



Children's gender constructions in Brazilian Early Childhood Education and Care

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ABSTRACT: The present study examines how gender is constructed by four-year-old children in a Brazilian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting. The Brazilian context is marked by the omission of discussions about gender in the National Curriculum for ECEC and the rise of conservative groups in the society. The study seeks to show how children's relationships with adults, in interplay with ECEC spaces, affect how they construct gender. Gender, as a theoretical concept, informed the interpretation and discussion of our findings. A mosaic approach guided the data collection, which consisted of observations and interviews with children, their teachers, and other adults closed to the children's context both inside and outside the setting. Data were analysed based on thematic analysis with an inductive approach. The findings reveal how the organisation of pedagogical work and the different roles taken by teachers in the class may influence children's gender constructions. Children's relationships with their teachers and other adults also show how stereotypical gender assumptions are both reproduced and challenged during play and other situations in the ECEC setting. We argue that educational policies and continuous training for teachers can support them in helping children expand their diverse ways of constructing gender.

Keywords: *Brazil, children's gender constructions, male teacher, female teacher*

Introduction

This article focuses on the different ways young children construct notions of gender within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Brazil. We contend that, in this context, different notions of gender are constructed, and that gender is configured as a very peculiar social category as it encompasses a diversity of cultural practices that condition and adapt our perception of the differences between bodies – of men and women, of boys and girls – and shape individual and collective behaviours (Connell & Pearse, 2015). Furthermore, we recognise a diversity of other ways of being in the world beyond this male/female dualism¹, where children have agency and are able to expand their constructions of gender (Xu, 2020).

Children’s understanding of gender is also informed by their experiences outside formal ECEC settings. From a macro and historical perspective, dominant perceptions of gender in Brazilian society are shaped by the marks of colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy, which remain embedded in social and political structures, and they continue to reinforce stereotypical gender notions (Dimenstein et al., 2020; Lugones, 2016). Brazil, like other Latin American countries, has experienced significant developments that have problematised a binary, heteronormative conception of gender and sexuality. Despite the democratisation and expansion of public education in Brazil during the 21st century and the introduction of protective laws that strengthened children’s rights, the country has also seen a conservative backlash in the educational field in recent decades (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). The influence of conservative groups, such as the one called “School without a Party,” on politics has negatively impacted the development of projects that promote progressive discussions of gender and sexuality in Brazilian educational settings, leading to their stoppage (Moura & Salles, 2018).

Traditional and conservative ideas that can reinforce gender stereotypes are prevalent in many spheres in Brazil and have consequences on how children construct gender in their early years, including in ECEC settings. The risk is that children’s gender constructions can be limited and reproduce stereotyped dominant gender discourses (Finco, 2010, 2016; Santos, 2021). This article presents a case study that aims to understand how children construct gender in Brazilian ECEC. The following questions guided the investigation: How do children construct gender in the interplay with their teachers in

¹ Public discussion of gender and sexuality has changed in recent years as binary definitions and identity categories have been challenged, leading to a broader understanding of gender that now includes, for example, androgens, transex, intersex (Santos, 2021).

ECEC spaces? How can children's interactions with adults inside and outside the ECEC setting affect their gender constructions? We do not claim that the case study is representative of Brazilian ECEC as a whole or of all the different ways of constructing gender, especially considering that Brazil is a country with vast territorial extent and considerable economic and cultural diversity. The study was carried out in a single ECEC setting, which does not allow us to draw generalised conclusions but rather thoughtful ones that acknowledge the specificities of the ECEC setting in question. Although it shares several points of convergence with the rest of the country, it also has its particularities.

Gender in the Brazilian ECEC

Early Childhood Education and Care in Brazil consists of voluntary nurseries for children from birth to three years old and compulsory preschools for children between four and five years old. Children can attend ECEC settings part-time or full-time, and attendance is mandatory from the age of four. These ECEC settings are managed by local governments in collaboration with state and federal governments (Nunes et al., 2011). Municipalities set up their own ECEC institutions and have the autonomy to establish local guidelines for their network of public and private schools, preschools, and nurseries. There is, however, a National Common Curriculum (BNCC) that determines the competencies, skills, and learning goals that all children should develop during each stage of their early education, as well as what content should be taught, prioritised and followed by teachers in each school year (BNCC, 2018). These include children's rights to live together, play, participate, explore, express themselves, and develop self-knowledge. Questions about gender and sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity, however, are not mentioned in the Brazilian curriculum. Previous studies have shown a lack of systematic pedagogical attention to gender in ECEC settings in Brazil, and questions about gender are not actively discussed during university teacher training programmes (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). As gender is not part of the curriculum of ECEC settings, teachers need to respond to any gender-related questions or issues that arise with children based on their own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge.

