

Male Educators in ECEC in Italy: Trajectories and Narratives to Challenge Gender Segregation in Early Education.

Educatori maschi nella ECEC in Italia: Traiettorie e Narrazioni per Sfidare la Segregazione di Genere nell'Educazione Pre-scolare.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

A partire dal tema della femminilizzazione dei lavori educativi e di cura, il presente articolo esplora il fenomeno della quasi totale assenza di educatori ed insegnanti nell'ambito della ECEC, luoghi di lavoro in cui la segregazione di genere è estremamente marcata. Il testo analizza le traiettorie professionali, le narrazioni e i punti di svolta di professionisti di nidi e scuole dell'infanzia restituendo una parte inedita di una ricerca più ampia, condotta tra il 2016 e il 2022. Alla luce dell'analisi e della letteratura sul tema vengono poi delineate possibili azioni volte a favorire l'avvicinamento ed il reclutamento di professionisti sottorappresentati in questo ambito professionale.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Taking as its starting point the feminisation of education and care work, this article examines the phenomenon of the male educators and teacher's shortage in ECEC, workplaces where gender segregation is extremely pronounced. The article analyses the professional trajectories, narratives and turning points of ECEC professionals. Based on an unpublished part of a larger research study conducted between 2016 and 2022, the paper identifies possible actions to facilitate the outreach and recruitment of underrepresented professionals in the sector.

Introduction

The phenomenon of feminization of formal education characterizes all of the most industrialized countries. In the OECD (1) area, the teaching profession has not only been largely dominated by the presence of women for some time but in the last ten years it has become even more characterized in this sense: the average percentage has increased from 61% in 2005 to 70% (OECD 2021). As is known, the gender gap is not homogeneous but does gradually decrease in line with the growth order (education levels considered). In early childhood education 96% of the staff are female and this percentage decreases to 82% in primary school and 63% in secondary school, with males being more present in tertiary education (55%).

Therefore, not the entire sector is considered unattractive to males but specifically the fields of early childhood (2) and, to a lesser extent, adolescence.

On the other hand, the university and post-university levels are generally characterized by a majority male presence, exceeding 60% in Luxembourg, Switzerland, Greece, and Italy in Europe. According to the OECD, one of the reasons for this increase is the rising employment rate of women, while another is the stereotypical understanding of male and female abilities that leads to the "gendering" of the presence of women and men in the various fields of arts, humanities, education and science (3).

The economic dimension also plays an important role in discouraging male professionals from investing in educational field: while the average teacher salaries are equal to, or higher than, the average salaries of fully employed women graduates in other sectors, men who teach in primary and secondary schools earn salaries that range from 77% to 88% of the average earnings of other employed graduates that work full time (4).

In order to emphasise the existing link between the genderization of the profession and economic factor, it should also be noted that while the percentage of women decreases with the level of education, salaries increase. This strengthens the image of ECE and primary school systems as 'not for everyone' and therefore contributes to the stereotyped understanding of a sharp gender division of roles and occupations. While in many countries there are actions and policies aimed at improving gender balance among school staff and especially among early childhood and primary education professionals, this is not the case in the Italian context: Italy ranks among the places where the gender gap is most pronounced.

This paper presents the findings of a research project in which the stories and professional trajectories of male early childhood educators were collected, aimed at exploring how they perceive the professional role and reasons for pursuing a career in early childhood education.

International Research at a glance

At the international level, this issue has been debated for over thirty years and has been approached from different perspectives while in the national scenario, it has only received more sustained attention in the last fifteen years.

There are studies that aim to explore the stereotypes and prejudices - explicit or implicit - that contribute to men's self-exclusion from early childhood in relation to gender performance in the workplace, such as those by Kevin McGowan (2016) and Malini Mistry and Krishan Sood (2013). Both studies agree on what was learned from those involved in the research: the perception of the risk of being labelled as a paedophile or homosexual, or being associated with violence as a 'natural' characteristic of being male, which would make them unsuitable for care work. Or the idea that men are more authoritative and therefore more suitable for different and different work tasks and roles. Mistry and Sood's findings suggest that despite trainees value working in early years settings, they highlight the need of mentoring from senior colleagues to address and deal with the stereotypes in the context. Other scholars explore peer role models and the importance of adult mentoring in line with these findings. Joseph and Wright's (2016) work in Trinidad and Tobago highlights both the anxiety associated with stereotypes and prejudice, and the lack of colleagues who can act as mentors.

