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Gender relations in Early Childhood Education: structure and agency in the process of building meanings about being a boy and being a girl¹

Relações de gênero na Educação Infantil: estrutura e agência no processo de construção de sentidos sobre ser menino e ser menina

Sandro Vinicius Sales Santos*

Isabel de Oliveira e Silva**

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the ways children experience gender relations in an Early Childhood Education institution are analyzed, in order to highlight the articulations between the structural dimensions and the agencies of boys and girls. The research object is the relations between the institutional regulation and the actions of boys and girls of 4 and 5 years old, in the choices and uses of the environments of an institution of Early Childhood Education. From a theoretical point of view, the text is anchored in gender studies and studies of childhood and Early Childhood Education. From the methodological point of view, the study is configured as ethnography developed throughout 2015 with 7 girls and 11 boys of 5 years old and their teachers in a public Early Childhood Education institution located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil, having as instruments of data production: participant observation, interviews, drawings articulated with the orality of the children. It was verified that the regulation exerted by teachers influences the action of children in the process of choice and use of the spaces of Early Childhood Education, since boys were more expansive than girls concerning the use of the spaces of the institution.

Keywords: Childhood. Children. Early Childhood Education. Gender relations. Structure and agency.

1 Translate by Janete Bridon Reis. E-mail: deolhonotexto@gmail.com

* Federal University of Vales do Jequitinhonha e Mucuri. Diamantina, Minas Gerais, Brazil. E-mail: sandrovssantos@gmail.com - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9666-3639>

** Federal University of Minas Gerais. Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. E-mail: isabel.os@uol.com.br - <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2223-4548>

RESUMO

Neste artigo, analisam-se as formas como as crianças vivenciam as relações de gênero em uma instituição de Educação Infantil, de modo a evidenciar as articulações entre as dimensões estruturais e as agências de meninos e de meninas. O objeto da pesquisa são as relações entre a regulação institucional e as ações de meninos e de meninas de 4 e 5 anos, nas escolhas e nos usos dos ambientes de uma instituição de Educação Infantil. Do ponto de vista teórico, o texto ancora-se nos estudos de gênero, da infância e da Educação Infantil. Já do ponto de vista metodológico, o estudo configura-se como uma etnografia desenvolvida ao longo de 2015 com 7 meninas e 11 meninos de 5 anos de idade e seus professores em uma instituição pública de Educação Infantil situada em Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, tendo como instrumentos de produção de dados: observação participante, entrevistas e desenhos articulados com a oralidade das crianças. Verificou-se que a regulação exercida pelos professores influencia a ação das crianças no processo de escolha e uso que fazem dos espaços da Educação Infantil, uma vez que os meninos se mostraram mais expansivos do que as meninas no que tange ao uso dos espaços da instituição.

Palavras-chave: Infância. Crianças. Educação Infantil. Relações de gênero. Estrutura e agência.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the ways in which children produce meanings about the gender relations experienced within an Early Childhood Education institution². The text seeks to show how gender representations³ are present in the structuring of the institution's environment, emphasizing their effects on children's agency (capacity for social action). The discussions presented here

2 The data presented throughout this article comprise the doctoral dissertation entitled 'A socialização de Gênero na Educação Infantil: uma análise a partir da perspectiva das crianças' - Gender socialization in Early Childhood Education: an analysis from the perspective of children, defended in October 2016 in the Graduate Program Knowledge and Social Inclusion of the Faculty of Education at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. We thank the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes) for the financial support.

3 Symbolic representations of gender are understood here as a "set of culturally organized forms that allow subjects to allude, classify, show or name themselves, people and things based on the historically constructed differences between masculinity and femininity" (SANTOS, 2017, p. 733).

are based on ethnographic descriptions developed throughout the 2015 school year with 18 children (seven girls and eleven boys), and the teacher who taught them daily in a public institution of Early Childhood Education located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

Within the scope of Brazilian scientific production, the investigation of gender relations in childhood has been fruitful, since, in the last 20 years, the area has developed important studies carried out by different theoretical and methodological traditions. Thus, during this period, we have witnessed the evolution of research that encompasses the intersectionality of gender and childhood on at least two different research fronts. On the one hand, a set of research analyzes the gender pedagogies produced by adults for children (FELIPE; GUIZZO, 2003; FELIPE, 2009; SALGADO, 2012; SILVA; BERTUOL, 2014; among others). Such studies seek to reveal a taciturn and fluid educational project to which we call “gender pedagogy” (SANTOS, 2016), which seeks to conform the subjectivities of boys and girls, differentiating them through a curriculum and a didactic that is dispersed. “[...] in the form of toys, cartoons, movies, magazines, songs, dances and a series of other cultural products”, arranged within the scope of Early Childhood Education institutions (SALGADO, 2012, p. 119).

