




GENDER AND PRE-SCHOOL: THE EXPERIENCES AND STRATEGIES OF MALE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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Abstract

This study analysed the gender dynamics prevailing in the context of early childhood education in Portugal. We sought to observe whether early childhood educators experience the negative consequences associated with tokens and the possible emergence of phenomena related to the social construction of masculinity. The thematic analysis of the contents of 14 semi-structured individual interviews with early childhood educators originated six themes and highlighted the specificity of the professional insertion of men. The experiences and strategies described by the male interviewees and perceived by the female interviewees highlight the effects of the social construction of masculinity and confirm part of the effects of their status as tokens, although differently to the ways revealed by studies focused on women in this situation.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION • GENDER RELATIONS • MAN • MASCULINITY

GÊNERO E PRÉ-ESCOLA: EXPERIÊNCIAS E ESTRATÉGIAS DE HOMENS EDUCADORES DE INFÂNCIA

Resumo

Este estudo analisou as dinâmicas de gênero no contexto da educação de infância, em Portugal. Procurámos observar se os educadores de infância vivenciam as consequências negativas associadas aos *tokens* e a possível emergência de fenômenos relacionados com a construção social da masculinidade. A análise temática dos conteúdos de 14 entrevistas individuais semiestruturadas com educadores/as de infância originou seis temas e evidenciou a especificidade da inserção profissional dos homens. As vivências e as estratégias descritas pelos entrevistados e percebidas pelas entrevistadas evidenciam os efeitos da construção social da masculinidade e confirmam parte dos efeitos do seu estatuto de *tokens*, ainda que de modo distinto ao revelado pelos estudos centrados nas mulheres nessa situação.

EDUCAÇÃO PRÉ-ESCOLAR • RELAÇÕES DE GÊNERO • HOMEM • MASCULINIDADE

GÉNERO Y PREESCOLAR: EXPERIENCIAS Y ESTRATEGIAS DE HOMBRES EDUCADORES DE LA NIÑEZ

Resumen

Este estudio analizó la dinámica de género en el contexto de la educación infantil en Portugal. Intentamos observar si los educadores infantiles experimentan las consecuencias negativas asociadas a los tokens y la posible aparición de fenómenos relacionados con la construcción social de la masculinidad. El análisis temático de los contenidos de 14 entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas con educadores/as infantiles originó seis temas y evidenció la especificidad de la inserción profesional de los hombres. Las experiencias y estrategias descritas por los entrevistados y percibidas por los entrevistados muestran los efectos de la construcción social de la masculinidad y confirman parte de su estatuto de tokens, aunque de manera diferente a la revelada por estudios centrados en las mujeres en esta situación.

EDUCACIÓN PREESCOLAR • RELACIONES DE GÉNERO • HOMBRE • MASCULINIDAD

GENRE ET L'ÉCOLE MATERNELLE: EXPÉRIENCES ET STRATÉGIES D'ENSEIGNANTS HOMMES DANS L'ÉDUCATION DE LA PETITE ENFANCE

Résumé

Cette étude a analysé les dynamiques de genre dans l'éducation de la petite enfance au Portugal. Nous avons cherché à observer si les enseignants de ce secteur subissaient les conséquences négatives normalement associées aux *tokens*, et la possible émergence de phénomènes liés à la construction sociale de la masculinité. L'analyse thématique du contenu de 14 entretiens individuels semi-structurés, réalisés auprès d'enseignant.e.s de maternelle, a permis de dégager six thèmes et de mettre en évidence la spécificité de l'insertion professionnelle des hommes. Les expériences et les stratégies décrites par ces hommes et ressenties par ces femmes font ressortir les effets de la construction sociale de la masculinité et confirment en partie les effets du statut de *tokens* vu par les hommes, bien différent de celui rapporté dans les études sur les femmes dans une même situation.

ÉDUCATION PRÉSCOLAIRE • RAPPORTS DE GENRE • HOMME • MASCULINITÉ

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PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN AND STILL REMAINS STAFFED BY A LARGE majority of female professionals, both internationally (e.g., Alves, 2012; Cortez, 2015; Drudy, 2008; Lam, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014; Peeters et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2020; Sumsion, 2005), and in Portugal (Sarmiento, 2002, 2004; Santos & Amâncio, 2018; Seco, 2015). In Portugal, there has always been a prevalence of women in the profession, perceived as a naturally feminine occupation (Sarmiento, 2002, 2004). In fact, the “male early childhood educator” designation was only formalised in the country following the 25 April 1974 Revolution as under the dictatorship men were prevented from engaging in professional activities deemed to be feminine (Margalha, 2009). Hence, the data on male early childhood educators only stretches back to 1974, with 37 male professionals registered in this year (see Table 1), demonstrating the existence of men with the will and vocation to exercise the profession. However, in 2020, there were only 157 men dedicated to early childhood education in Portugal (Pordata, 2021), continuing to constitute a very small minority (0.95%) (Table 1).