Another focus of the literature is the status of the profession: for example, Xu and Waniganayake's (2017) study shows that work with children is poorly valued due to low compensation in relation to the workload and responsibility required. There is also an expectation of quick access to management positions for men, who are reasonably present in Chinese childcare centers. On the other hand, entry into this field is not the result of choice, but rather determined by a selective mechanism that assigns these positions to individuals with low diploma grades, as shown by the research conducted in Turkey by Erden, Özgün and Aydilek Çiftçi (2011).

The Swedish experience provides a counterweight to this. Research dedicated to exploring the narratives of students who have followed educational pathways into ECEC, and how these narratives relate to analysing their professional status, includes the work of Heikkilä and Hellman (2017). The study focuses on the negotiation of "hegemonic masculinities" (Connell, 1995), identifying the innovator/breaker character and the resulting pride. This is exactly the opposite of what happens in Turkey (Erden, Özgün & Aydilek Çiftçi, 2011), as these are high-profile individuals with the best skills in their field, high qualifications and also good reflexive skills.

Other research focuses on the lack of structural policies for career guidance specifically aimed at promoting male access to caring professions, as is the case with promoting scientific professions and STEM fields among women. Another focus, which is closely related to education policy, comes from the work of Koch and Farquhar (2015), who argue that there is a real male 'glass door': an invisible barrier that is rarely acknowledged but is effective.

Some of the more recent publications examine recruitment strategies (Mathwasa & Sibanda; Mohandas; Okeke & Nyanhoto), and the career trajectories and factors that influence the retention and turnover of practitioners within the education sector. This last research area will be our focus. As mentioned above, the aim of this paper is the analysis of the careers of a group of ECEC early childhood educators, in order to bring this limited Italian experience into dialogue with international ones.

Methods

The data and the content of the interviewees analysed for the purposes of this text are related to a broader research project that was carried out between 2016 and 2022, entitled 'Masculinity and Care'. ECEC educators (0-3 years) and preschool teachers (3-6 years), self-identifying as men, were initially involved in this research. We then decided to involve two groups of parents: one consisting of children in an institution with a male educator and the other in an institution without a male educator. The research with the families, carried out with the focus group method, aimed to gather experiences (if any), ideas, expectations and concerns regarding the presence of such a figure. More recently, the research was extended to all-male students enrolled in Education and Primary Education courses at Bergamo University. In the latter case, the research was conducted through a visual stimulus focus group (5).

The research first began with interviews with stakeholders and continued by collecting life stories from a group of five educators and five preschool teachers in Lombardy. Both

snowball sampling and a accurate research process over several months required to recruit participants. The average age of the participants in our study was 44.4 years (no major differences between two types of education settings) and had at least one year of experience as a teacher of reference for a group and/or a class, at time of interview. It was important for us to hear from individuals who had a leader role, managing the full responsibilities of the group. First, we asked them to describe their education and training and to map out their professional careers. Secondly, we asked them to describe their professional experiences, including how they relate to their children, colleagues, managers and family.

The narratives collected were analysed in relation to the international debate, through transversal and comparative reading, in order to highlight the main themes that emerged. In this paper we would like to focus on the collected trajectories to highlight the turning points that have emerged from the perspective of the interviewees.

The 'career trajectory' concept rests on the assumption that there will be pathways of betterment, a positive sequence of choices, opportunity, and influences. Many have suggested that the term portrays an illusion of pattern and order and does not adequately describe the vagaries and quirks of fortune that actually determine the employment patterns of most people today. (Warin *et al.* 2021, 17)

Working on trajectories as a process description, can place individual biographical events in a much broader context, observing how personal, contextual and social dimensions are intertwined. This caution is necessary in order to avoid the risk mentioned above. This is done to identify individual strategies and to show how these strategies can be linked to both the biographical dimension and the social contexts.

Professional Trajectories, Narratives and Turning Points

When analysing the trajectories, we refer to the main turning points that appear in the narratives of our interviewees. These are defined as moments that are considered important for various reasons (e.g. the end of an important experience, a change of job, the memory of a significant person). Each of these turning points was identified in retrospect, i.e. during the interview, and represents an important situation that, when it occurred, marked a meaningful change in the personal history of the interviewee.

We have then decided to consider these turning points in relation to three levels (Brody *et al.* 2021; Deleted for review): the micro level, related to the individual experience, the meso level, related to the organization, and the macro level, referred to the sociopolitical context. The micro level, is related to the biographical experience and manifests itself in different ways as it intercepts some personal or professional events considered significant and often enlightening the two other levels.