Gender as a theoretical approach to children's constructions

In this study, gender is used as a theoretical approach to shed light on how children can construct different notions of gender that emanate from their social relationships with adults both within and outside an ECEC setting. As a category of analysis, gender as a performance is produced and reproduced through everyday actions, and it is subject to reflection and questioning (Butler, 1999). As a result, although it is subjective, it is also systematic and established in an interpersonal way (Connell & Pearse, 2015). Children's

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understandings of gender are shaped by the social practices in which they are socialised and the context in which they are raised, where individuals are constructed as men and women, boys and girls, or other categories beyond such binary constructions. Gender is understood, therefore, as a consequence of cultural, historical, and socially elaborated meanings of how bodies are socially signified (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Connell, 2016; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The relationships that children establish through their interactions with male and female teachers in ECEC create a space-time for the construction of gender ideas that can both reinforce stereotypes of masculinities and femininities and challenge them (Xu, 2020). In this way, teachers are essential agents in contributing to how children experience gender relations with themselves and other children in ECEC.

In Brazil (Prado & Anselmo, 2019; Santos et al., 2020; Santos, 2021) and in other countries (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018; Sumsion, 2005; Xu, 2020), there is a gap in the literature on children's perceptions of gender relations experienced in the interplay with their teachers, particularly male teachers, that problematises the presence/absence of men in ECEC. In the Brazilian context, ECEC teacher roles are predominantly occupied by women. Therefore, the presence of a male teacher in an ECEC context can affect children's understanding of gender and contribute to the production of new meanings about masculinities and femininities, but it can also reinforce social gender stereotypes (Santos, 2021; Sumsion, 2005). The composition of the staff and the organisation of pedagogical work within the ECEC setting shape the relationships established there, and children's constructions of femininity and masculinity can be influenced by how these are portrayed by their teachers (Silva & Luz, 2010).

In our case study, children are conceived as competent social subjects with the potential to intervene in the social relations they experience, showing themselves to be equally capable of speaking in their own right (Alderson, 2009; Campos, 2008). In this sense, instead of passively absorbing gender-related behaviours, children actively construct their subjectivities and, in relation to the cultural world that surrounds them (Xu, 2020), they not only reproduce traditional, perhaps stereotypical, roles but also engage in their production in their social relations (Prado & Anselmo, 2019). This theoretical lens also allows us to understand children as competent social subjects immersed in producing collective meanings around gender in ECEC (Santos, 2021; Xu, 2020).

Different roles assigned for male and female teachers

Expectations of and different roles attributed to women and men in ECEC can be understood based on studies on gender and questions about men as a minority group in

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gender-segregated ECEC conducted in Brazil and other countries. In Sweden, for example, which is a Nordic country with advanced gender equality policies, male and female teachers are expected to work to support children in challenging stereotyped gender norms (Warin, 2016). Their pedagogical work focuses on gender equality, where male and female teachers are expected to develop gender flexibility (Warin & Adriany, 2017) in their pedagogical work, where they can show children different ways of being without necessarily being tied to a stereotyped or binary gender construction. For example, male and female teachers are encouraged to perform all care and teaching tasks to challenge gender norms and stereotypes.

Research in China shows how male teachers in ECEC settings are seen as role models, especially for boys, when they tend to be more playful and willing to engage in physical activities than female teachers, who are more reserved (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Similar patterns also emerge in an Australian study about female teachers' perspectives on their male ECEC colleagues; male teachers are seen as more playful and connected to sports and outdoor activities (Sullivan et al., 2020). Interview studies in South Africa also show that female teachers are considered more capable of caring for younger children than males, an assumption associated with a stereotyped gender construction (Moosa & Bhana, 2018, 2020). Female teachers express that male teachers can learn to take a more caring approach and argue that they can be important male role models for children, especially those who do not have a father at home. Although this reflects a binary, traditional view of gender, it illustrates the view that children can benefit from a model of caring masculinity, especially when they meet a more toxic and normative type of masculinity outside ECEC settings in South Africa.

In Brazil, male teachers' positions and roles often become unclear when working with children. This can be explained by their minority position in a gender-segregated Brazilian ECEC workforce as well as other socio-cultural factors. Currently, only 4% of ECEC workers in Brazil are male. This may be because, for example, caring for younger children has been a role that culturally and historically has been attributed to women, and due to suspicions related to child sexual abuse, tends to be more often directed towards males (Haddad & Marques, 2022). A literature review of published Brazilian studies focused on men in ECEC between 2018 and 2021, Haddad and Marques (2022) show, for example, that male teachers feel exposed and have concerns about having tactile interactions with children because of these suspicions. Based on those concerns, they tend to work with older children to reduce possible suspicions, as younger children need more physical and intimate care, such as diaper changing and carrying. Male teachers prefer to focus on pedagogical activities, especially outdoor physical activities, rather than care tasks. Haddad and Marques highlight several studies showing that men working in

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Brazilian ECEC settings are subject to a higher degree of surveillance and must prove they can care for and teach younger children.