Table 1
Men in pre-school education in Portugal, 1974-2020

Year	Total	Number of men	Percentage of men
1974	1667	37	2.22
1980	4167	98	2.35
1990	7737	82	1.06
2000	15437	276	1.79
2010	18380	490	2.67
2020	16611	157	0.95

Source: Pordata (2021).

There are some theories about the low uptake of early childhood education qualifications by men. Indeed, several studies conclude the causes relate to low pay, the lack of social status of this profession, fear of allegations of child abuse and lack of male camaraderie in the working context (Klecker & Loadman, 1999). Gamble and Wilkins (1997) also highlight, as factors justifying the low number of men in child education, how this is traditionally a feminine profession, associated with feminine gender aptitudes and roles, accompanied by low salaries and a lack of both prestige and social status. In addition to these factors, the authors also refer to some demotivating aspects, such as the pressure exerted by family members and the friends of potential educators at the time of choosing a profession, the absence of male role models in education and having to work only with women.

Clearly, there still remains a lack of deeper information on male early childhood educators that would allow for reflection on the profession and how it may be better structured in the future as well as better grasping the difficulties, barriers and obstacles that men face in their decision-making process when adapting to this work context and thereby understanding the experiences of men in a markedly feminine context (Sargent, 2004). In this area of education, there is a prevalent tendency for research subjects of study to be female early childhood educators and with the literature correspondingly overlooking male early childhood educators (Costa, 1998; Sarmiento, 2002).

Thus, the present study aims to analyse the gender dynamics existing in this professional context, focusing on knowledge of the experiences of men as early childhood educators, as male and as an extreme minority (i.e., tokens, according to Kanter’s designation, 1977, 1993), in order

to identify the main obstacles and the ways in which these men manage the situation as well as the perspectives of their peers belonging to the dominant group (i.e., women). In line with Kanter (1977, 1993), we seek specifically to verify: whether men are particularly visible in this professional context, putting them under pressure to perform well; whether the differences between them and the dominant group (i.e., women) are polarised, such that it leads to their isolation or social exclusion; and whether they are “trapped” in stereotypical roles associated with their belonging group that undermine them, as identified by Sargent (2004, 2005), or whether, on the contrary, due to their high status in society, these men encounter positive experiences in the professional context, such as the glass escalator effect, which lifts them quickly to the top positions, as identified by Williams (1992, 1995).

Tokenism and its effects

Kanter (1977, 1993) pioneered deeper analysis of organisational dynamics through tokenism theory. According to this author, the numerical proportion is a very important aspect in social life, opening up our understanding of the interactions between groups of people of various social categories. According to Kanter (1977, 1993), in skewed groups, where the proportion is close to 85:15, there is the majority presence of a social category, which controls the group and the culture, and is called “dominant”, while the other members are called “tokens”, or “solitary” or “solos” if they are a single individual. They receive this designation because they are seen as representatives of their category (e.g., women), as “symbols” and not as individuals. In her research with women tokens, Kanter concluded that the proportional rarity of tokens is associated with three “perceptual tendencies” (Kanter, 1993, p. 210): the increased visibility of tokens, which results in pressures to perform, and may lead to increases or decreases in their numbers; the contrasting or polarizing of differences between tokens and the domination of the latter (e.g., in terms of sex or ethnicity/“race”), which may lead to the isolation or social exclusion of tokens; and the group assimilation of stereotypical roles, resulting in a kind of “role entrapment”, which may make tokens feel trapped and unable to express themselves fully.

Several international (e.g., Maccorquodale & Jensen, 1993; Yoder et al., 1983) and national (e.g., Delgado, 2016; Morais, 2019; Santos et al., 2016) research studies on women tokens, working in masculine professional contexts, have supported Kanter’s theory. However, a current of research, oriented by the gender perspective which considers men as tokens, has strongly criticized the author (e.g., see the literature review by Santos & Amâncio, 2014), pointing out that analyses based only on numbers (Yoder, 1991) do not consider either the social context (Yoder, 2002) or gender and will therefore always be insufficient. According to this same current, tokens only suffer isolation or social marginalisation when there is a double deviation, hence, when belonging to a proportionally underrepresented group and holding low social statuses as is the case of women or visible minorities, for example (Yoder & Berendsen, 2001). Thus, when working in an atypical professional context in terms of gender, men start out from a more favourable position than women (Yoder, 2002; Zimmer, 1988), benefiting from the gender advantages that are socially granted to them (Floge & Merrill, 1986; Heikes, 1991; Ott, 1989; Williams, 1995). This has been demonstrated by studies that have compared, for example, male nurses (e.g., Heikes, 1991; Williams, 1995) with female doctors (Floge & Merrill, 1986; Santos & Amâncio, 2019), male and female police officers (Ott, 1989), male and female doctors (Santos et al., 2015) and male and female teachers in elementary education (Rabelo, 2013; Santos & Amâncio, 2018).