On the other hand, there are investigations that analyze gender relations from the perspective of children (FINCO, 2003, 2013; SAYÃO, 2003; NEVES, 2008; KISHIMOTO; ONO, 2008; BUSS-SIMÃO, 2012, 2013; among others). These studies highlight the ability of children to deal, from a very early age, with the social relationships they experience among themselves, because “[...] in the games they invent, boys and girls demonstrate that gender roles are being outlined very early, although in childhood it is quite possible to transgress them” (SAYÃO, 2003, p. 78).

In view of the peculiarities of recent production in the field of education, there is an absence of studies that seek to understand the intricate dimensions that involve gender relations in childhood. In other words, the proposition of investigations that analyze the gender experiences produced by children without, however, disregarding the structural forces that stand in the way of this process, constitutes a gap in the national scientific production.

The object of study analyzed here comprises the relationships between institutional regulation and the actions of boys and girls aged 4 and 5 with respect to gender relations and how they interfere in the choices and uses of the environments of an Early Childhood Education institution. In this direction, the question that guided the research and analysis discussed here consists of: How are the choices and actions of boys and girls in the use of the environments of an Early Childhood Education institution related to the formalized and/or present

institutional regulation in practices of teachers and other adults, having gender relations as mediators? From this central question, two others arise: How does the institutional regulation of construction and use of environments establish a gender pedagogy? And how do children's actions conform and/or transform determined uses, revealing or not their agency and their perspective on the environments of Early Childhood Education and the relationships that occur in them?

Thus, when we recognize the density and complexity that constitute the social relationships experienced by children (who alternate between the dynamics and interactivity inherent in the relationships between peers, while weighing the multiplicity of meanings present in the interactions with adults), we chose, in the lines of this paper, for analyzing the ways in which boys and girls signify gender relations from an approximation with their reference universes. Such an undertaking imposed two challenges on us: the first, of a theoretical nature; and the second, a methodological one.

From a theoretical point of view, it was necessary to articulate conceptual contributions capable of enabling the construction of looks that are sensitive to the children's age specificities. Thus, in order to analyze the meanings produced by five-year-old boys and girls about the gender relations experienced within a public Early Childhood Education institution, it was necessary to articulate, in addition to theories and authors of the new childhood studies (THORNE, 1993; MORROW, 2006; FERREIRA, 2002; CORSARO; AYDT, 2003; CORSARO, 1997; 2011; among others), authors of feminist and gender studies (WEST; ZIMMERMAN, 1987; CARVALHO, 2012; CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015; among others), ratifying the understanding that childhood is currently seen as a complex, hybrid and multifaceted social phenomenon.

In relation to methodological issues, we sought to undertake a reading of children's experience through otherness of childhood. For that, we constructed a methodological design for the investigation that allowed to describe, with density (GEERTZ, 1989), the specifics of the social experiences of gender of the children. Through the ethnography (SPRADLEY, 1979; GEERTZ, 1989; MAGNANI, 2002; GRAUE; WALSH, 2003) in a public institution of Early Childhood Education, we were concerned with accessing the children's perspective in order to understand the complex and multifaceted ways that they show when experiencing gender relations.

For this endeavor, we used a variety of data production instruments (participant observation, interviews with adults and children; drawings, articulated with the children's orality), in addition to the different forms of recording (notes in field notebooks, photographs, recordings in audio), since "[...] a good data record contains points of view gathered from as many perspectives as possible" (GRAUE; WALSH, 2003, p. 127). The combination of these

different research instruments allowed us to interpret the children's experiences in terms of appropriating gender relations in the context of the care and education institution – which confirms the relevance of data triangulation in research with children (GRAUE; WALSH, 2003; ROCHA, 2008).

When analyzing gender relations from different angles (instruments) and from the perspective of different actors (adults and children), we better understand the specificities surrounding the learning related to the construction of gender identities, in order to show that being a man and a woman, boy and girl are complex and diverse social constructions. This process allows us to consider masculinities and femininities as plural possibilities that permit human beings to be and be in the world, which also includes the children themselves.

This text was organized in three parts. In the first section, the theoretical contributions of the investigation are presented that allowed to understand the complex and intricate relations between gender and childhood. In the second section, through the empirical data produced in the dialogue with the children and their teachers, we highlight the ways in which the gender representations present in the environment of the Early Childhood Education are set as structuring dimensions of social relations between adults and children, with effects mainly on the social action of boys and girls. Finally, we make some final remarks.

Gender and childhood; structure and agency: dualisms present in children's experiences in Early Childhood Education contexts

Virgínia Morrow (2006) states that, at the international level, more precisely in the sociology of Anglo-Saxon tradition, with the exception of educational research (which, as in Brazil, has gradually been increasing the amount of investigations), little attention has been paid to children regarding the construction of their gender identities (MORROW, 2006). To the author, sociological research, when trying to demonstrate a certain regularity in the gender experiences of boys and girls, commonly incurs the error of generalization, that is, the universalization of discourses about the experiences produced and lived by boys and girls.