Different perspectives on roles attributed to male and female teachers are essential for understanding how they are culturally and socially constructed in a macro context and can be reflected in a micro context in ECEC. The interaction between macro and micro contexts (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013) contributes to understanding the different roles assigned to and taken on by teachers and how children construct an understanding of these within the spaces of ECEC. Gender representations are closely linked to bodily practices and social structures (Connell & Pearse, 2015), leading to a binary distribution of roles for women/girls and men/boys (Nielsen, 2017). The concept of social embodiment allows us to understand both the asymmetrical insertion of men's and women's bodies in social dynamics and the internalisation of social processes in the bodies of these individuals (Connell, 2016). This social embodiment also shapes children's understandings of themselves and others and their perception of dominant gender discourses, which can be reflected in their play and other situations in ECEC (Blaise, 2005; Davies & Banks, 1992). The literature in the Brazilian educational field and beyond shows how different roles and expectations can be assigned to female and male teachers.

Methodological approach

A qualitative case study was designed to understand children's gender constructions in a Brazilian ECEC setting, and we sought to investigate their particular context in depth. The scientific literature, especially in Brazil, has pointed to the indiscriminate use of the case study as a method in educational research (Alves-Mazzotti, 2006; André, 2013; Stake, 1994; Yin, 2015). However, research cannot be characterised as a case study simply because it has a small sample size or was carried out in a single institution. What defines the case study as a research method, especially in the context of education, is the possibilities it has for reconstructing everyday processes and relationships that define the experience of individuals (André, 2013). In studying gender in the context of early childhood education, we sought to understand how children experience gender relations through the relationships they have with peers and adults within their social environment.

Data for our case study were gathered from October 2022 to December 2022. The ECEC setting we studied is located in a large Brazilian city of over 2.7 million inhabitants, and the surroundings of the ECEC setting typify the contradictions of large Brazilian cities. It is situated in a border zone between an upscale neighbourhood and one of the largest

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slums (*favelas* in Portuguese) in the city. The children attending this setting and who participated in our study come from different social classes, ranging from the working class to the middle class. This ECEC setting becomes a meeting place where children from various socio-economic backgrounds can meet. Most children come from Christian-oriented families with diverse family arrangements, such as children of single mothers and separated couples. According to data gathered by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the ECEC settings in the city employ 5618 teachers, of which only 22 are men (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2023). At the time of undertaking the case study fieldwork, the investigated ECEC setting served 150 full-time children from three to five years of age (from 7:00 a.m. to 5:20 p.m.). The teachers comprised 23 professionals, two of whom were men and worked with young children; one male teacher actively contributed to data collection in our case study.

Data collection and ethical considerations

To explore our research questions, we used a mosaic approach during data collection (Clark & Moss, 2017), which sought to identify children's constructions of gender. The mosaic approach, developed by Clark and Moss, is a method that enables researchers to capture young children's voices through various data collection methods aimed at creating a comprehensive picture of children's perspectives. For this study, we focused on interviews with children and conducted participant observation at the beginning of the fieldwork, alongside interviews with adults, which we documented in fieldnotes, to gather additional data and gain a deeper understanding of children's utterances. The empirical data collection involved interviews with 15 four-year-old children (eight girls and seven boys) from a preschool class in the investigated ECEC setting. Participant observation with a more observant approach was conducted over one week to contextualise the social and physical environment in the ECEC setting (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018), and also served as supplementary data to the study. The main teacher (female) of the class and the co-teacher² (male), the pedagogical coordinator (female), and the vice-principal (female) also participated, in addition to 15 family members of the children (10 mothers, two grandmothers, an older sister, an older brother, and an aunt). Interview sessions were conducted with children and adults in the ECEC setting. In the case of adults, the following were interviewed: the male and female teachers, the pedagogical coordinator, and the vice-principal. For family members, an online questionnaire was used to gather data on

² In the context investigated, the main teacher of the ECEC preschool class is the one who spends most of the time with the children and is responsible for the pedagogical work. The co-teacher spends less time with children during the day but also has pedagogical responsibilities when working with the children in the class.

how external factors in the ECEC setting could shape gender socialisation processes (Santos, 2017) experienced by children in their nearby contexts.

The interviews with the children were conducted in pairs and took place in the class while the other children and the teachers were involved in other group activities. In addition to the interviews in pairs, photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) were carried out using drawings and photos produced by the children of their favourite places in the ECEC setting. During the interviews, the children were asked to talk about their drawings and photos, what they like to do in those spaces, and which teacher, male and female, is usually with them during these activities.

According to the Brazilian National Health Council, all research involving human participants must be submitted for approval to a Research Ethics Committee (Conselho Nacional de Saúde 466:2012). The study received approval³ from the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil, where one of the researchers is based, and the empirical data collected at the ECEC Brazilian setting were stored. The other researcher, based in Sweden, only had access to fieldnotes from the interviews, photos, and pictures produced by the children for analysis. It was not necessary to obtain ethical approval from an Ethics Authority in Sweden because it complied with the Swedish Ethical regulations when the shared data did not include personal or sensitive information, such as ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, about the adults and children, nor any details that could harm the participants (Swedish Research Council, 2025). Nevertheless, the researcher at the Swedish university engaged in ongoing discussions about ethical dilemmas and questions within various scientific environments at his department to develop a reflexive and critical ethical approach to the study.