Organisations are gendered (Acker, 1990; Santos & Amâncio, 2014) and constitute an extension of the gender order existing in the broader society (Connell, 2002, 2006). Socialisation

is gendered and influences the construction of individual and group identities, the development of symbolic representations, and social relationships as well as the choices and decisions they make throughout their personal and professional lives (Casaca & Lortie, 2017).

In this sense, due to collective past experiences (of success in the case of men and failure in the case of women), women and men tokens react in different ways to the dynamics of tokenism. While men tend to interpret them as a challenge, women tend to consider them as a threat (Barreto et al., 2004), reacting less proactively than men do.

Token men in the context of education

Studies of elementary school teachers (Drudy, 2008; Santos & Amâncio, 2018) have demonstrated how male tokens are indeed subject to some discrimination, especially from outside the organisation. However, it is also noticeable that, compared to female tokens, they gain advantages, enjoying benefits in feminine professional contexts that they do not attain in masculine professional contexts. Furthermore, a few years ago, some controversy arose around this issue following studies focusing on early childhood education (Sargent, 2004, 2005) with the results showing that men also suffer the negative consequences identified by Kanter (1977, 1993) in this professional context. Such results cast considerable doubt on the prevailing idea that men are “*high status tokens*” in early childhood education, with Sargent (2004, 2005) arguing that in many aspects, male early childhood educators are closer to the “*classical tokens*” than otherwise thought in the current criticising Kanter.

We accept that the presence of men in the early childhood education context brings about the emergence of phenomena related to gender identities and relations at the personal, interpersonal and organisational levels. This assumption furthermore reflects the view that, based on the already presented history and statistical scenario, the profession in question is exercised in organisations subject to gendered social constructions (Acker, 1990), to a gender regime (Connell, 1987, 2005) and in which gender is “manufactured” (Calás et al., 2014).

We also consider that, following the insertion of men into a profession traditionally carried out by women and in which women maintain clear numerical supremacy, phenomena related to the universe of masculinity emerge.

Hence, we believe the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987, 1990) should be assumed as theoretical support for this work. This concept is potentially useful in the characterization and analysis of the processes of *genderization* in various contexts, such as interpersonal relations, the division of labour, organisations and policies, which express the gender order and gender regimes (Connell, 1995).

In macro-structural terms, hegemonic masculinity represents the “masculinist ethos” that emphasises and values that deemed traditionally natural to men (Whitehead, 1999, p. 58). It emerges from and draws on the dominant ideology of masculinism, demarcating the cultural boundaries of behaviour perceived as “masculine”, recurring to arguments that locate the categories of sex and gender in nature and the unquestioning categorisation and ordering of men and women according to these categories.

Although situated on an ideal level, this form of representation of being a man conveys the dominant and immediately available model as an orientation, comparison, differentiation, and valuation of men (among themselves and in relation to women) in whatever real situations require their situating in accordance with their closeness to or distance from this idealised figure through processes of reaffirmation and surveillance (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004).

Within this theoretical framework, the central objective of this present study involves ascertaining and analysing the dynamic processes of male inclusion in the professional context

of early childhood education, numerically dominated by women. Various international studies (e.g., Børve, 2017; Sargent, 2004, 2005) report some of the difficulties and obstacles men face in this profession, similar to those that arise for women in a minority situation in traditionally male professions. However, deepening knowledge on this area holds every justification in keeping with its importance, updating the situation and, in this case, studying Portuguese society.

Methodology

Participants

Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 early childhood educators working in and around Lisbon: six men and eight women, aged between 21 and 61 years ($M = 41.29$; $SD = 12.44$), with a male average age of 49 ($SD = 10.35$) and 46 years for women ($SD = 11.02$). In relation to academic qualifications, two interviewees hold master's degrees, one has a doctoral degree while the others have undergraduate degrees with the exception of one female interviewee who attained a professional qualification equivalent to the female educator undergraduate degree. The length of their careers ranges from 1 to 40 years, with an average of 18 years of professional activity. Finally, as regards interviewee nationality, there was only one Cape Verdean male early childhood educator with all the other respondents being Portuguese citizens.

Procedure

In order to carry out these interviews, we contacted some already known male and female early childhood educators through e-mail, telephone and Facebook, informing them of the interview contents and the study objective before requesting their participation. The interviews took place according to the positive responses received and according to the availability of early childhood educators. We then deployed the "snowball" technique (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004), thus, as the interviews took place, the interviewees were asked to contact colleagues available to collaborate in the study.

All interviews were conducted in the workplace contexts of each male and female early childhood educator in order to facilitate their accomplishment. The interview duration varied between 25 minutes and 1 hour and 35 minutes. That one of the authors had carried out his curricular internship in a school grouping and had learned about the functioning and dynamics of schools facilitated the interviews in enabling a more proximate approach to the interviewees.

