GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND THEIR CROSSINGS IN PLAYTIME ACTIVITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

EXPECTATIVAS DE GÊNERO E SEUS ATRAVESSAMENTOS NAS BRINCADEIRAS DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL

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RESUMO

O presente estudo teve por objetivo analisar os atravessamentos de gênero nas práticas pedagógicas e nas brincadeiras de uma turma de "Maternal 3", evidenciando as expectativas acerca dos comportamentos de meninos e meninas. Como estratégia de coleta de dados, adotaram-se, privilegiadamente as observações com registro em diário de campo; processo que teve a duração de seis meses. Além disso, de forma complementar, foram feitas entrevistas semiestruturadas com a professora e auxiliar de ensino da turma, bem como com a diretora e coordenadora pedagógica da escola. A análise dos dados se deu por meio dos procedimentos da Análise de Conteúdo. Evidenciou-se que gênero produziu práticas pedagógicas normativas que tentaram invisibilizar os sujeitos que se desviavam do centro. Essa invisibilidade pareceu necessária para reforçar as relações de poder que estiveram presentes nas rotinas e atravessaram as práticas pedagógicas, direcionando os alunos aos seus "devidos locais".

Palavras-chave: Identidade de gênero. Educação infantil. Educação.

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to analyze gender crossings in the pedagogical practices and playtime activities in a nursery group -"Maternal 3", highlighting what was expected from boys and girls in regard to their behavior. As a data collection strategy, semi-structured interviews and observation, in which notes were taken and registered in a journal, were the methods adopted. This process took six months. It was evident that gender produced normative pedagogical practices which tried to make invisible the subjects who deviated from the center. This invisibility seemed necessary to reinforce the power relations that were present in the routines and crossed the pedagogical practices, keeping the students in "their places". **Keywords:** Gender Identity. Child Education. Education.

Introduction

The subject of this study, gender relations in pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education, is marked by political tension from contemporary movements that have tried to subsume the effectiveness of debates on sexual diversity and gender plurality in schools. By taking the classroom "*locus*" as a privileged space of reflection on phenomena that cross and produce the educational dynamics, to an extent, this study points out the non-synchronicity between extremely high rates of violence against women and the LGBT population and the attempt to judicialize teaching practices favorable to equality and non-discrimination of gender and sexuality.

Historically, schools have served as a pedagogical instance that instate a process of vigilance of the bodies of boys and girls in an attempt to ensure that their behaviors do not extrapolate gender and sexuality expectations¹⁻³. Thus, the choice of contents, the learning materials made available, the organization of spaces and the ways interpersonal relations are conducted are carefully thought over to produce a convergence of bodies, genders and sexualities. Schools then tend to (re)produce culturally established behaviors that boys and girls must have by inscribing gender differences onto their bodies. According to Louro:



Gestures, movements, meanings are produced and assimilated by boys and girls in the school space [...]There, children learn how to look, to listen, to speak and to silence and to have preferences. [...] All the lessons are crossed by differences; confirming and also producing differences. ^{4:61} (Authors' translation.)

Thus, based on the assumption that gender crosses and makes up the practices³, institutions and individuals, it would be interesting to look at play as a practice that institutes meanings determined by gender in Early Childhood Education at the same time that it results in problems and destabilizes gender norms themselves⁵. This initial interest resulted in conducting this study in municipal public schools in a town with approximately 6,000 inhabitants located 60 km away from Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. With strong influences from German colonization, this town seems be proud of its ascendency, given that German nationality is mentioned in parties organized by the town administration and is included in the school event calendar.

The peculiarity of this countryside town caught the attention of the researcher, who, since the negotiation for access to the school for fieldwork, got interested in a full-time municipal public school with six classes of children aged from four months to four years old.

Upon visiting the school, talking to the teachers, the board of directors and the children, a class called "Maternal 3" (Nursery Class 3) for children aged 3 and 4 years old showed to be very receptive and seemed not to bother with the presence of one more "teacher" in the classroom. The games chosen, the toys, the friends who the children related to, the class routine and even how pedagogical material was presented indicated strong markers of gender. The directors considered this to be a "very calm class" (Jul. 12, 2017) from the behavior and learning view points; the children in this class already knew each other and distinguished themselves according to what they considered proper "for a girl" or "for a boy."

Thus, the pedagogical practices and games in Nursery Class 3 were also investigated taking into account cultural manifestations produced in specific historical and social contexts. Besides being a cultural product, the act of playing was also considered as a pedagogical practice that teaches, among other things, ways of being and behaving.

Based on these initial elements, this paper sought to analyze gender crossings in pedagogical practices and games in Nursery Class 3

Theoretical and Methodological References

In this study, gender is considered both an analytical category that guides the theoretical understanding and interpretation of certain phenomena⁶ and a historically and socially "constructed social and cultural organizer"³. Therefore, gender relations and representations that organize practices in Nursery Class 3 are understood as discourse productions, which refutes the essentialist thesis that places biology as the cause of differences and dissimilarities lived and expressed by the children, the teacher and the teaching assistant in this class. In this way, "gender and sexuality are constructed through numerous learning experiences and practices carried out by an endless set of social and cultural instances, either implicitly or in dissimulation, in a never ending process."⁷

Produced in the power relations within the specificities of each social group and each historical moment, gender lends meaning to social practice, establishing distinct places and hierarchies that, in turn, stimulate desirable identities, as well as cause embarrassment for the "improper" ones.^{8,9}

However, after the mediation of the power relations, the experiences produced by gender relations are multiple, which allows the emergence of other projects, other representations and diverse identities through resistance. In this way, fields of dispute that

assign norms and deviations are formed around relations of power and resistance that make up gender.