In both countries, we followed ethical principles throughout the research process, particularly regarding the participating children, by providing them with the opportunity to give their assent before and during data collection. This was done by asking the children about their willingness to participate and observing their body language. For instance, if a child did not want to be interviewed or showed other signs of disinterest, we rescheduled the interview for a later time. The research proposal was presented to the family members during a meeting where parental written consent for children's participation was obtained from those willing to take part. Besides the formal written consent from adult participants, we also sought ongoing assent at each stage of data collection by informing them of the study's aims and encouraging a collaborative

³ The ethical approval is registered under the protocol number CAEE 76727523.4.0000.5149 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil.

approach (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Only data from adults and children who had given consent and assent were used, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study. The participants' identities and any identifying details about the ECEC setting were anonymised, and confidentiality was maintained. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in the study. The researcher also specifically asked the children for permission to use their drawings in the article, and they gave verbal assent.

Data analysis

We conducted a qualitative analysis inspired by a thematic approach to identify and code recurring patterns in the empirical material collected, aiming to organise the findings into different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We employed an inductive approach (Patton, 2015) for our analysis, creating themes strongly linked to the collected data⁴. Our analysis was informed by the theoretical framework of gender as a social category, which is shaped by various cultural practices and formed through interpersonal interactions (Connell & Pearse, 2015). We centred our study on the study's aim to understand children's gender constructions based on the interplay with their male and female teachers, the different spaces within the ECEC setting, and their relationships with other adults both within and outside of the ECEC setting in Brazil.

The primary analysis was conducted by reviewing the fieldnotes from pair interviews and photo-elicitation interviews with children, aiming to identify common patterns (Patton, 2015). Meetings were held twice a month over the course of a year among the researchers, which allowed us to compare perspectives during the analysis process and facilitated the emergence of an initial set of inductive codes. Our coding choices were guided by the recurring patterns identified in the children's utterances, aligning with our first research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The decisions about the codes were guided by some analytical questions derived from interviews with the children, focusing on what they enjoy doing with their teachers, their favourite places in the setting, and their preferred play activities. At a later stage, we started to develop themes by clustering recurring codes and exploring how children's gender constructions might be influenced by various factors in their daily experiences within the ECEC setting.

A second level of analysis sought to review and refine our preliminary themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to understand how children's gender constructions might be shaped by adult responses (teachers, other adults in the ECEC setting, and family members), based

⁴ One of the researchers, who is a native Portuguese speaker, translated the data collected in Portuguese into English.

on the central questions used in the interviews and questionnaires. These questions covered how they perceive the roles of male and female teachers in the ECEC, and their views on girls' and boys' play. In this phase, we focused on identifying similarities and differences in perceptions among children and adults regarding the themes developed from the children's utterances. This process aimed to analyse how children's relationships with other adults can also influence their gender constructions, which aligns with our second research question. Fieldnotes from the observations conducted at the beginning of data collection were used as supplementary data to support the preliminary themes. Three key themes were created regarding how children's notions of gender can be constructed, based on recurring patterns in their utterances, informed by interviews with adults and initial observations. These themes were further interpreted and discussed using the theoretical framework on gender outlined in the study.

Given that this study is based on a single case, our analysis of the findings can be influenced by what has been observed and heard in this specific ECEC setting. To minimise bias and avoid generalisations, we, as researchers, engaged both individually and during our meetings in a reflexive process by reflecting on how our own knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds (Denscombe, 2009; Patton, 2015) could impact the analysis of children's constructions. This process fostered a critical and reflexive approach to the empirical material, aiming to understand children's perspectives in line with the aim of the case study and its research questions.

Findings

Children's gender constructions based on teachers' roles in the ECEC setting

Findings based on children's utterances indicate that when they perceive that male and female teachers take different roles in the ECEC setting, this shapes how they construct notions of gender. They also associate different teachers' roles with different spaces; for example, the male teacher is often with them during outdoor activities, and the female teacher is responsible for giving them pedagogical activities in the class.

Understanding gender as performance requires recognising that individuals continuously incorporate social norms related to masculinities and femininities as they experience them. Another characteristic of the performativity of gender is that it is contextualised and situational (Butler, 1999). In this sense, gender performances are linked to how individuals act in and toward the social world that surrounds them. Thus, the interviews with children suggest that they can perceive a division of pedagogical work in the ECEC

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setting based on how the professionals act while undertaking that work. For example, the male teacher (Cleber) is seen to take a more playful role, and the female teacher (Helena) takes a more formal teaching role, as evidenced by the children's statements:

Jasmine (girl): *He (Cleber) is cooler! He does not get upset with us, not even when we make a mess. Helena is cool... She (Helena) teaches us how to count and write.*

Isabela (girl): *It is just Helena who gives us more activities to do. Cleber is only playing with us.*

(Interview with two children, extract 1)

The children perceive that the female teacher is the one who teaches and gives tasks and pedagogical activities to them. The extract that refers to the male teacher shows that, based on children's views, he is associated with the most playful situations: he is the most relaxed and is there to play (Haris & Barnes, 2009). This division of roles between the teachers can be understood by the processes of gender socialisation to which the children, as gender subjects, experience and are exposed. According to Connell (2016), socialisation processes affect our body constructions and social embodiment, as if we are programmed to be more bodily expansive. Therefore, we are delineated to be more contained from the point of view of corporeality (Prado & Anselmo, 2019), which affects how men and women behave differently, for instance, in the actions of play perceived by children in our study.