A.1(6), An experienced educator recounts how the death of a psychiatric patient he worked with made him question the meaning of his profession. It doesn't take long after this event for A.1 to realize that he wants to engage in a context that promotes the prevention of distress and discomfort, rather than just treating them, which doesn't always yield the desired results. The episode, which is narrated as a turning point that marks his

interest in early childhood educational services, also affects him on an existential perspective: it was not just about changing jobs to pursue something more meaningful, but about questioning himself and his way of 'being in the world'.

Different, however, is the experience of M.5, who, in the first few minutes, recounts how he connects his professional choice to a dramatic event: the loss of his father in very early childhood. M.5 returns to this aspect several times, as if this event were somehow fundamental, which he himself says he cannot explain in the long term, as the cause of a professional outcome that, before finding its way to early childhood education and care, takes a very complex and distant path, both metaphorically and physically, from the profession of educating.

Upon completing high school, M.5 forgets to finalize his enrollment at the University, thus losing the academic year. This non-choice leads him to embark on a journey abroad and to return to Italy no later than the following year, when he enrolls in the Faculty of Psychology and, thanks to an internship, he will have his first experience in a preschool. From there, the transition as a responsible educator for the group is close: at first, he is given a few hours and after two years the entire class is entrusted to him.

The theme of non-choice seems to be much more decisive for L.6, who recounts three different episodes in which he found himself facing a situation, precisely, not determined by his own will. The first turning point comes after the decision to enroll himself in the Faculty of Physiotherapy: he fails the entrance exam and must redirect his educational path. L.6 then decides to enroll in Educational Sciences. Subsequently, the loss of a contract from the Cooperative he works for determines the possibility of a change in scenery. Continuing the collaboration with the same organization would mean, for L.6, having to return to the world of school: he accepts and asks to be placed in a preschool. In L.6's trajectory, a final non-choice (at least until the moment of the realization of the interview) concerns the missed opportunity to move to work in a nursery for children aged 0-3. This is how the 'vagaries and quirks of fortune', referred to by the authors, take shape in relation to the uncontrollability of certain variables that guide – or disorient – trajectories.

Both the loss of the contract and the decision of the Cooperative's responsible parties not to accommodate L.6's request to be transferred to a nursery are elements that pertain to the managerial and organizational dimension of personnel and resources, namely the meso level which we will discuss later. Early childhood services and the organizations that provide them in certain cases are indeed an intermediate field, carrying within it certain constraints and variables that impact the paths and choices – or missed choices – of individuals, their agency, as determined by factors influencing the choice to pursue a specific professional path (Brody *et al.*, 2021).

Another recurring topic in the trajectories is the beginning of an internship or work period in early childhood education and care services. Two of the interviewees describe how the curricular internship required by their course of study represented a turning point in relation to the target group they would have liked to engage with; for others a work experience involving children aged 0-6 unexpectedly plays the same role. We will return to this aspect later, as it is interesting that once the experience of education and care in early childhood services has been tried, as it looks like quite easy to become passionate

about it and to remain committed to it, even at a professional level. This is an aspect that should be strongly considered when defining strategies aimed at mitigating the shortage.

Following on from what has been said above, it is useful to point out that voluntary or community service experiences carried out in contexts involving minors in early childhood education and primary school (in Italy this means children aged between 3 and 10), have represented an important access to educational professions and a significant first turning point in the personal journey towards early childhood education. In at least two cases this was the case of experiencing educational activities during summer camps, or with kids living in foster homes.

Kedar, Andrä and Sullivan (2021) suggest that intrinsic motivation is an additional factor in the choice and persistence of young people's careers. These authors adopted the formulation of intrinsic motivations proposed by Lepper and Green in 1975, defining those as 'a basic form of motivations because are based on an individual's desire to do something for its own sake, as in children's play, rather than attempting to achieve a goal because it is regarded positively by the community'.

At first glance, it would seem that only one person, out of the ten interviewed, had a clear idea of their career interests since their childhood. Indeed, only P.10 tells us that 'ever since they were little, they always wanted to become a teacher', demonstrating a strong and consistent motivation over time, almost independent of what happens around them, because their professional trajectory is not characterized by linearity. However, on closer analysis, as Kedar, Andrä and Sullivan's research has highlighted (2021), it appears that all respondents, perhaps because they are 'persisters', have over time developed and strengthened those intrinsic motivations which, in combination with other elements, favour their remaining in the field. In the course of their careers, such motivations have led them, for example, to give up permanent contracts in favour of less secure positions that are more in line with their interests. An example of this is the turning point narrated by Q.4, who describes his arrival in early childhood services as a crossroads, a choice he has done between an office job and a preschool educational service. In Q.4 narrative there is almost a sense of urgency, the impossibility of choosing anything other than between these two options emerge, and, finally he has chosen the ECEC profession. It seems that this intrinsic motivation theme goes hand-in-hand with the idea of oneself agency, as in the course of their careers, some educators actively pursue their goal of working in the early childhood and care educational field. In some cases, a strong intrinsic motivation seems to strengthen the agency of early childhood educators who, once they have understood that working with early childhood is what they want to do, embark on paths aimed at securing it with permanent position. This is the case with B.7, who resigns from his previous work, in order to become a partner in the cooperative founded and managed by two former colleagues, with the intention of working in the childcare center as the class teacher. Or like C.8 and P.10, who take part in a public competition to reach a permanent job position as a public officer.