To Morrow (2006), the constituent categories of identity, such as social class, age, ethnicity, religion, among others, amalgamate, influencing children's childhoods and, consequently, their gender identities. This fact highlights the insufficiency of theories that insist on universalizing or idealizing the phenomenon of childhood (MORROW, 2006).

The recognition of the complexity of the contexts of action in which children operate has also allowed to shed new light on the agency (capacity for action) of boys and girls. If the social relationships experienced in the company of adults are, for the most part, traversed by controversial meanings and almost always produced unilaterally (from adult to child), within the scope of relationships with peers, boys and girls actively create, negotiate and build new meanings about gender relations (THORNE, 1993; MORROW, 2006; CORSARO; AYDT, 2003; CORSARO, 2011). Thus, social gender relations, which are constructed and apprehended by children in conjunction with adults, are constantly confronted, interpreted and negotiated in the relationships they establish with their peers.

Although there are different theoretical meanings and traditions within feminist thinking (CARVALHO, 2012), it is necessary to take gender in a peculiar sense, namely: understanding it as a daily performance that is repeatedly open to reflection and questioning (THORNE, 1993). It is, therefore, a construction that, although subjective, is simultaneously systematic, recurrent and established in an interpersonal way (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015). Personal understanding of gender arises from a multiplicity of processes in which individuals are constructed as men and women; boys and girls, while, in everyday situations, they also build gender relations.

In this text, therefore, we understand gender as a consequence of the combination of countless units of meaning, culturally and structurally produced, *on* and *from* the ways in which bodies are socially signified, at the same time that they are concomitantly constructed (THORNE, 1993; WEST; ZIMMERMAN, 1987; CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015). Thus, in the context of Early Childhood Education – a social space structured by adults for children – gender representations are a structuring dimension of social relations. Gender is thus understood as a social structure that has specific dimensions, as it focuses on a multiplicity of cultural practices that regulate, adapt and adjust the differentiations between bodies – men and women; boys and girls (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015). Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that there is a diversity of other ways of being and being in the world that go beyond this dualism (SANTOS, 2018).

In this perspective, Manuela Ferreira (2002) suggests that the supply of toys leads children to erect real structurally demarcated gender boundaries. In this way, the establishment of bordering territories, in which they play segregated in different groups, which associate girls with the space of the house and direct boys to the most daring toys (weapons, cars, among others), provides “[...] the construction of bipolar borders according to an identification of contrasting, extreme and exclusive gender interests” (FERREIRA, 2002, p. 128).

To the author, the specific belonging of children in private land of relationships based on male/female binarism allows the creation of “[...] homosocial gender groups, relatively segregated: that of girls and that of boys” (FERREIRA, 2002, p. 128). In the relationship between groups of boys and groups of girls (*heterosocial* relationships), children erect real “frontiers” in which they actively work to understand gender relations at the same time that they experience them (FERREIRA, 2002). According to the author:

It is, after all, the continuous *frontier work of gender relations* (according to Thorne, 1993: 64-88; Louro, 1997:79; Corsaro 1997:182; Danby, 1998:198) that marks and reinforces the differences and separations between groups, so the construction of *homosocial relationships*, by erecting *exclusive gender boundaries*, also defines how *heterosocial relationships* are built and maintained. (FERREIRA, 2002, p. 127-128, author’s emphasis).

Ferreira’s (2002) considerations demonstrate, with regard to gender, that structuring elements of social relations have effects on children’s actions. However, it is necessary to articulate new theoretical lenses that allow an interpretative analysis capable of showing the interfaces between structure and agency within the scope of gender socialization⁴ in Early Childhood Education.

Connell and Pearse (2015) seek to understand the ways in which the agency (which occurs through body practices) and social structures are interconnected over time. According to the authors, gender relations “[...] are added to the historical process in which society is embodied and bodies are dragged into history”, a route they name as *social embodiment*, a kind of “reflective corporal practice”, in the case of social behaviors, in which bodies are simultaneously agents and objects (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 112).

In this perspective, masculinities and femininities are socially elaborated constructs that we live with from an early age, since, from birth (or even before it), we experience several socialization processes that aim at the manufacture of gendered subjects, in which different codes, agencies and social structures (gendered) are imposed on us. Thus, the ways in which we become subjects of

⁴ Gender socialization consists of the combination of different socialization processes with a view to producing gendered subjects. In the articulation of such socialization processes, children, as active subjects, interact with adults, with their peers, with culture and with society from a framework of references, ambiguous, conflicting and, sometimes, contradictory (SANTOS, 2016, 2017, 2018).

gender come from the combination of innumerable processes of socialization, full of tensions and ambiguities, in which the subjects fabricate themselves from the objective (structural) conditions that are given to them (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015).