The following picture, produced by Luciano, one of the boys in the group, provides further evidence of this perception among the children:



FIGURE 1 Luciano's picture from "the place that he likes most in the ECEC setting."

Researcher: *Why did you take a picture of this place?*

Luciano (boy): *I like to play on the slide a lot. It is big.*

Researcher: *Who usually takes you to play there? Cleber, Helena, or both of them?*

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Luciano (boy): *Cleber. When we are with him it's cooler. He doesn't tell us off.*

(Interview with one child, extract 2)

The fact that the male teacher is commonly related to situations that the children experience as more playful does not mean that children do not play with the female teacher. However, the playful situations in which children are involved with the female teacher are more associated with school pedagogical tasks. This is expressed by Bianca, one of the girls in the class, in her drawing:



FIGURE 2 Bianca draws “Me at ECEC setting.”

Researcher: *What do you like to do in the ECEC setting?*

Bianca (girl): *We come here to play, have fun and learn things, many things.*

Researcher: *You have many teachers here, right? Which one do you like to play with most?*

Bianca (girl): *I like Cleber and Helena.*

Researcher: *And why do you like them?*

Bianca (girl): *It's because they take care of us!*

Researcher: *How?*

Bianca (girl): *We learn to write our names with Helena. We like to play with Cleber in the playground. He is funny!*

(Interview with one child, extract 3)

The different roles taken by the female and male teachers perceived by the children may be gendered. However, it can also depend on the different responsibilities that the teachers have, according to how much time they spend with the children in the class. At

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the same time, the playful role mostly associated with male teachers is also expressed by the female teacher when she speaks about the division of the pedagogical work in the class:

Helena (female teacher): *The division of work in the class depends on the person who we work with. For example, if you find a male teacher who genuinely enjoys teaching, it differs from those who only want to play.*

(Interview with the female teacher, extract 1)

The male teacher also expresses that females and males can have different attributes that may affect how they approach and work with children:

Cleber (male teacher): *I think that there is a difference between how male and female teachers work. I can see here in the class that women, for example, like decorating things, tend to decorate excessively, and worry too much about certain things.*

(Interview with the male teacher, extract 2)

Once again, the male teacher is associated with the broader spaces of the ECEC setting, such as the playground, while the female teacher is more related to the context of the classroom, which corroborates the results of previous studies (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2020; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Bianca's statement, for example, when explaining her drawing to the researcher, shows that there seems to be a cultural logic, often guided by the logic of schooling at levels of education after ECEC stage, marked by a certain rigidity and which is based above all, on the "*disciplining of bodies, gestures and movements, to the detriment of the pleasures of play*" (Prado & Anselmo, 2019, p. 10), which guides the female and male teacher are placed in different spaces in the ECEC setting. Moreover, the teachers' utterances show how different gendered expectations and abilities are associated with males and females.

Children's gender constructions based on their interactions with teachers

In the ECEC setting investigated, the gender socialisation experienced by the children, especially in the presence of men working in care and education practices, sometimes aligns, sometimes distances, and sometimes competes with the gender socialisation experienced in other social contexts outside the ECEC. In some instances, the bodily dimension becomes a component of the deconstruction of stereotypes, easily identifiable in the children's utterances. For example, Hélio and Marcela, children who participated in our study, express in the interview how the male teacher's physical contact with them differs from their parents:

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Hélio (boy): *Cleber's hug is different. My father does not hug me. But Cleber is a man, just like my father, and he hugs us.*

Marcela (girl): *My father hugs me, but just a little, my mother hugs me more. But Cleber has to hug us! I think that is cool!.*

(Interview with two children, extract 4)

Listening to how children experience physical interactions with the male teacher is interesting. They show the importance of physical contact, such as a hug, as part of the caring relationship, which challenges the gender norms that associate this form of contact with females and that informs a discourse of suspicion relating to men in caring roles (Haddad & Marques, 2022). Children encounter a variation of masculinity and different ways of being men outside and inside the ECEC setting when they see that men can also care (Moosa & Bhana, 2018, 2020). The children's utterances show that the presence of men in care and education practices challenges stereotyped representations of gender (Sumsion, 2005). We suggest, however, that it is not enough solely for men to work in ECEC to contribute to children's different ways of constructing gender; male and female teachers need to work together as agents of transformation and change (Santos, 2021; Sumsion, 2005; Warin & Adriany, 2017). Children's utterances also illustrate the centrality of bodily encounters between adults and children in the context of ECEC and their place as an essential element of the pedagogical work in nurseries and preschools.