In accordance with the ethical procedures, prior to each interview, all participants signed an informed consent form which contained the study objectives and guaranteed the total anonymity and confidentiality of their identities. This consent authorised the audio recording of the interviews for the purpose of the subsequent reliable transcription of all the information collected and its application for academic study and subsequent dissemination and publication. Finally, all the interviews were transcribed and analysed in full.

Instrument

Data collection took place through individual, semi-structured interviews, following a script that also determined the sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees (e.g., sex, age and marital status) and contained questions oriented by the theoretical framework. There were specific and different scripts prepared for the male and female early childhood educators participating. Although with some different questions for the different genders, both scripts are divided into two to focus on major stages in the professional trajectory: entry into the profession, thus, to identify

possible obstacles, particularly those experienced by males; and the current professional context, thereby addressing possible gender imbalances and inequalities and exploring the experiences of the interviewees regarding the dynamics of tokenism.

Data analysis

The corpus composed of the material from the 14 interviews was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We chose thematic analysis as a methodology that enables “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) as well as identifying sub-themes within the themes under analysis. We followed the six steps proposed by the authors: familiarisation with the data, which includes transcribing the interviews, reading the data and noting down initial ideas; coding interesting features and gathering relevant data for each code; creation of themes through the initial codes, bringing together all the revealing data for each theme; revision of the themes, seeking to verify this work done on the codes and the set of data, generating a thematic “map” of analysis; definition and naming of the themes, refining the specificities of each theme and their definitions; and producing the analysis report by selecting examples related to the research question. We started out with mostly deductive analysis in keeping with the previous engagement with the literature on the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of tokenism from a gender perspective but also containing a partially inductive approach in accordance with our openness to the likelihood of identifying unexpected themes taking into account the literature review.

Findings

The thematic analysis allowed us to identify six major themes in the discourses of the interviewees, which we designated as follows: external judgements on the choice of profession; integration into the profession: supports and obstacles; visibility of male early childhood educators; differences and (in)equalities between female and male early childhood educators; attributions and assimilation of male stereotypical roles; and men’s strategies for managing the situation.

External judgements on the choice of the profession

A first theme identified related to the reactions of others to the choice of profession. Both female and male interviewees referred to the support and encouragement of their families and close friends when deciding to study early childhood education. This seems particularly significant in the case of the men, considering the predominance of women in the profession, as seen above. However, despite the support shown, the families questioned the option the most in the case of men, especially because it was a “women’s profession” causing some expressions of strangeness. In turn, the socially established linkage between being an early childhood educator (man) and having a homosexual orientation may also have generated doubts and concerns among those stating the intention of taking up this profession:

Everyone supported me and thought I did very well. The fact I have both early childhood educators and teachers in the family also helps. (I13, woman).

There was always that thing everyone asks me, which was if I was having confusion, in terms of my sexual orientation because people would say “he must be gay if he’s an early childhood educator”. (I2, man).

Integration into the profession: support and obstacles

Another theme identified concerns the obstacles or barriers to the processes of integration

and adaptation to the profession. In this theme, there was a gender discrepancy in the discourses with clear differences in the acceptance and integration of male early childhood educators when embarking on their careers. The male interviewees alluded to various obstacles, specifically the fact of not being accepted by others in their profession (i.e., the school community in general, both female early childhood educators and auxiliaries) and ways of being at work, with several participants also mentioning they had had job applications rejected on their grounds of their gender and were openly questioned about their motives for early childhood education.

These interviewee narratives reported the various forms of questioning they experienced regarding their abilities and competences for exercising the profession in comparison with women. The effects of the association between being a (male) early childhood educator and likely homosexuality was also mentioned with fathers and mothers expressing fear that this situation would harm the learning and development process of their children.

In contrast, female interviewees always emphasised the positive aspects of their integration and having benefited greatly from support provided by all the people around them, which facilitated their process of adaptation to the working context:

When I started, the first questions I was asked in interviews was precisely: "A male early childhood educator in pre-school education, a man, why?" I can say that in the 10 or 12 interviews I did, it was a recurring question in 90% of them. . . . They still think, perhaps, a little bit like, a man, at such a tender stage for the children, is still not seen with very good eyes They look at you a bit like "A man here, really!". (I6, man).

It went well. I started with a professional internship, so I was very well accompanied, and I always had the support of my colleagues, as well as my bosses. So, it was easy to integrate. (I8, woman).

Visibility of male early childhood educators

The third theme identified refers to the greater visibility of male early childhood educators in the pre-school context. In fact, with the exception of three women, all the interviewees stated that men are more visible and the focus of greater attention than women, and therefore feel certain pressures and needs to prove their competences. However, in their words, this was particularly true at the beginning of their careers as this pressure eased over time through the work developed and the self-confidence the (male) early childhood educators gained.