In the field of Sociology, the concept of structure has been called upon to demonstrate the existence of regularities (patterns) in social actions and relations. According to Connell and Pearse (2015), social relations between individuals would have little meaning and, consequently, little durability and permanence if they were transitory and irregular. To them, “[...] the duration and extensive patterns between social relations are what social theory calls structure” (CONNEL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 156). In this sense, a society’s gender arrangements are set as a social structure that organizes and is organized by the social relations of boys and girls; of men and women.

In this sense, it is necessary to consider, however, that the structures are not only coercive and regulating human agency; they can also drive action (CONNEL; PEARSE, 2015). Thus, in one way or another – be it through the alignment of action with the social coercion imposed by the structures, or through the criticism carried out by the subject on these structures in the construction of their experiences –, what is in vogue is that, in some way, structures relate to the action of individuals. In Connell and Pearse’s (2015, p. 157) words, “[...] a structure of relationships does not mechanically decide how people or groups act. [...]. But a structure of relationships certainly defines possibilities for action and its consequences”. According to the authors:

The social structure conditions the practice. However, structures are not prior to everyday life. Social structures are updated (made act) by human activity over time and historically created. Gender relations are updated when we continue to engage in “gendered modes of behavior”, as Carol Hagemann-White (1987) mentions. Structure and change are not opposed, but start from the same dynamic of our social life (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 157).

When analyzing gender through this theoretical key, the authors understand it as a specific mode of *social embodiment*, that is, as a way of connecting bodily processes to social structures. To them, the distinctive property of the genre presupposes that it mentions, simultaneously, the body structures and the processes linked to human reproduction, since it is a theoretical construct that encompasses a set of social practices that include “[...] childcare, childbirth,

sexual interaction – which show the capabilities of human bodies to give birth, breast-feed, give and receive sexual pleasure. We can only begin to understand gender if we understand how close social and bodily processes are” (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 113).

Such bodily capacities and the practices by which they are performed constitute an arena, “[...] a corporal field in which something social happens” (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 113). Among these events are the cultural categories “man” and “woman” – and all other gender categories that a given society defines, such as: boys and girls, aggressiveness and docility; masculinity and femininity, brutality and sensuality, among others) and “[...] this can be called the ‘reproductive arena’ in social life” (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015, p. 113).

Considering the institution of Early Childhood Education as a socially organized space, regulated and constantly structured by adults for children, when acting in this context, they often encounter situations whose gender representations promote influences on their agencies, which sometimes they accept, conform and align their actions to such regulations, sometimes they refute them, building new and varied possibilities of experiencing masculinities and femininities.

Understanding how structure and agency are articulated in children’s gender learning

The prolonged insertion in the Early Childhood Education institution, a reference context in which children and adults daily coexist, evidenced the existence of different representations about masculinities and femininities whose presence had effects on the agency of individuals, especially on the little ones. As we stated, gender is set as a structure of society whose organization links human agency to the structuring dimensions, showing that the learning related to masculinities and femininities takes place in a reproductive arena – a field of bodily action in which societal reproduction is guaranteed by the socialization of new generations, a process named “social embodiment” (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015).

As Spradley (1979) suggests, ethnography conforms to the “[...] description of a system of cultural meanings of a certain group [...]” and, therefore, its main objective is to understand another way of life, apprehended, however, from the point of view as close as possible to that of the informants. Ethnographic fieldwork, in this perspective, encompasses the study of what the world is (or what it may become) in the natives’ view. Thus, ethnography aims to describe how people see, hear, speak, think and act *in* and *about* the world – cultural

practices that, from the point of view of gender relations, are apprehended at the same time that they are experienced in the daily flow of life (THORNE, 1993; WEST; ZIMMERMAN, 1987; CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015).

In this sense, the prolonged contact with the subjects (adults and children) allowed an approximation with their universes of references, evidencing, equally, the existence of distinct appropriation processes, by the children, of the spaces of the institution of Early Childhood Education. On the one hand, when boys played, they expressed the need to expand their interactions and games through space, often extrapolating the domains of the classroom and occupying other environments of the institution. The girls, on the other hand, usually remained playing inside the room, a fact that can be seen in the episode described below:

Right after the break, the students return to the classroom for the continuity of the experiences with the mathematical language that were proposed by the teacher. Vânia, the teacher responsible for the class, had finished the Math activity with the children and gave them modeling clay so they could play. At that moment, teacher Anselmo entered the room and explained to his colleague how the reports about the children he had started were (reports that are usually produced at the end of the semester). Teacher Vânia, as she always did, asked me very discreetly to take care of the class while she went, together with Anselmo, to see those reports on the computer in the teachers' room. As soon as Vânia left, Jonas – one of the boys in the class – took his modeling clay and put it in the jar. He returned to the table and asked Vitório if he wanted to play superhero. Vitório accepted the invitation and also put his modeling clay away. Then, Saulo also performed the same procedure. It didn't take long for most of the boys present (Vitório, Jonas, Gleisson, Saulo, Carlos, Gabriel, Israel, among others) to run around the room with their superhero cloaks (pieces of TNT cut by the teacher). The girls remained seated playing with the clay. As activity corner time⁵ was approaching, when Vânia returned to the classroom, the boys immediately, without asking for the teacher's permission, placed themselves outside the classroom to play. The girls, still sitting with the clay, took some pots and pans and started play cooking, as usual (Notes from the field notebook, June 22, 2015).

5 Translation note: Activity corner time is a typical form of planning for Early Childhood Education in which the teacher offers, simultaneously, different experiences so that children can, organized in small groups, choose the ones they wish to carry out. As they are offered concurrently, they are arranged at different points in the classroom. Therefore, the (geographical) idea of "corners".

Upon realizing that the teacher had left the classroom, the boys (led by Jonatas) left the modeling clay – an activity that children normally performed while seated – and started playing superheroes running all over the classroom. When they realized that the teacher had returned, the boys who were running euphorically and tearing about, started to play outside, running and jumping along the entire length of the corridor. The girls gradually also stopped playing with the modeling clay, but preferred to play with the pots and pans in the living room.

The Early Childhood Education institution is a context of action regulated by adults. However, we can observe that, in its dynamics, there are situations in which experiences can and should be “[...] managed by decisions taken by the children themselves according to situations that occur or are triggered by them” (SANTOS; SILVA, 2016, p. 139). In the episode described above, the teacher leaving the room was a trigger for children’s initiative actions that reveal the possibility of developing a certain sense of autonomy. However, with regard to gender, there are differences in the modes of action of boys and girls that affect different forms of appropriation and use of spaces in the institution of Early Childhood Education.

The recurrence of episodes like this imposed, in the analysis process, the need and urgency for an intense review of the records in the field notebook. In addition to the frontiers erected within the scope of the games through the gendried cartography imposed by the toys (THORNE, 1993; FERREIRA, 2002), the episode reveals the different agencies assumed by boys and girls in the face of the following issue: the boys almost always went to play in the corridor (outside the classroom); the girls sat and played with the pots and pans. At that moment, we realized that children took on gender positions in their actions that involved the dichotomies of boys/men /public spaces/external spaces and girls/women/private spaces/internal spaces. What made this difference between the actions of boys and girls possible? Why did the boys try to expand the play spaces while the girls preferred to stay in the class classroom? Is it just the influence of toys? To what extent did other processes of production of meanings intertwine with situations like these, in which the separations between boys and girls took place almost in a “natural” way?

When reviewing the notes in the field notebook and other data produced through the empiric (interviews with children and adults, some photographs and drawings produced by the children), we realized that there were several situations in the daily life of the institution that promoted not only the separation between boys and girls, but allowed the boys to remain in the external spaces and the girls in the internal space of the classroom. In this process, although it was not the only factor that contributed to the differentiation between the boys and girls

agencies, the gendered cartography of toys promoted a separation between boys and girls, which did not go unnoticed by the children. This becomes evident in the interviews with the small children, because when they were asked about where the best place to play was, the children demonstrated:

When the play is in the activity corners, I don't think that happens this type of playing together. This business of mixing building blocks with dolls in the living room is not worth much, because the teacher does not let the toys get mixed. Either we play with building blocks or we play with dolls. Then the girls play cooking more and the boys more with themselves. We only join in the playground. There everyone plays together (Andreia Juliane, September 15, 2015).

In the playground we play together more: boys and girls mix more. In the classroom it is boy with boy and girl with girl (Cristiano, September 21, 2015).

As in the classroom, children are surrounded by toys and several other artifacts that enable the separation between boys and girls, they demonstrate that they understand that such factors influence their interactions, which is clear in Cristiano's speech when he states that "in the classroom it is boy with boy and girl with girl". The opposite occurs in the moments of play in the playground that, because they have less structured toys, that is, with lesser gender connotations than those found in the classroom, this environment provides more equitable interactions from the point of view of gender relations, in which boys and girls play indistinctly, because, according to Ana Julia, "there [in the playground] everyone plays together".

The photographs of moments of interaction between the children (Figure 1), both in the classroom (or in other spaces of the institution where the situations were measured by the teacher) and in the playground, show this distinction: more segregated relationships between boys and girls in internal spaces and more shared relationships between them in external spaces:

FIGURE 1 – DIFFERENT SITUATIONS IN WHICH CHILDREN UNITE AND SEPARATE



SOURCE: Research archive.

