Breaking roles in education among teachers[1]:
a theoretical framework for a sustainable and decolonial education

Decostruire i ruoli in educazione tra gli insegnanti:
un quadro teorico per promuovere un'educazione sostenibile e decoloniale

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to address the so-called male shortage in early education and teaching professions, through an interdisciplinary frame. Critical studies on masculinities and literature on role models in schools are here in dialogue with pedagogical perspectives on hidden curriculum studies and inclusive education theory. The paper describes a theoretical framework of a research proposal aimed at investigate whether a more diverse teaching staff may increase inclusion in education, understood as the never-ending commitment to developing better ways of responding to diversity. Although international literature is quite attentive to minority teachers, the Italian scenario does not look so rich of theory or empirical study. While reframing the male shortage definition in an intersectional framework, including gender identity and performance perspective, but also considering ethnicity, (dis)ability, religious background, I intend to investigate if a diverse teaching staff may challenge the mainstream curricula and increases the level of inclusiveness of schools in a diverse society.

Keywords: minority teachers, ECEC, critical studies on masculinities, pedagogical strategies.

Abstract

L'obiettivo di questo saggio è quello di affrontare la cosiddetta carenza di uomini nei servizi per la prima infanzia e nelle professioni di insegnamento, attraverso una cornice interdisciplinare. Gli studi critici sulle maschilità e la letteratura sui modelli di ruolo sono qui in dialogo con gli studi sul curriculum nascosto. L'articolo descrive il quadro teorico di un progetto di ricerca in corso, volto a indagare se un corpo docente più eterogeneo possa aumentare l'inclusione, intesa come impegno continuo a sviluppare modi migliori di rispondere alle diversità nel sistema scolastico. Sebbene la letteratura internazionale sia piuttosto attenta agli insegnanti appartenenti a minoranze, lo scenario italiano non appare così ricco di teoria o di studi empirici in tale ambito. Riformulando la definizione di *male shortage* in un quadro intersezionale, che includa identità e performance di genere, ma che consideri anche appartenenze culturali, (dis)abilità e background religioso, intendo indagare se un corpo docente eterogeneo, possa essere una sfida ai curricula tradizionali e aumentare il livello di inclusività delle scuole quali istituzioni democratiche in una società plurale.

Parole chiave: insegnanti di gruppi minorizzati, ECEC, studi critici sulle maschilità, strategie pedagogiche.

> *The more of the world you see,*
> *the more people you imagine you can be.*
> (Michela Murgia, 2023)

Introduction

Creating inclusive schools, as well as gender mainstreaming, are at the forefront of the EU policy (European Commission, 2020) and are key targets for European policymakers for the upcoming years. In this article I will explore the overlap of these two EU priorities, focusing on the involvement of men in early childhood care and teaching professions – as the target that was set more than 20 years ago has still not been reached. I will explore

and stress the framework in which this phenomenon is defined and tackle both; by policy makers and scientific literature in the field. According to Dewey (2009), schools produce democracy and are simultaneously produced by it. In education, the reproduction of hegemonic discourse and the practice of mainstream society is reflected in the organization of spaces, schedules, programs, school books and other materials, interpersonal relations, gender roles and social expectations. Schools are complex institutions which operate as gender devices (Burgio, 2015) with a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Burgio, 2012; Santambrogio, 2022), and an explicit one, with educational effects. However, the hidden curriculum does not only intervene at the level of gender norms, but also affects other dimensions in which power relations occur. All of these curricula together act as mainstream society model reproducers.