Respondents mentioned that the greater visibility of male early childhood educators as from their initial training relates to their low level of representation, particularly symbolised by the ease with which their names are recognised. Although the need to demonstrate professional competences when beginning their careers is referenced as a common experience for male and female early childhood educators, the interviewees highlighted the existence of a differentiating nuance. In fact, the narratives report that men's mistakes or successes are more noted than those of women, thus placing higher expectations for excellent performance or else deemed a failure due to the inherent inaptitude of their sex. However, the interviewees seem to agree that this specific facet does not affect the performance and competence of male early childhood educators:

I think that men . . . are [more visible], because we are few, it's just because we are a rare species. [Have you ever felt the need to prove your competencies or pressure to perform better?] Curiously, only in initial training. . . . I remember the pressure was very great in initial training. Because then it was the other way round, it was the fact that there were only two of us, only two male trainees. There was great pressure and we had to show we knew what we were doing. (I4, man).

The men, of course [are more visible], they are far fewer than us. They are always a novelty when they appear . . . [Do you think they feel the need to prove their competencies or pressure for better performance?] I don't think they feel that need, because they are professionals like us. They have learnt the same as us and are able to do the same things as us. But I think they do feel some pressure to perform excellently because it can't be easy to enter a world of women. They must be subject to a lot of people always coming to check what they are doing and, if they are doing it right, how they are doing it, it can't be easy or very comfortable to be subject to this kind of thing. (I12, woman).

Differences and (in)equalities between female and male early childhood educators

The fourth theme to emerge interlinks with the polarisation of differences between male and female early childhood educators and the relationship to existing situations of gender inequality. The discourses diverge between the male and female interviewees, with only the males identifying differentiated treatment of males and females with the women correspondingly rejecting the existence of gender inequalities in the workplace context:

Comparisons [between men and women] yes, without a doubt. This is a world of women, suddenly a man appears in the middle of it and there are always comparisons: if he does it like us, if he has the same approaches, if the way of working is the same. I don't believe there are any differences in treatment. [Have you ever felt that they were excluded by their colleagues?] Not from what I have experienced, no. I never knew of any episode like that. And also because, as the only man, it is difficult to be ignored by colleagues as there is always that thing of something new. (I14, woman).

Although the male interviewees identify differentiation in their treatment due to being a numerical minority, they also mention that in certain situations this differentiation may prove advantageous, reinforcing their self-confidence through overcoming the obstacles mentioned. On the other hand, most male respondents mentioned not having experienced exclusion from the conversations of their female colleagues or otherwise ignored by them, suggesting that relational processes facilitated their integration into workplaces, benefiting from the inclusive attitudes of their female colleagues.

Male early childhood educators, however, refer to frequent comparisons between men and women in the profession, interpreting these as a result of the physical and biological characteristics of both sexes and the male minority status. Both male and female interviewees tend to classify these comparisons as normal and do not perceive them as an effect of gender ideologies but rather as relating strictly to the professional performance of male and female early childhood educators:

When they tell me that I'm going to do an internship in a certain place because I'm a man, there is, in fact, a differentiation Occasionally, this comparison may happen. In my case, I make a plea that this should not be possible, that it should not happen. Because there is no possibility of comparing because we are necessarily different. (I2, man).

I worked I'm working this year with João and I've worked with Vítor and I never felt... I never felt that they were treated differently, always equally [Have you ever felt that men were excluded?] No, I never felt that. They were always very present; they were always very much with us No. It was always really equality. (I10, woman).

When we deal with an area marked by gender, in this case female, whenever there is a minority, there is always the tendency for us to compare everything that is done. . . . [Have you ever felt that men were excluded or ignored by their colleagues?] No, I don't think so. Women, in

these cases, are even quite inclusive. They like to have a man in the group to give the masculine opinion and so on [laughs]. (I12, woman).

Attributions and assimilation of stereotypical male roles

Another theme identified relates to the attribution and assimilation of stereotypical male, demonstrating how male early childhood educators are in some way “attached” to the roles associated to their belonging group. This theme is organised by the discourses about equality between professionals, independently of their sex and, simultaneously, of their differences. On the one hand, respondents state that being a man in the pre-school education context is to be a male educator, to be a good professional, to fulfil the proposed objectives and to possess the necessary competences to carry out the profession in the best way as is expected of female educators and therefore no gender-based differences are valued or signalled.

On the other hand, however, and in comparison with female early childhood educators, both male and female interviewees mentioned that men are perceived as professionals who venture and risk more, adopt more practical and relaxed postures and ways of working in moments of tension, stress or demanding greater care, which ultimately facilitates the management of the work carried out. Male educators are also perceived as physically stronger than female educators as well as deemed more rational, less emotional, more objective and with greater ability to simplify and solve problems.

The fact that men are a small minority, in a context mainly dominated by women, means they are portrayed as persons with enormous resilience and courage as they have to cope with embarrassing situations and social pressures due to the perceived likelihood of them showing paedophilic behaviours, which may cause them discomfort and inhibition in their relationships with both children and their parents. However, according to the interviewees, they deal well with this situation and manage to create an excellent relationship with the children.