We can notice, in the children's statements as well as in the photographs produced as a record of participant observation, that the routines experienced in the classroom by the group, due to the toys there and offered to them, lead them to build true boundaries between genders which are erected in moments of play, which occurs less frequently in the environment of the playground that has less structured toys from the point of view of gender relations.

To Manuela Ferreira (2002), the provision of gendered toys makes children create a sequence of routines and games that, based on elements of the adult world, are configured as legitimate specific territories of homosocial groups (of boys and girls' games). According to the author, children do not build these divisions randomly; on the contrary, they understand not only the existence, but also the extent of these boundaries. According to the author, children

[...] have the notion that there are spaces, objects and "own" activities for girls and boys, whose definition of what is allowed and what is prohibited, the *borders*, largely reinforced or constituted through playing with each other and with the others, allow them to understand how they become, belong and see as members a particular gender group through two relational categories (FERREIRA, 2002, p. 128).

As a way of apprehending the different agencies of boys and girls in the moments of play, the teachers were interviewed, enabling the construction of a set of data that contributed to the understanding of the collective meanings built around masculinities and femininities in that context. When they were asked about how they perceived the games played by boys and girls, the teachers presented divergent opinions. Anselmo said he did not perceive differences between the way boys and girls play in the Municipal Unit for Early Childhood Education (UMEI). To him, the little ones play indistinctly. However, Vânia, who worked with children most of the day (approximately three hours), not only realizes that boys and girls play in different ways, but also have different behaviors. According to the teachers:

From the moment that the boys join with the girls the games, the attitudes of each other do not change. Except for the boys' fighting games – which they stop there. For example, if the girls are in the Dolls' house, the boys approach and go to the Dolls' house (Teacher Anselmo, October 6, 2015).

I have already realized that girls are more cautious. It is as if they are more contained. So much so that the boys appropriated the space of the corridor at the time of the activity corners, which is a large space and a good space. At no time did the girls come up to me and ask, "oh teacher, why do you let only the boys play in the corridor? I didn't let them, they took over that space (Teacher Vânia, October 6, 2015).

Several situations observed in the fieldwork showed the separation between boys and girls in pedagogical practices and in various rituals that make up the routine of the institution of Early Childhood Education. Observations revealed that the classroom had toys that favored the separation between boys and girls. However, in the previous section, we can observe that teacher Vânia, a reference teacher for that group of children, interprets the appropriation of external spaces by boys as their less submission to adult regulation, making their actions positive like achievements. Many of the pedagogical practices experienced by adults and children, in that context, contained meanings about masculinities and femininities that do not seem to be objects of reflection on the part of the teachers. This is because "[...] in the set of experiences of the educators at the institution of Early Childhood Education, there is a dynamism that expresses different conceptions at different times and institutional spaces and relationships with children" (SILVA; LUZ, 2010, p. 29).

Observation in the field also made it noticeable that, through the unexpected and the news that emerged **in** and **as a result of** everyday life, gender representations were constantly reinforced in the pedagogical work developed by the adults in the institution of Early Childhood Education. The following episode illustrates how, in the context of the institution of care and education, the public/private dichotomy, reproduced in the course of a situation experienced by children, explains how a logic of using physical spaces in moments of play is established, which allows and consents to the construction of differentiated agencies: for boys, the use and circulation **of** and **in** the external space of the institution; and girls, the use and permanence **of** and **in** the internal space of the classroom:

It is about 8:30 am and teacher Anselmo arrives at the classroom so that teacher Vânia can leave the ACPATE. The teacher organizes an activity that consists of creating props to decorate a cardboard box where he keeps some of his materials. He explains that the box, without any decoration, is very ugly and that, to decorate it, he would need the help of the children. He said that while the girls, sitting in the classroom, would paint some CDs, the boys, sitting outside, would make some drawings that would be pasted onto the box. Then the situation would be reversed: the boys would come to paint in the classroom and the girls would draw outside (Notes from the field notebook, March 12, 2015).

Here, there is the presence of representation that expresses a binary gender logic that presupposes the presence of boys in the external space, since they were taken by the teacher to perform the task in the corridor (outside the classroom), making the girls, in contrast, perform a second part of the same task within the space of the room. There was a promise, on the part of teacher Anselmo, that the situation would then reverse: the girls would draw outside the room, and the boys would paint the CDs inside the room, which, in fact, did not happen.

Actions like this cause boys and girls to understand, from an early age, that the public/private dichotomy regulates the social action of men and women, considering the men more objective/expansive and that, therefore, are led and encouraged to act from an early age in the domains of public spaces (considered spaces of economic and political production), while the women, conceived as more subjective/discrete, should be responsible for the affairs of the private space (where family care and situations related to intimacy occur). This statement becomes clearer when we realize how this binary logic regulates the agency of

boys and girls in the face of the demands of another task proposed by the teacher and that, in a way, is becoming embodied in the flow of daily life (THORNE, 1993; WEST; ZIMMERMAN, 1987; CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015).