If we look at the trajectories from a certain distance in time, it seems that motivational drive contributes to access to the profession, even in terms of contractual precariousness and economic weakening of the professional pathway.

However, once the profession is chosen, among educators, there are those who implement the exact opposite process, namely the stabilization and broadening of their responsibilities and intervention skills.

This aspect is not, in itself, unusual in professional growth paths but, considering the high level of male educators dropping out of the job market, it is interesting because it indicates some elements that could favour their retention.

Having achieved their desired professional status, teachers continue to question their own jobs, the new challenges that arise and the ways in which these challenges could be met. Here, for example, we refer to A.1, to begin to work on an ongoing basis and with increasing commitment with the families of the children who attend their school. It became clear to him that any serious work on the promotion of well-being must necessarily involve the adult reference figures and care givers in the family sphere. This awareness provides an opportunity for innovating his professional practices and for renewing his motivation to continue his commitment in the early education and care field.

Another example is, again, M.7's choice to integrate his training by qualifying as a psychometrician, thus opening up new opportunities of growth – both for his organization and for himself.

The experience of M.7 raises another issue that is often discussed in the literature: the question of significant people who inspire a desire to 'be like them'. In M.7's case, it is a female teacher that he met at an Open Day. No other educators interviewed appear to have experienced this.

In this paragraph, we have presented some thematic nuclei that emerged from the analysis of key turning points in the educational and professional trajectories of the educators involved in the research. In the following one, we intend to outline some possible avenues for further analysis, focusing more on the organizational dimension of early childhood educational services as contexts that may – or may not – promote the recruitment and retention of male educators within them.

Discussion

We started to focus on male educators in early childhood services in Italy in 2016, when national research on the subject was still extremely limited. At the beginning of our interest in this topic, our primary objective was to investigate and bring visibility to a statistically invisible but socially relevant phenomenon. Over the years and with the progress of research, we have expanded the focus of interest as well as the sample of individuals involved. This expansion occurred, both numerically and with regard to the types of participants with whom we found it interesting to engage in dialogue (e.g. families, colleagues, future educators still in training) in order to explore the multiple facets that the scarce presence of male educators in early childhood and their biographies brought to light.

In this paper, following previous research on the subject, the trajectories of male educators and teachers working in early childhood services (0-6 years) in a region of Northern Italy have been examined, focusing on turning points identified in the narratives. In line with the international literature, we identified a number of areas to

explore: the micro-level of biographical events, the meso-level of ECEC services as organizations (Warin *et al.*, 2021), and the macro-level, understood as the social, cultural and political context in which ECEC services are.

So far, the study of the professional experiences of men in education and teaching have involved the identification and analysis of themes which intertwine these three levels. We have considered macro-themes directly related to educational care (Palmieri, 2000), both in terms of the care experienced by male educators and teachers in their own growth trajectories and the care enacted in professional contexts (Deleted for review).

Our interest is therefore on the paths that led these educators and teachers to choose the profession of early childhood education and the reasons why they decided to stay in it over time.

If we look at the trajectories from a certain distance, it seems that motivational drive contributes to access to the profession, even if it means to be in a position less stable in terms of contractual precariousness and economic weakening. However, once the profession is chosen, among educators, there are those who implement the exact opposite process, namely the stabilization and broadening of their responsibilities and professional skills.

This aspect is not, in itself, unusual in professional growth paths but, considering the high level of male educators dropping out of the job market we are focusing on, it is interesting because it means that these professionals first made a career change that brought them into ECEC, were able to stay in this working environment by resisting the many pulling forces, and then chose to continue to invest in their own professional development. Through their narratives, it is possible to identify situations which might helped to recruit and retain them. We would like to outline some possible action: initiatives that can be seen as integrated, complementary and certainly feasible. Some of the stories tell of an almost casual entry into this field of work. A first aspect, certainly not unexplored but one that we believe is necessary to emphasize even in this context (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2023; Bernacchi & Di Grigoli, 2023), is the need to activate orientation paths regarding masculinity and care, long before gender segregation in secondary education is in place.