The women interviewed mainly perceive men as being different, recognising they have different ways of working to women but that the results of their work are not any different. In short: men carry out their profession in the same way as women but according to different processes that return similar results. It is generally agreed that because they work in a feminine context, male early childhood educators do not assume feminine postures and are praised for this. These differences of men are seen as advantageous for them as professionals even while the male and female interviewees argue this does not result from the effects of gender construction but rather the individual personalities that they each have:

Being a man is undoubtedly a challenge, always. As is being a woman There may be [advantages or disadvantages], taking into account the context. Again, if the father figure, the male figure, is really not very marked, it can be a facilitator or a hindrance Logically, some of them [characteristics generally associated with men] end up being [associated with male early childhood educators]. The uncomplicating factor that is associated with us, simplifying is often associated with us The question of strength, it ends up being, well, if it is necessary to put the heaviest thing up there, “Hey, João, come here”, but, well, that is not a negative aspect It is like this, I have my way of being and my way of acting, I have no need to go and adopt a feminine posture. (I6, man).

I think [being a man] is the same as being a woman, they are just a bit more practical and more relaxed than us The fundamental thing is to be good professionals, gender comes after We know that they have different ways of working. It doesn't mean that they practice differently. The end result is the same. The path may be different. But I think this is an added value. This difference, if it is shared, can bring immense benefits for all male and female early childhood

educators, for children and for the evolution of early childhood education itself in Portugal. . . . Men are more rational, we are more emotional, we react immediately as if it were the end of the world What is required of them is that they are good professionals and have those competences I have already mentioned. Then, if they are stronger or more rational, these are secondary characteristics, they may help but they do not define them either as professionals or as men. (I12, woman).

I think they can and should do both. Accepting stereotypes doesn't mean that you agree with them. They can accept them and then in their daily work, through their work, combat them, making these roles disappear. I think that men in early childhood education combat and deal with this situation very well, they are quite intelligent [laughs]. (I12, woman).

Men's strategies in managing the situation

The sixth and last theme identified aggregates the ideas expressed by the male and female respondents about the strategies adopted by male early childhood educators for their inclusion in the specific professional context. Our analysis brought out two interrelated sub-themes: men's strategies in relating to female colleagues; and men's strategies in relating to children and families.

Men's strategies in relation to female colleagues and society

Among the strategies that the men and women interviewed refer to having adopted in their relationships with their female colleagues is the ability to manage these situations very well, with great calm and tranquillity, demonstrating skills to immediately resolve any situation that occurs. Another of the strategies listed by both male and female early childhood educators is the ability of men to be impartial, to listen to all colleagues without creating any friction, always trying to promote team spirit, through positive attitudes and dialogues about the roles they each have in that working context. The courage and determination to face some of the prejudices existing in society, focusing only on their work, were other characteristics identified by women as regards male early childhood educators:

I think it takes some patience and courage, not exactly to put up with us, but to still face the prejudices that exist in our society. (I14, woman).

Look, with a lot of intelligence [laughs]. With a lot of patience, a lot of resilience, a lot of willpower, a lot of calm and reflection, but, mainly, I think that if they are determined and focused on what they want, they can deal well with any adversity they may face and manage in the best way this world that still remains very feminine. (I12, woman).

With a lot of fair-play; with a lot of management, a lot of acceptance and a lot of questioning. . . . "Questioning" is questioning, helping people, women, in this case, or whoever is working with me, helping them question each other's role and each other's performance. (I1, man).

The male interviewees emphasized the importance of their presence in the specific professional context of early childhood education due to the contribution towards the social deconstruction of the associated gender stereotypes. They perceive that men work strategically to dismantle the roles and gender stereotypes existing in society, seeking to counteract them, through the quality of their work and their results, based on a model of education. They view the situation as a challenge, wishing to show they can do as well as their female colleagues, with the same value and quality. This requires changing people's mentality, through pedagogical skills, working strategies and good human values, thus combating gender roles and stereotypes through work and intelligence, and showing that they cope well with this situation:

They are stereotypes. When you talk about stereotypes, you have to change people's minds. . . I don't think this profession requires any special characteristics from men or women. It requires them to be good human beings, to be competent in what they do, to know well what they are doing. (I5, man).

Men's strategies in relating to children

This subtheme aggregates the ideas about the care that male educators should take in the relationships they establish with children due to the issues of sexual abuse and paedophilia,¹ and how this conditions their work. This care is especially important regarding physical touching between male educators and children and the boundaries, in other words, how far male educators can and should go without risking suspicions of inadequacy or abuse. According to the men interviewed, after the emergence of judicial processes, they had to adopt self-protective measures, eliminating behaviours such as holding children on their laps, hugging or kissing them, which had hitherto been perceived as normal, but which were now assumed as potentially cause for questioning as to the intentions, especially by the families of children.