Due to the large number of boys, teacher Vânia, constantly encouraged them to play outside the classroom (since the teacher saw them as more agitated and restless than the girls and their games used to be full of hustle and bustle). Without realizing it, in making this separation, the teacher contributed to the children's division by allowing the boys to play outside. Thus, with regard to the appropriation of spaces (and also the appropriation of gender relations), boys and girls did it in different ways, reproducing, in a certain sense, the dichotomous logics disseminated by teachers; embodying the structuring of the social context (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015), in this case, the institution of Early Childhood Education. This can be seen in the following episode:

In the moments of the activity corners, the teachers constantly put the boys who wanted to play with a cart or a superhero to do it in the corridor. Realizing the effects of this practice, in some situations the teachers – mainly Vânia – tried to change this logic (of only the boys playing outside the classroom), moving children around. Today, for example, the teacher asked for my help to take the toys from the corner of the Dolls' house (fridge, stove, pots and pans, among others) to the outside. After this move, we watched, saying nothing to the girls; waiting for their reaction. We noticed that the girls played most of the time in the classroom, without questioning the absence of the stove and the refrigerator. They improvised other plots that did not depend on these toys, due to that, on that day, they almost played with dolls. Only at the end of the activity corner time, when they realized that the refrigerator and the stove were in the corridor, they asked the teacher to play outside. Theoretically, the boys would not go to the corridor, since the cart game would happen inside the room due to the change made by the teacher. At one point, without asking permission or notifying the teacher, a group of boys left the classroom and went to play in the corridor. Unlike the girls who are all grouped in the corner of the Dolls' house, the boys were playing chase (cops and robbers) crossing the entire length of the corridor with loud laughs, screaming and making lots of noise. (Notes from the field notebook, May 7, 2015).

This episode is remarkable because it presents not only the teacher's perception of the different appropriations that boys and girls made of the institution's spaces, but also their intervention in this process. When realizing

that boys always expanded their play beyond the space of the classroom, teacher Vânia proposed a change in the situation: she took the girls' toys out as a way to change the logic established earlier – on that day, they would be the ones who would play in the corridor. However, the teacher did not say this to the girls and waited for them to react to the modification of the space – which was slow to happen. The girls, even missing the fridge and the stove, did not question or look for them, they simply built other plots that did not demand the use of those toys. Only at the end of the class (after one of them found out that the teacher had taken them out of the room), the girls asked to play with those toys in the hall.

We observed that, even with the intention of breaking with the separation between boys and girls with regard to the use of the spaces inside and outside the classroom, the teacher's strategy was to move the toys without questioning their meanings regarding the relationships of genre. If the change in the environment favored the use of external space by girls, the type of play was not the object of reflection regarding the stimulation and incentive for boys to play with toys displaced into the corridor, nor with respect to girls creating other possibilities of exploitation. By not paying attention to the specificity of the toys present in the context of the classroom, the teacher, without realizing it, reinforces the sexual division between children by using them as part of the strategy, even though her intention was to combat differences in opportunities to use spaces between boys and girls.

This episode is revealing that, in the appropriation and use of spaces, times and materials in Early Childhood Education, boys and girls, adults and children, perceive and use spaces in different ways. We can observe, therefore, the importance that reflection on the meanings of objects and the construction of environments with children in Early Childhood Education also considers their meanings in gender relations.

This, however, does not mean that children passively assimilate the prescriptions present in the structures of the institution of Early Childhood Education that have gender as a regulator of social conduct. During the participant observation, it was possible to perceive that the children, as active subjects, made choices based on opportunities present in the interactional situations experienced, especially with regard to the participation of boys and girls in the peer group, despite the institutional regulation suggests or even prescribes different behaviors based on gender relations, which is noticeable in the images in Figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2 – SITUATIONS IN WHICH CHILDREN BREACH THE GENDER BORDERS IMPOSED BY TOYS



SOURCE: Research archive.

The images present moments that the boys proposed to try playing with dolls while the girls played with guns and/or foosball⁶. In this process, it is evident that social structures are not only conditioning of action, but also allow children, at the time of interactions between peers, to mobilize dimensions of that same social structure during play, in addition to gender prescriptions (CONNELL; PEARSE, 2015). This was also evidenced from some drawings produced by the children – which, when articulated with their speeches⁷, enabled us not only to understand the process of appropriating the references present in the structure of social relations that have in gender the empirical reference for the behaviors of men and women, boys and girls. Furthermore, it enabled us to perceive children as subjects who have a lot to say, on their own merits, about how they perceive and appropriate gender relations.