While social research and educational policies are attentive to promoting an adequate level of inclusiveness for diversity among pupils, much remains to be done for teaching staff. Even though, this is closely linked to the creation of a positive learning environment for all those involved in it. I address this gap through interdisciplinary and multilevel research design that integrates several theoretical frameworks, as shown in the following image.
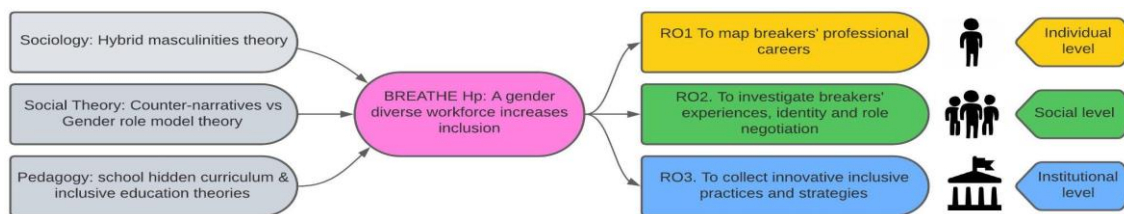

Fig 1. Research proposal overview: theoretical framework, research question and objectives (Persico, 2022, p. 2).

The research project has three main objectives:
- to explore breakers' professional careers, analyzing experiences and episodes that intervene on how they got to teaching professions, and their turning points;
- to investigate breakers' personal experiences and negotiations of identity and professional role, in relation to social expectations of gender performance, in the workplace;
- to collect and describe the innovative pedagogical practices and organizational strategies implemented to increase inclusivity in schools.

Thus, the starting point is if and how a gender-diverse workforce (McGrath, Moosa, Van Bergen and Bhana, 2020) may strengthen inclusivity in education; understood as the never-ending commitment to developing better ways of responding to diversity (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). This article only aims to describe the theoretical assumptions on which this was based[2].

1. *Male shortage* in education: a contentious definition

The shortage of males in education (Skelton, 2012) is defined as the re-genderisation of care and teaching professions, i.e. the idea that the education and care of children, especially those aged 0-11, is a naturally feminine task (EIGE, 2019). The teaching profession has not only been largely dominated by the presence of women for some time in the OECD[3] area, but in the last ten years the average percentage has increased from 61% in 2005, to 70% (OECD 2021). Moreover, in the last decade, although the gender gap has narrowed at the tertiary level, it has widened with regards to the primary and secondary levels (OECD, 2022). In early childhood education (ECEC) 96% of the staff

are female and this percentage decreases to 82% in primary school and 63% in secondary school – with males being more present in tertiary education (55%). As found in previous research, teacher recruitment is a great societal challenge, and males are quite difficult to retain in this sector (Myklebust, 2021), also because of the limited social and economic recognition of these professions. While the average teacher salaries are equal to, or higher than, the average salaries of fully employed women graduates in other sectors, men who teach in primary and secondary schools earn salaries that range from 77% to 88% of the average earnings of other employed graduates that work full time (OECD 2018)[4]. In comparison with the international context, the gender gap in Italy ranks among the most pronounced; with the percentage of female teachers – both temporary and permanent staff – in schools from early childhood to upper secondary education reaching almost 82% in the academic year of 2020/2021.

Circumstantially, doing research on gender segregation, in order to overcome the feminisation in the early care and teaching profession, continues to be an urgent task, helping to underline a crucial aspect, that is the cultural and social effects of gender segregation, firstly, in education, and then in the workplace (Biemmi, 2018). I do not consider gender as a natural fact that determines and polarises roles from a binary (Neary and Cross, 2018) perspective, however, following Morris (1995), I refer to gender from a socio-constructivist perspective as a situational performance. Masculinity, therefore, takes on a historical value, socially determined and heterogeneous; comprising different traits and characteristics that change over time (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). According to critical studies on masculinity debates concerning caring and hybrid masculinity (Bridge and Pascoe, 2014); males working in teaching and care professions challenge the hegemonic discourse on gender, and more specifically, on gender and caring. Research on the lack of men in early childhood education and the teaching profession highlights gender stereotypes by describing care as a feminine task. It also brings to the fore criticisms that I would like to highlight. According to Santambrogio

> school environments firmly act as binary gender devices (Bragg *et al*., 2018), based specifically on the cis-normative presuppositions. Cis-normativity in school can be interpreted as an institutionalized system (Paechter *et al*., 2021) that explicitly and implicitly organises the lives of the entire student population; this impacting considerably and acutely on transgender individuals. Firstly, it has a regulatory function where identities are concerned; through the elements of daily school practise and a binary and cis-genderist culture, it establishes the existence of only two genders, distinct and distinguishable, in which students can identify (Santambrogio, 2022, p. 91).