The children also indicate their sense that the female teacher is more concerned with the control and discipline of the class than the male teacher:

Nuno (boy): *Cleber is nicer. Helena is nice too. But she gets upset when we make a mess in the class.*

Ana Maria (girl): *Ah, Cleber is good. Helena is the one who teaches the most, but she is angry. She is telling off us a lot.*

(Interview with two children, extract 5)

The children's utterances show that they perceive differences in how the female and male teachers approach them. The female teacher seems stricter, while the male teacher is described as "nicer" and "good". Huber and Traxl (2018), in a study that analyses the effects of similarities and differentiations in the pedagogical practice of male and female teachers on children's behaviours, argue that in the ECEC setting, gender "is present at various levels of interpersonal interaction, both by teachers and children, sometimes in a subtle way, other times in a very explicit way" (p. 466). They also suggest that, although there found no empirical evidence of a difference in how male and female teachers behave in their pedagogical relationship with children, male teachers tend to be perceived as less

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imposing, which is supported by the interviews with children in our investigation. As well as indicating how they perceive Cleber to be a more affectionate, less strict teacher, the children also identify how some professionals seem to demand stronger displays of control and vigilance from their colleagues:

Marcelo (boy): *She (Helena) is even telling off Cleber! She keeps saying that he needs to be stricter with us.*

Valentina (girl): *The teacher Helena even tells him: Cleber, we need to tell off these messy boys.*

(Interview with two children, extract 6)

The children appear to perceive social expectations regarding how the male teacher should behave in the ECEC setting. Children are active subjects and construct ideas about gender when interacting with others in different contexts (Blaise, 2005; Davies & Banks, 1992). Children learn and apprehend the world around them and become aware of the complexity that governs it from the relationships they establish with others (both adults and children) in their social practices. In this way, how children attribute meanings to the teachers' care relations sometimes can diverge from adults' views, as stated below:

Valéria (pedagogical coordinator): *When we think about the differences between the teachers, I think that the female ones tend to show children more affection than the male ones.*

Joana (vice-principal): *It is strongly associated with care in the feminine sphere, and the man is the one who helps; he is, like, doing a... helping.*

(Interview with the pedagogical coordinator and vice-principal, extract 3)

Our thematic analysis, which focuses on how children construct gender in their interactions with teachers, illustrates the differing views of children and adults regarding care relationships. Children share their experiences of how male teachers provide care, while adults tend to associate care more with female teachers. This finding highlights the importance of children's agency when their voices are included in constructing meanings of gender related to care relationships with adults (see also Xu, 2020).

Children's gender constructions shaped by adults inside and outside the ECEC setting

The findings show that children construct gender through experienced interactions with teachers and different spaces in the ECEC setting. Gender socialisation experienced by children in ECEC in some situations presents points of alignment with the socialisation experienced by them in other contexts (Santos, 2017), but also that there are moments and situations in which tensions arise between the socialising processes commonly

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experienced by boys and girls in the family, in neighbourhood groups and religious institutions, and even in contact with other adults in the ECEC setting.

In this sense, the children's utterances show that gender issues cross different levels of social interaction, both by teachers and children (Huber & Traxl, 2018) and other professionals in the ECEC setting. This is the case even though the adults express that they do not intentionally work with gender questions with the children. In an interview, the pedagogical coordinator (Valéria) stated that the theme of gender is not included in the institution's curriculum:

Valéria (pedagogical coordinator): We have two male teachers here [...] One of them joined us 18 years ago. We never considered working on gender questions in the ECEC setting, except due to the children's demands if they are curious about something... It never crossed our minds to do something related to gender. Moreover, there is no external guidance or training on how to perform our pedagogical work towards gender. There are no discussions about gender.

(Interview with the pedagogical coordinator, extract 4)

Although the pedagogical coordinator's utterance shows that there is no intentionally planned pedagogical work involving gender in the ECEC setting, the interviews with the children indicate that they do experience different gender constructions during play situations. Such possibilities are identifiable in the children's utterances below:

Bianca (girl): Sometimes I play with the boys too. They even say that girls do not even know how to play football and other boys' games. But we play anyway.

Enzo (boy): Here, in the ECEC setting, the teachers let us play whatever we want. Those who want to play with cars can do it, and those who want to play with dolls can do that too.

(Interview with two children, extract 7)

The absence of a broader institutional or curricular focus on gender, as described by the pedagogical coordinator, means that the relationships between different subjects (adults and children) can appear ambiguous and, sometimes, contradictory. At the same time, as gender is not explicitly discussed in the ECEC setting, children can experience different ways of playing and interacting that can deconstruct gender stereotypes associated with girls and boys, men and women.

The same environment that allows for the deconstruction of stereotypes, when children are allowed to play whatever they want, can also become an arena for reproducing gender stereotypes (Santos, 2021). The children's utterances below indicate that there seems to be an expectation about the girls' behaviours in relation to stereotyped gender

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assumptions on boys, which is based on a supposed distribution of gender roles (Nielsen, 2017) and also related to gender non-conformity. Thus, when the girls, in their speeches and actions, subverted, questioned, or challenged such gender stereotypes, they were immediately reproached by the teacher:

Lenira (girl): *Helena is telling off us girls when we are fighting when we are running or playing with the boys' games. She always says: girls cannot be so messy and behave like boys.*

Vilma (girl): *Look, can I tell you something? There are times when Evelyn and Stéphane from the other class come here. They fight with us. They even show us their middle finger. When they do this, Helena says: You behave like a boy!*

(Interview with two children, extract 8)

