https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1902.173>
- Wilkinson, J., & Warin, J. (2022). Men-only support spaces in early years education: A step towards a gender diverse or a gender divided workforce? *Gender and Education*, 34(4), 478–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1990221>
- Williams, C. L. (1992). The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the «Female» Professions. *Social Problems*, 39(3), 253–268. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096961>
- Williams, C. L. (1995). *Still a Man’s World: Men Who Do Women’s Work*. University of California Press.
- Williams, K. D. (2000). The Scarlet Letter study: Five days of social ostracism. *Journal of Personal & Interpersonal Loss*, 5(1), 19–64.
- Williams, K. D. (2007). Ostracism. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58(1), 425–452. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085641>
- World Economic Forum (2023) The Global Gender Gap Report 2023. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-r>

Acknowledgements

First, our gratitude goes to all the teachers and educators that took part in the study since their personal histories will be of great contribution to gender and masculinity studies. We also thank our colleague, Dott. Chiara Ostuni, who helped us in conducting some Focus Groups and the other colleagues who provided extensive feedback on Dott. Mario Ederoclite's Ph.D. project over the years.

Authorship

First author Mario Ederoclite together with Paola Villano and Aurelio Castro designed the research, drafted the paper and revised it. Specifically, Mario Ederoclite wrote the Introduction and the Findings, whereas Aurelio Castro wrote the Reflexivity and the Method sections. The Discussion paragraph must be attributed to both Mario Ederoclite and Aurelio Castro. Professor Paola Villano made contributions to the acquisition of the data, provided major revisions to the paper and approved the version to be published. Research data can be obtained by contacting the main and corresponding author, Mario Ederoclite.

Bio

Mario Ederoclite is a psychologist and Ph.D. candidate at Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna. His research interests lie at the intersection of psychology and educational sciences, focusing on gender studies, particularly masculinities, within the context of educational care for early childhood.

Paola Villano is a Full Professor of Social Psychology at Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna and the Rector's Delegate for Workplace Well-being. Her current research interests focus on forms of prejudice against minorities, the psychological processes underlying social exclusion and conflict management, workplace well-being, and participatory processes.

Aurelio Castro, Ph.D., is a researcher and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna. Their research focuses on the construction of sexual

orientation, queer bi+ studies, masculinities, intimacies and non-monogamies, health and social inequalities, social class and work discriminations.