The reasoning suggested by Santambrogio within an investigation of international literature concerning the experiences of transgender adolescents in school, offers a useful interpretative key as it highlights the effects of a system structured according to a binary and cisgender norm. Although this research does not focus on teachers, it is evident how this system can impact on the entire school population, including students, teachers, and other practitioners. What happens if even the categories of analysis of the phenomena that characterize school life reproduce the same normativity? The first criticism of the concept of male shortage is therefore to be noted in its very definition (Warin, 2019). Researching male shortage and questioning *male/female* gender balance entails a risk that may reinforce a binary and cis-gender normative framework relating to the topic. This results in a non-irrelevant theoretical and methodological contradiction. In fact, just as it happens within the education system, research also risks the non-recognition, invisibility and

exclusion of all subjectivities that do not identify as binary, heterosexual or cisgender (Burgio, 2012) among teachers.

This led us to discuss the definition of *breakers* (Heikkilä and Hellman, 2017), a key figure in literature on male shortage on education. Scientific literature defines *breakers* as males breaking through the glass doors (Koch and Farquhar, 2015) of professional gender roles in education by undertaking careers in early and primary education (ages 0-11 years, according to International Standard Classification of Education levels 0 and 1). To avoid falling into the aforementioned contradiction, from here on, I will refer to the *so-called male shortage* in the care and teaching profession, broadening the definition of breakers, so that they are regarded as individuals self-identifying as male or performing as a masculine gender type. Moreover, I propose to address the hegemonic discourse concerning gender roles and masculinity in an intersectional perspective, framing it in terms of a complex system of relations of power. According to Demetriou (2001), alongside *external hegemony*, the institutionalization of male hegemony, there is an *internal hegemony*; a hierarchy that values certain groups or types of men over all other men. Sexual orientation, gender identity, (dis)ability, age, racialization, culture, language and religion are all sensitive dimensions of personal identities, which expose individuals to inequalities. This is the reason why an intersectional perspective is also needed.

Most studies concerning the male shortage in education (Davis and Hay, 2018) focus on one or two dimensions, e.g. male educators in early care, black male teachers (Woodson and Bristol, 2020), male teachers with disabilities (Neca, Borges and Campos, 2020) or LGBTQI+ teachers (Lee, 2020). Hegemonial discourses are thus compartmentalised based on individual characteristics and the according single categories. In order to challenge schools as mainstream and hegemonic discourse reproducers, it would be more effective to broaden the analysis and to consider all of these dimensions as different facets of a complex phenomenon. There is also an urgent need, I would like to stress, to move from a personal and biographical perspective – the individual teacher – to a social perspective – the team, the class, and beyond that, to an institutional perspective – the school as a democratic institution. The vast majority of research has looked at the biographical experiences or professional careers of these practitioners (Brody *et al*., 2021), focusing mainly on individuals. While the resonance of these professionals within the teaching staff and educational apparatus has been under-represented in empirical research in education.

This section has examined the definition of the shortage of men in education, in the following one I will critically analyse the concept of gender role models, which is often used as a possible interpretation of this phenomenon.

2. Reshaping the role model theory

A definition of a role model is a person looked at by others as an example to be imitated (Oxford Dictionary), or someone you admire ad try to imitate (Collins Dictionary). While most of the literature concerning the shortage of men in education frames the issue as children needing gender-specific role models (Brownhill, 2014), this is a contentious matter. For example, according to McGrath and colleagues (2020), the definition of a gender role model (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007) is ambiguous. They stated this with reference to research suggesting that adult role models are not necessarily gendered (Hutchings *et al*., 2008) and point to other research that demonstrates how limiting it is to use the concept of role model only in relation to gender identity (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2012). Furthermore, there are scholars who argue persuasively that gender role models are more likely to be found among peers or relatives (Bricheno and Thornton,

2007). This would emphasize the idea that it is not the lack of role models that is at the heart of the matter. While the previous section highlighted the risks of reinforcing binary and cisgender perspectives in studies of the male shortage, this brief excursus suggests how to address the male shortage in early childhood education by referring to the concept of role models, poses additional challenges. McGrath and colleagues highlight how:

> Schools should be representatives of a range of masculinities, femininities, and alternative gender identities, both; between and within genders. It is important that students do not see their own gender as a defining or limiting characteristic, but become aware of the range of gender identities (McGrath, 2020, p. 6-7).