6 A kind of board game that simulates a football field, with fixed pins that represent the players. The game uses a kind of disc that symbolizes the ball and is played with kicks given by the participants, aiming at the opposing goal.

7 Children's drawings, when combined with their speeches, are relevant artifacts that enable greater comprehension of children's symbolic production, since they become privileged elements of analysis in an ethnographic study with children (PIRES, 2007; SARMENTO, 2011).

In the dialogues that follow, during the production of the drawings, the children also demonstrated that, in the institution of Early Childhood Education, they could choose which toys to use, often contradicting the rules imposed by adults through toys and games suitable for boys and girls. This is Andreia Juliane's case, who, when drawing the toy she liked the most (Figure 3), she stated that, although she was unable to play football with her brothers at home due to her mother's prohibition, at school she had the possibility to have this playful experience with her classmates (the boys). Likewise, Welington's arguments concerning the drawing he produced (Figure 4) express that, although there are toys for boys and toys for girls, they have the possibility in Early Childhood Education to choose which toys they would like to play with.

FIGURE 3 – ANDREIA JULIANE'S DRAWING



SOURCE: Drawing produced by the children.

Researcher: – *And do you think there is a difference between girl toys and boy toys?*
Andreia Juliane: – *Oh, I'll tell you something, you see? My mom doesn't like me kicking the ball with my two brothers.*
Researcher: – *Why?*
Andreia Juliane: – *She says it's not a girl's game!*
Researcher: – *Really?*
Andreia Juliane: – *Only here at school I play kicking balls with the boys.* (Andreia Juliane when drawing "The toy I like the most", August 27, 2015).

FIGURE 4 – WELINGTON'S DRAWING



SOURCE: Drawing produced by the children.

Researcher: – *So, do you think there are toys for boys and girls? Are boys and girls toys different?*
Welington: – *They are. Boys play with carts and girls play with dolls. But there are times when you can play with everything. And there are toys that are boys' and girls', like building blocks [construction toys].*
Researcher: – *And is there any kind of toy you don't like to play with?*
Welington: – *No, I play with everything here at school.* (Welington when drawing "The toy I like the most", August 27, 2015).

The data presented show that the same environment that reinforces representations about the masculine and the feminine also enables the exercise of criticism, mainly by allowing and promoting the actions of children in that educational context, who can live social experiences that allow boys and girls to overcome the prescriptions and the boundaries established by toys and other structures that, perhaps, may condition their conduct. This shows the absence of an institutional debate that promotes constant reflections on the real possibilities in which adults and children act in order to build situations that favor the different ways of experiencing masculinities and femininities (SILVA; LUZ, 2010). Such a process will allow the professionals of Early Childhood Education to continually exercise their gaze, directing them to their own practice, to the specificities of the children and to the influence of their performance (pedagogical or not) with the girls and boys agency.

Final considerations

Throughout this paper, we sought to describe the ways in which children produce meanings for the gender relations they experience (in peer interactions and with adults) in the context of Early Childhood Education, an educational space structured by the grown ups for the little ones. We realized that, in that context, the daily actions experienced by adults and children (whether those endowed with intentionality or those less structured), allowed the emergence of “[...] day-to-day organization practices and strategies characterized by a pedagogical intentionality in the form of an institutional organization that has gender as a criterion for the organization and use of times and spaces” (FINCO, 2013, p. 176). Thus, it becomes noticeable that, in many situations, the structuring regulation of adults/teachers influences the action of boys and girls in the process of choosing and using the spaces of the Early Childhood Education institution, because, as we saw in the episodes presented, the boys showed themselves to be more outgoing and expansive than the girls, which present themselves in a more timid way.

In several situations observed at the time of empiricism, we realized that children sought to adapt their actions to the structures imposed by the organization of spaces and pedagogical practice, identified by the adult regulation present within the institution of Early Childhood Education. However, it is worth clarifying that even if children align their behavior to the gender structures imposed by adults, this does not mean that they are passive to the manufacturing

processes of gendered subjects. When we shed light on the agency of boys and girls, we realized that the appropriation of gender relations by children involves their engagement and active participation, a process that reveals real possibilities and a multiplicity of ways of experiencing masculinities and femininities .

In summary, such considerations allow us to argue that, by aligning their conduct with the (structural) conditions offered to them or by subverting, transgressing or constructing genuine forms of appropriation of social gender relations, children show the social capacity of boys and girls to read – in the sense that Geertz (1989) gives the expression: to construct an interpretation of gender representations from a multifaceted, ambiguous and, at times, controversial frame of reference, a fact that makes it possible to understand boys and girls as subjects engaged and committed to societal dynamics.

Likewise, data allow us to highlight the urgency of new studies that take children as empirical deponents capable of speaking, on their own merits, as subjects that produce meanings about gender relations, while actively experiencing them.

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