Children experience moments in everyday life when boys and girls, men and women, including teachers, can invert, perhaps subvert, and challenge gender stereotypes. There are also situations in which teachers tend to reproduce stereotyped gender expectations, which perhaps results from the absence of a collective and planned debate about gender relations in Brazilian ECEC settings (Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). The extract below shows how children can perceive gender expectations, including relating to adults when they experience other interactions in the ECEC setting:

It was a Thursday, the last week of October 2022. One of us, a male researcher responsible for collecting data, was approaching the ECEC setting exit at the end of the day. The children had already stored their belongings in their backpacks, waiting only for the gate to open and their families to enter to pick them up. One of the girls, Sarah, complained to a female teacher that Amanda, another child, took her ball. The teacher then asked Amanda to return the ball to Sarah, and the girl did not answer. Then, suddenly, the teacher turned to the researcher and asked: "Can you solve this, please?" He was embarrassed and did not know how to proceed. He even asked the girl to deliver her classmate's ball, but he was unsuccessful. As it was early in the research process, the researcher was aware that any more hasty interference could have severe effects on the data production process, especially regarding the children's acceptance of the presence of a researcher in the ECEC context.

The female teacher continues to insist until Amanda gives the ball back. The teacher, trying to solve the problem between the girls, requests that they hug each other and that Amanda, who had taken Sarah's ball, apologise. With the gates opening, family members began to arrive at the classroom doors to pick up the children.

(Observation of female teacher and two children, extract 1)

There seemed to be an expectation that a male would take a more disciplinary role towards the children. The children knew little about the researcher's presence there, as

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that week marked his first contact with the group. The adults, including the female teacher, had already interacted more with the researcher in both informal and formal situations. The affective bonds that allowed the group, both children and teachers, to accept the researcher were still being built, and, in this sense, the female teacher's sudden request for the researcher to intervene in the situation could affect the construction of a relationship with the children. This was the first day of observation in the ECEC setting with the children and their teachers. The abrupt way in which the female teacher asked the researcher to resolve a dispute between two girls, although trivial, is illustrative of how the social meanings around male presence in ECEC are constructed from an established and complex set of cultural and collectively produced meanings that shape expectations of how and in relation to which men and women boys and girls behave (Santos, 2021). In other words, we start from the assumption that the male presence in early childhood education and care is not only signified by male teachers but also produces behaviours and responses from children informed by the gender cultures in which they are immersed (Xu, 2020).

The children's statements also evidence the convergences and tensions of gender socialisation experienced in the ECEC setting and broader social contexts, such as family, peer, and neighbourhood groups. In the ECEC setting, children can experience situations in which they can explore different options for constructing gender, which can challenge cultural beliefs and fixed gender norms that they experience outside the ECEC setting. According to two children, Juliana and Lenilson:

Juliana (girl): *Our teachers even let us play with a car, but mom says it is not a girl's toy.*

Lenilson (boy): *The teacher Helena always says that we boys can play with the dolls. My grandmother says that I cannot do that.*

(Interview with two children, extract 9)

The extracts from the interviews with Juliana and Lenilson show the contradictory and sometimes conflicting ways in which gender socialisation experienced at the ECEC setting relates to the broader social context of the children. Undoubtedly, this social context influences the construction of children's gender perceptions and seems to present views based on a binary division of what boys and girls can do. Families initiate children into cultural norms, including gender stereotypes, as we can see in the statements below from some of the children's family members. In the questionnaire sent to families, when we asked, *"In what ways do you think gender has an impact on how children are raised?"* some family members answered the question mostly in relation to how children should play and should be:

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Mother of one child: *Boys play with boys' things and girls with girls' things.*

Mother of one child: *In my family, for example, the older ones always say that girls wear pink and boys blue.*

Older sister of one child: *The adults sometimes impose what boys and girls should be. Boys should play with balls, and girls should only play with dolls.*

(Questionnaire responses from children's family members, extract 1)

The responses of the children's family members illustrate how social expectations about male and female roles mark the gender socialisation that children experience in their family environment. This illustrates how gender can be seen as a result of cultural and historical factors (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Connell, 2016; West & Zimmerman, 1987), where children develop meanings about masculinities and femininities and, to some degree, adopt the gender beliefs of the adults with whom they interact (including teachers and family members). These beliefs are reflected in the children's speech, particularly when they express which toys they can play with at home. Notions of being male and female can be reproduced and deconstructed based on teachers' sensitive and attentive practices, whether male or female (Xu, 2020). This occurs, for example, when the female teacher emphasises that boys can play with dolls or girls can play with balls and cars. This example shows how ECEC can help children challenge the traditional gender formations in which they are inserted (Xu, 2020). In addition to that, it shows how children understand the contradictions and ambiguities that gender carries in different contexts (Blaise, 2005).