Role models should be, instead, considered in a broader sense, as in the authors' understanding, to which I agree with; adults may act as chances to prevent children «erroneous generalization of all teachers' characteristics as female specific traits» (McGrath, 2020, p. 6-7). In early childhood services and primary schools, the diversity of adults represents *the opportunity to legitimize plurality*.

The intersectional approach to the theme, proposed above, clarifies that the diversity of adult figures does not necessarily have to be limited to the expression of a continuum of sexual and gender identities. This plurality needs to expand along multiple identity axes and through intersections between them. The diversity of teachers can thus encompass and overlap various aspects: gender identities and performances, sexual identities, (dis)abilities, cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations and skin colour. Building on this consideration, it is possible to further specify the category of breakers – as mentioned above – stressing the importance of including teachers from minority groups. At this point, key questions raise here; why should we do research on the presence of *breakers* (as I have defined them) in ECE and primary schools? What is the point of taking on the challenge of increasing the percentage of breakers in early childhood and primary education? For several reasons. To answer this question, I will draw partly on the work of McGrath *et al.* (2020), who identify four levels at which it makes sense to address the issue (student, classroom, school organisation and society). At the same time, I will try to extend their thinking by going beyond gender issues. Firstly, breakers can act as a way of challenging the prejudice that primary care and early childhood education tasks are assigned to the female gender, otherwise essentialised and stereotyped. Secondly, because gender identity develops in early childhood and it is during this period that children begin to conform to stereotypical gender expectations in line with their peers (Halim and Ruble, 2010). The opportunity to confront heterogeneous ways of interpreting gender can contribute to individual expression and reduce the formation of stereotypes. Thirdly, because a diverse teaching staff can legitimise students' plurality of self-expression both in school and in society: their presence could help to challenge hegemonic masculinity discourse by disseminating hybrid masculinities, not only in terms of gender roles and identities, but also in relation to other aspects that characterise hegemonic discourses on masculinity (Moosa and Bahna, 2018), such as (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion.

In this perspective, my proposal is to move beyond the role model approach and, as an alternative, to focus on the category of counter-narratives. Andrews defines counter narratives as «stories – told and experienced by people – that implicitly or explicitly resist dominant cultural narratives» (Wolff Lundholt, Aaen Maagaard and Piekut, 2018, p. 1), and ascribes both political and symbolic value to these narratives (Ottaviano and Persico, 2020). A social dimension prevails here, in which the hegemonic discourse is countered

from several angles, in contrast to the category of role models, which is strongly linked to the individual dimension. Fourth, to enhance the diversity among teaching staff as

> workforce diversity (of age, gender, ethnicity and religion) is frequently pursued to foster an inclusive workplace and to ensure that an organization is reflective of the broader community it serves (McCuiston, Ross Wooldridge, Pierce, 2004). Notably, such efforts have been found to positively impact employees' job satisfaction and performance (Pitts, 2009) (McGrath *et al.*, 2020, p. 8).

This ensures that the benefits to students (as listed above), as well as to teachers themselves (Grissom, Kern and Rodriguez, 2015), are considered.

3. Challenging mainstream curricula

In this paper I have crossed different disciplinary fields with the intention of contributing to the academic debate on the so-called phenomenon of the shortage of men in early childhood care and education, by bringing sociology into the dialogue, through critical studies on masculinities and then the literature on role models, with a focus on gender role models in schools. The pedagogical perspective was provided by studies on the hidden curriculum and inclusive education theory. However, in order to complete this proposal, one more step is needed.