In Italy, this phenomenon can be observed as early as in the first year of secondary school; this means proposing orientation paths to care professions starting from middle schools. Both nationally and in Europe, there is a widespread commitment to involving girls in STEM disciplines, however, with some national exceptions, there are no widespread programs to raise boys' awareness of care professions.

A second aspect is related to the fact that for some male educators and teachers interviewed, professional internships or short work experiences in early childhood services triggered a thought process and subsequently a professional choice in favour of such services. Although it is evident that undertaking an internship entails having already chosen a specific path, it is equally clear that to date there are no specific incentive initiatives that direct male students enrolled in educational professions towards early childhood. Furthermore, if gaining experience in working in early childhood and educational services is indeed an opportunity to consider oneself a professional in this

field, policies and initiatives could be implemented to promote access to such services even during the training orientation phase. For example, by promoting the dissemination of agreements for the implementation of work-study programs (work experience) within early childhood services.

We do need to transform the career guidance and training paths for teenagers, in order to let them try experiences of caring (7). From this it can be concluded that there is a need to work in a coordinated manner, firstly, on the educational orientation of middle schools and on the access of young people to knowledge of services and self-experimentation in caring relations with young children, even before secondary schools, and secondly, on the widening of the horizons of students who are already in university courses in pedagogy and education.

Limits

This study has two main limits we would like to underline. First, as all interviewees were still in service at the time of the research, we consider them as 'persisters' in the sense of Brody *et al.*'s (2021) definition. The method of recruitment, through a network of ECEC institutions, and then by the respondents themselves through informal contacts is largely responsible for this characteristic of the respondent group. In fact, we sought out the few individuals where we could find them. Tackling the issue of the lack of men by looking at the presence and careers of those who work in the services may, to some extent, seem contradictory. This aspect should therefore be considered when looking at trajectories, which might otherwise all appear to be 'successful', in term of persisting in the profession. Rather is important to underline that, drop out, as much as the shortage itself, is a phenomenon increasingly addressed by researchers.

Second, researching the lack of men and questioning the gender balance between men and women risks reinforcing a binary and cis-gendered normative framework around the issue (Persico, 2023).

Conclusion

Starting from the feminization of caring and teaching profession in early education and care, we stressed the idea of an education system strongly characterized by a teaching staff highly segregate from gender perspective: ECEC aren't for all professional. At the same time, looking at professional trajectories of male educators working in this professional field, we have highlighted educational strategies that could help to promote a wider participation of underrepresented professionals in the field.

At the same time, as stated in the limit's session, we are aware that is not enough to tackle this issue only from a male/female gender balance perspective. We believe that it is necessary to commit to promoting greater diversity within the teaching profession - not only from a gender perspective.

While measures are being taken to combat gender segregation in the teaching profession and among early childhood educators, we believe it is also necessary to look far beyond.

Indeed, we consider it a priority to ensure that teaching categories at all levels develop the internal heterogeneity that characterises the people they work with. This should be done not only with regards of gender identities, but also through an intersectional approach that considers factors such as ethnic origin, linguistic or cultural belonging, and different abilities and/or physical characteristics.

To offer children an inclusive environment, making the educational system for all and for everyone, should start from the teachers they meet counter-narratives (Deleted for review) of hegemonic discourses.

Note

- (1) The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international economic studies organization for its 36-member countries (of which 26 are European).
- (2) Level zero' – or Early Childhood Education (ECE) – of the ISCED classification (International Standard Classification of Education). This level takes into consideration the educational programs referred to children under the age of entry into primary school (ISCED level 1), an age that differs from country to country (UNESCO 2012).
- (3) Female representation in academia has been increasing since 2005 (OECD, 2022).
- (4) In OECD (2018) countries and economies with available data, between 2005 and 2017 the salaries of primary and secondary teachers with 15 years of experience and the most common qualifications in their country have increased on average between 5% and 8% and have returned to pre-economic crisis levels. Furthermore, teachers have strong incentives to become school leaders: salaries of school heads are at least 35% higher than the salaries of teaching staff and are at least 20% higher than the average earnings of other graduate workers.
- (5) A detailed discussion of this method can be found in [delete for review].
- (6) 'Letter. Number' is a code referring to the name of the interviewed person and the number of the interview.
- (7) In some Italian region, this is an opportunity offered by educational program based on an intergenerational approach and mainly pertaining to Catholic Institution.
- (8) Note of the authors. This paper is the result of the joint work of the two authors. However, all paragraphs can be attributed to Persico G., except the paragraph entitled International research at a glance, attributed to Ottaviano C., and the conclusions, which are attributed to both.

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