Discussion

Our findings indicate that the specific pedagogical roles taken by female and male teachers, as well as children's interactions with adults both inside and outside the ECEC setting, and how these adults view gender, can influence how children construct their understanding of gender. The interviews with the children reveal that they seem to experience more flexible constructions of gender as possible in the context of the ECEC setting, which emphasises the primary role of ECEC in challenging and problematizing gender stereotypes that persist in wider society. This positions ECEC as a space where children's gender constructions are shaped by the creation and reinforcement of meanings about what it means to be and act as a girl/woman or boy/man (see also Connell & Pearse, 2015; Santos, 2021; Sumsion, 2005).

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The findings indicate that the division of pedagogical work by the teachers in play situations and spaces in the ECEC may affect how children construct gender. For example, children associate the male teacher with outdoor activities and playful situations, and the female teacher relates to the classroom space and teaching responsibilities. Our case study within a Brazilian context aligns with other contexts, such as China and South Africa, where notions of femininity and masculinity are more based on traditional gender assumptions (Moosa & Bhana, 2018, 2020; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Findings show how children in Brazil bring normative gender assumptions into the ECEC setting, which are commonly shared by their families. This helps us understand that children carry stereotypical gender ideas from other social contexts outside the ECEC setting, which may influence their gender constructions, particularly regarding which toys are considered more appropriate for boys and girls. Children report interdictions by family members when, in everyday situations, they seek to relate to activities and social conditions associated with the opposite gender. Some children emphasise that even though teachers allow boys to play with dolls and girls with cars, their family members disagree. This shows how the social context in which children are raised can influence their perspectives when they play in the ECEC setting. Sumsion (2005) argues that the discourses children encounter in ECEC can confirm, expand, or contradict the normative standards imposed on them in other contexts. This highlights the importance of professionals' sensitivity and attentiveness to the active and continuous work of children's gender identity development, particularly in relation to more complex notions such as gender fluidity (see also Warin & Adriany, 2017).

At the same time, the findings also suggest that pedagogical work on gender intentionally organised by ECEC professionals can provide ways to deconstruct gender stereotypes and respect differences, especially those that emerge from gender relations. The inclusion of male teachers in ECEC is also a factor that contributes to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, as it enables children to encounter other types of masculinities, such as one that plays, embraces, and establishes more affectionate educational and care relationships than that guided by hegemonic standards (Connell, 2016; Prado & Anselmo, 2019). However, as previous studies have suggested (Bhana et al., 2022; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2018; Santos, 2021; Sumsion, 2005), the presence of men as teachers in early childhood education, although positive, does not in itself diminish the chances that care and traditional gender constructions shape pedagogical practices.

Considering the growing conservative discourse (Moura & Salles, 2018) and the absence of institutional debate on gender issues in the investigated context, particularly when a male teacher interacts with the children, renders this pedagogical work ambiguous and occasionally contradictory (see also Gonçalves de Sousa & Nogueira, 2023). We argue,

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therefore, that gender should be part of the curriculum of ECEC and teacher professional development, and fixed gender roles should be a constant focus of critical reflection by all ECEC educators, *“conforming themselves as a driving force for the construction of a more egalitarian and just society, expressing a project of human formation that does not allow the transformation of difference into inequality”* (Santos, 2021, p. 14).

Conclusions

This case study, conducted within a Brazilian context, contributes to the understanding of how different notions of gender permeate everyday lives of children and adults by illustrating how children’s gender constructions can be shaped by the roles that male and female teachers assume, and how this influences their experiences both within and outside the ECEC setting. It is an example of how dominant gender discourses rooted in Brazilian society (Dimenstein et al., 2020; Lugones, 2016) still shape how children – and teachers – construct gender in ECEC spaces. Our findings also align with previous studies in Brazil and other countries that show similar patterns in how different roles can be assigned to male and female teachers (Haddad & Marques, 2022; Moosa & Bhana, 2018, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Despite the limitations and possibilities of generalisation from a specific ECEC setting, our study shows how stereotyped notions of gender can still be reinforced and reproduced in ECEC, regardless of sociocultural contexts.

Our study suggests that it is important that ECEC creates an arena where teachers can critically discuss and reflect on how pedagogical work is divided and how their roles affect children’s constructions of gender. One possibility is that male and female teachers work based on gender flexibility (Warin & Adriany, 2017) and take different roles that challenge fixed, stereotyped gender assumptions. At the same time, teachers must reflect upon the language they use to address the children and the expectations they have of children in order to create conditions for children to learn and play without restrictions placed according to traditional understandings of gender.

Even within the examined context, where there is a lack of systematic pedagogical work focusing on gender and where policies related to gender equity are limited, it is evident that children are active participants who experience how different notions of gender are connected to being boy/male or girl/female. The case presented here also allows us to reflect on how ECEC is configured as a gendered arena in which both the deconstruction of traditional gender roles and the production of new meanings for masculinities and femininities occur. Thus, it would be pertinent to promote public policies for early

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childhood education and care focusing on gender relations and constructions, especially when there is a growing number of conservative groups in Brazil voicing opposition to discussions about gender in educational settings (Moura & Salles, 2018). Such policies can encompass different levels of pedagogical work, e.g., the inclusion of discussion of gender equality in the official curricula of ECEC, inclusion of content on gender identity and sexuality in early childhood education teacher training programmes, and reference to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion policies and training for the ECEC workforce in Brazil.

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