In the Italian scenario, research on the experiences of minority teachers seems to be lacking, if not completely absent in the national literature. Filling this gap is important for at least two reasons. The first is the personal experience of these teachers in terms of life experiences, relationships, prejudices they have faced, teaching strategies and identity negotiation in the classroom or with their colleagues and families. It is reasonable to assume that the harmful effects of invisibility or exclusion experienced by marginalised and minority students in school are also reflected in adults who find themselves in the same educational context. I am interested in exploring whether the needs of these practitioners find physical and symbolic space in the system; otherwise an inclusive educational environment cannot be such. Secondly, I am also interested in looking at this phenomenon, which links the individual level with the institutional level: what pedagogical added value, if any, could a diverse teaching staff bring to the organisation? As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, breakers can act as counter-narratives to hegemonic discourses. At the same time, the literature on the male shortage suggests that teamwork, trust and collegial relationships are central to the inclusion and retention of men in early education (Sullivan et al., 2021). What the literature does not currently explore yet is the impact of teamwork and positive collegial relationships on pedagogical practices, curricula and any other component of the educational apparatus.

A question arises at this stage: is it is possible to move from the biographical level to a collective, social and institutional one? From individual experiences to pedagogical shared practices among a diverse teaching staff? I wonder if breakers' presence has any impact on the educational device and whether this impact remains at an informal level or becomes part of the formal knowledge of the institution. Is it permissible to think that a teaching body with a diverse range of backgrounds might have more tools and frameworks to challenge the different dimensions in which the mainstream model of society is manifested? Are there pedagogical practices or pedagogical strategies, tools that have been matured in everyday life through the shared work of a diverse teaching staff? A curriculum reconsidered through the lens of non-dominant or racial subjectivities, spaces modify thanks to the experience of bodies with different abilities.

Rethinking education, rethinking its dominant model in order to decolonize its Western, ableist, gendered, anthropocentric structure, i.e., its mainstream model, can perhaps take place where there are teaching staff capable of adopting a reflexive gaze, starting from themselves, their own bodies, biographies and, moreover, the content and the methods of what they are teaching, and their shared pedagogical practices. The ambition of this research design is to try to answer these questions.

Conclusion

In this article I address an under-represented area of educational research by proposing a theoretical framework and presenting research questions arising from a research design that addresses the so-called male deficit in early childhood education and care. In doing so, I critically reflect both on the definition of the phenomenon as commonly presented in the literature and on the popular reading of the phenomenon in terms of the need for role models for students. I reframed the issue from one of male/female balance in order to overcome a binary and cis-normative approach to the issue. Then, thanks to an intersectional approach, I emphasised the potential of a heterogeneous (diverse) teaching staff, which was meant as an opportunity to legitimise the plurality of both teachers and students. We have also seen how, without awareness of the power dynamics that are constructed and enacted within education, certain types of subjectivity can become invisible. This is often the case for individuals from marginalised groups, such as LGBTQIA+ teachers (or students), those from an immigrant background, or those with disabilities. The same process of invisibilisation seems to be taking place with regard to minority teachers in the world of Italian educational research. It is clear that, especially with regard to the so-called male shortage in the care and teaching profession in early childhood education, the statistical component of the phenomenon plays an important role. At the same time, this phenomenon is a challenge for society and for educational research it is an opportunity to improve the Italian schools in the direction of a more inclusive education in a diverse society.

Notes

[2] The research design combines qualitative methods, classical and innovative research strategies; such as the sociological approach of critical studies on masculinities, applied to the study of professional trajectories, biographical interviews and focus groups, critical and engaged pedagogical approaches and creative methodologies.
[3] The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international economic studies organization for its 36 member countries (of which 26 are European).
[4] The OECD (2018) reminds us again, in OECD countries and economies with available data, between 2005 and 2017 the salaries of primary and secondary teachers with 15 years of experience and the most common qualifications in their country have increased on average between 5% and 8% and have returned to pre-economic crisis levels. Furthermore, teachers have strong incentives to become school leaders: salaries of school heads are at least 35% higher than the salaries of teaching staff and are at least 20% higher than the average earnings of other graduate workers.

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