Even though they consider it irrational to respond to such thoughts and change practices, the men interviewed said they had adjusted to the situation while trying to transmit the attention and affection to children as they had always done and consider inherent to the profession and important to creating trusting and friendly relationships with the children but careful of any negative effects of their behaviours as perceived by professional peers and family members:

Fifteen years ago, we had the Casa Pia case and any man in education, any man in activities where we were in contact with children, we were under intense scrutiny, right under the spotlight. There are behaviours that we dropped out of self-defence. There are colleagues who say they even stopped sitting the kids on their laps because they were always looking. I didn't drop any behaviours but it's clear that we have to pay attention. There are things we would do unconsciously, in terms of gestures, hugs, kisses, maybe, for a while, there was a kind of self-censorship and self-management of behaviour. (I2, man).

Yes, nowadays people can be a bit more afraid of that, can't they? And I think that men in particular . . . if it's a woman, it's nothing, but if it's a man he's already "going to kiss her". This is probably the prejudice of women. If it's a woman kissing the child, it's OK, but if it's a man, it's probably not OK. I don't know. Nowadays, there's even a lot of care . . . And there's a prejudice there. Nowadays, for example, in the Nordic countries, teachers are not allowed to show a lot of affection . . . I read an article about this, and I was a bit shocked, a bit because of the stories that have been read lately about paedophilia. (I7, woman).

Discussion

This study aimed to analyse whether the assumptions of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977, 1993) regarding professional contexts characterised by a marked numerical disproportion between members of each sex, in this case in the exercise of early childhood education, are corroborated. In this profession, men are, practically everywhere in the world, a numerical minority and the exercise of early childhood education is socially associated with and dominated by women (e.g., Alves, 2012;

1 A socially very prominent issue since the so-called "Casa Pia Case" in Portugal, with its identification of abuses in contexts of educational institutions led exclusively by men. For a chronology of the emergence of this process, especially due to its strong connection with the media and the public opinion, see Oliveira (2007).

Cortez, 2015; Lam, 2014; OECD, 2014; Peeters et al., 2015; Santos & Amâncio, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2020), we thus sought to observe whether male early childhood educators experience the three negative consequences associated with the tokens: high visibility, polarisation and assimilation (Kanter, 1977, 1993). Cumulatively, we furthermore identified and characterised the strategies that male early childhood educators, as potential tokens, adopt to manage their inclusion in this professional context.

Regarding the first specific objective, following analysis of the experiences described, we consider that there is, in this context, greater visibility for men due to their low level of representation and that they experience some pressures and need to prove their competence. However, our analysis suggests that this may have only prevailed at the start of their careers, leading male interviewees to relate the pressures to perform to less professional experience rather than belonging to a numerical minority.

These male educators state that, with experience, this pressure to turn in good performances is no longer felt and mention that belonging to a minority in the profession is sometimes an asset in this professional context, which aligns with studies on other professional scenarios (e.g., Williams, 1992, 1995; Zimmer, 1988; Santos & Amâncio, 2018; Santos et al., 2015). In fact, men consider that because they are a small minority (i.e., tokens), it is easier for female colleagues to recognise them and remember their names in addition to how their mistakes and successes receive greater attention. In their overall judgement, men do not evaluate their greater visibility in the working context as a hindrance or a difficulty as observed in studies on elementary school teachers, a context in which men are also numerically a minority (Rabelo, 2013; Santos & Amâncio, 2018). When women are in token conditions, in contrast, high visibility generates rather negative consequences, especially in terms of pressures to prove their competences (Santos et al., 2015; Santos et al., 2016).

The polarization of differences by the dominant members encapsulates the second of the negative consequences associated with tokens (Kanter, 1977, 1993). The female educators interviewed consider there is no differentiation between men and women in the professional context, stressing how gender equality reigns in this context. However, the men point out the presence of differentiation in relation to their female colleagues and the inevitability of comparisons which they deem “normal” in keeping with their small minority context. The male respondents emphasize that these comparisons focus on professional performance and do not directly relate to gender. In their understanding, such comparisons are due to the physical and biological differences between men and women, arousing curiosity about how men will do a certain task, whether they will act and behave like women. Despite these comparisons, the male interviewed judged that female colleagues do not exercise negative discrimination in a similar finding to that observed by Santos and Amâncio (2018) among female and male elementary school teachers, stressing how their integration into the working contexts was not problematic and that, in some situations, the differentiation turned out positive for them. This contrasts, however, with the results returned by women tokens (Santos et al., 2015, 2016), who often encounter obstacles to integration in professional contexts numerically dominated by men.

Furthermore, when men form minority groups in professional contexts, the phenomenon named by Williams (1992, 1995) as the glass escalator is observed in many cases (e.g., Santos & Amâncio, 2018, 2019) even while this was not here referred to by participants of either sex. Empirically, we have observed that the management positions in early childhood education institutions are mostly held by women.

Regarding the last negative consequence identified by Kanter (1977, 1993) for female tokens – assimilation – both the male and female interviewees defend the existence of equality between the sexes, in generic terms and in a wider social context. However, and simultaneously, situations and

personal experiences were reported in which the differences of the male early childhood educators are accentuated. In their view, these differences are due to the curiosity and novelty of contact with male professionals as well as to the personalities of the persons involved and not to any direct effects of gender ideologies and practices.

A number of characteristics deemed to be possessed more by men than women, were listed which, according to the male and female interviewees, prove advantageous for men in this context. Males in the profession are perceived as more pragmatic, less confrontational and conflict appeasing. The female educators underlined how men are not only physically different but also in terms of personality and stating they generally demonstrate greater capacities for simplification and problem-solving. This seems to confirm evidence of the second interactive process proposed by Acker (1990), which refers to the symbolic representations of gender disseminated in the organisational culture that foster the perception there are characteristics and competences intended for men as they are perceived as “masculine” and associated with the image/symbol of man.

In a study with Norwegian participants, Børve (2017) observed that, in the context of early childhood education, a gendered work culture is reflected and constructed, namely in the division of labour.

Although the women interviewed state that men are not required to “act like men” and be “imprisoned in masculine roles”, it seems consensual that these men, while working in a feminine context, neither adopt nor try to adopt feminine postures or the behavioural and relational patterns of their colleagues and receive praised for this. There seems to be no psychological and social pressure (Zimmer, 1988) for male educators to avoid acting spontaneously in their working context. Indeed, the verbalisations of the female interviewees tend to accentuate and value the socially distinctive traits of being masculine, thus circumscribing their colleagues within a set of expectations based on gender stereotyping.

In addition to these masculine characteristics, the female educators also indicated, as positive traits of male colleagues, their resilience and courage in managing the sensitive issue of physically touching children and the association with paedophilia. This issue, in fact, seems to be one of the main constraints experienced by men in the profession, which leads them to adopt self-defence, avoidance and adaptation strategies. This phenomenon is also reported by Amanda Rabelo (2013) in a study of Portuguese and Brazilian elementary school teachers. The former, as in the present study, refer to self-restraint in interactions with children, “especially after the scandal that happened in Portugal about paedophilia in Casa Pia” (p. 918). The prominence of males in cases brought to trial is said to have reinforced dominant social thinking and statistical evidence of men as the active perpetrators of paedophilia (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010) and simultaneously downgrading the likelihood of women engaging in such actions in what became a prevalent trend (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; Hetherington, 1999).

Overall, these perceptions about male early childhood educators align with what the literature has identified as representations associated with being masculine (Amâncio, 1994; Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006), particularly in workplace contexts (Acker, 1990; Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Marques, 2011). Men are, in general, perceived as professionals with a more practical attitude and way of working than women (Acker, 1990; Bozani, 2021), which makes it easier for them to manage the situations of tension or stress that may occur in working contexts. We should therefore underline how men, as early childhood educators, are characterised by stereotypical traits, such as instrumentality, rationality and resistance (Amâncio, 1994; Donnelly & Twenge, 2017), signifying, in our interpretation, the presence of the phenomenon of stereotypical role assimilation, as advocated by Kanter’s theory (1977, 1993). However, this does not seem to harm their professional careers.

The importance and benefits of involving professionals in education contexts (Connell & Pearce, 2015), particularly in early childhood education (Peeters et al., 2015; Roberts-Holmes & Brownhill, 2012), are recognised within the scope of changing the socialisation of new generations in gender-equitable settings. However, and based on the contributions of this study, we consider that, in addition to the desirable increase of the presence of men in the profession, the need to reflect on the ways in which they are understood and integrated should also be considered and thereby enable them to act in line with the desired social change and not be forced to reproduce the dominant social norms.

In conclusion, the registered dynamics of tokenism seem to strongly relate to the prevailing gender order in the wider society and the positioning of these token men does not seem to challenge existing gender hierarchies. Although it sometimes generates some inequalities, their token position does not seem to transform asymmetrical gender positions either in the professional context or in the wider social context.

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Note on authorship

Conceptualization, research and methodology: M. H. Santos and E. F. Cruz; Supervision: M. H. Santos; Validation: M. H. Santos and A. M. Marques; Original written draft: E. F. Cruz and M. H. Santos; Written revision and editing: M. H. Santos and A. M. Marques.

Data availability statement

The data cannot be made publicly available. We followed the ethical procedures of Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa and due to ethical issues, we cannot make the data available as we have assured the participants of their anonymity and confidentiality of the data and hence do not reveal the interview materials.

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Cadernos de Pesquisa indicates the following correction:

In the article "Gender and pre-school: The experiences and strategies of male early childhood educators", with DOI: 10.1590/198053148974_en, published in the journal *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 52, Article e08974:

On the page 1, where it read: Escola Superior de Saúde do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal, Setúbal, Portugal; antonio.marques@ess.ips.pt

It should read: Escola Superior de Saúde do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal (IPS) and Centro de Investigação Interdisciplinar Aplicada em Saúde (CIIAS), Setúbal, Portugal; antonio.marques@ess.ips.pt