Based on the concept of gender as a theoretical criterion, this study adopted field observation as the principal method of data collection. Field observation and journalizing required complementary semi-structured interviews for a deeper look into the routines and the meanings assigned to the practices of Nursery Class 3. Inspired by ethnography, the observations were a permanent exercise in watching, listening and problematizing what had been watched and heard.¹⁰ Following Nursery Class 3 and seeking to record the complexity of its relations and practices became more and more challenging, while bearing in mind Geertz's¹¹ advertency about "biased" perceptions. To watch and observe fell into another level of complexity when the practices of those children were read and translated in search of evidence of resistances, dissidences and contradictions.

In various moments, the field journal (F.J.) was "left" on a desk or on some toy when a child came over and asked for attention. Far from the purism of what can be called participant or non-participant observation, the involvement with that class was intense as the children remarked when the researcher was absent. However, being referred to as a "teacher" and justifying absences allowed a more effective approximation to the act of playing, allowing intervention and questioning at the very moment playing was under way. Similarly, availability to interact with the children, to arrange the classroom and for the class routines allowed a greater proximity with the teachers, who, at times, saw me as a "teaching assistant." It is worth pointing out that this process was not gratuitous, as my experience with little children at early childhood education schools was important in the process of "preparation" for the fieldwork.

The class was followed up for six months in a total of twenty-three observations carried out at various times (sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon) to cover the children's whole routine at the school. An initial observation plan was needed, but it was gradually put aside as new questions rose. To ensure the children's anonymity, the names used here are fictitious and were chosen by the children who participated in this study themselves.

As pointed out earlier, the class teacher participated in individual interviews and so did the teaching assistant, the director and pedagogical coordinator. The study participants' interviews are identified with the following acronyms, all followed by their respective dates: D.I. – Director's Interview, C.I – Coordinator's Interview, T.I – Teacher's Interview, T.A.I. – Teaching Assistant's Interview. F.J stands for Journal Field.

The interviews were performed at the school after four months of observation and the questions were made based on the field journal notes. Each of the interviewees gave their free written informed consent and the director also signed an Institutional Authorization Agreement. The consents, the authorization agreement and field journal are under the care of the main study author. The research project was approved by the ethics committee of Feevale University under access number 88110518.2.0000.5348.

After the interview transcription and observations had been completed, the material was analyzed following the Content Analysis procedures proposed by Bardin¹². The following theme categories were produced at three stages: a) pre-analysis – a reading of all the material for an overview, b) careful examination of the field material – definition of units of meaning in an analysis process by "disassembly" and reassembly of the text based on recurrences and absences, c) treatment of the results, organization of the field material according to the analytical concepts and the references. This allowed an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Close to lunchtime, the teacher turned the DVD off, asked the girls to make one line and the boy to make another. Then, with the children sorted out by gender, each of the teachers led a lined group to the cafeteria. (F.J. Mar. 17, 2017, Nursery Class 3)

During the observation period, we realized that gender worked as an organizer of spaces and times in Nursery Class 3. The teacher, the teaching assistant, as well as the children in general seemed to coordinate their actions using gender as a criterion. As an example, besides separate lining up of boys and girls, at the cafeteria and at the nap time, the children were usually seated alternated by gender, a strategy that, according to the teacher and the teaching assistant, produced a more harmonious and disciplined atmosphere, as the "female tranquility" calmed down the boys.

At another moment, during a guided activity, the children were instructed to paint the characters of a prince and a mermaid to make a panel that represented the bottom of the sea later. For this, the children were seated at a table and using the same "nap time" and cafeteria strategy, the teacher seated a girl between two boys. After taking their places, each child was given a drawing to paint: the boys received princes and the girls, mermaids. Although blue and pink paint were available and within the reach of all boys and girls, the teacher set forth a rule that the boys should use blue and the girls should use pink. Despite sharp criticism of strategies like these, some studies point out that gender norms continue to determine understandings in many teachers and supporting their pedagogical practices¹³⁻¹⁵. Based on the sex-gender system¹⁶ where the sexuated body is taken as materiality that produces gender, the pedagogical strategies in Nursery Class 3 in that school operate on the individuality of the children's bodies, naming them as sexuated and separating them based on their anatomies. When disciplinary practices¹⁷ like these confer visibility to body markers that differentiate boys from girls, they construct understandings of their behavior and, in turn, a process of constant vigilance by not only the teachers and school staff, but also by the children themselves, very efficiently. Thus, even at moments when boys and girls must stay together, the behavior of each one must agree with the normative models of gender for the good working of the school dynamics¹⁸.

To this end, when normative markers of gender produce the materiality of place and practices established in that class, they make visible what is desirable for males and females, which seems to impregnate the descriptions of the teachers of the behaviors of those boys and girls. While they evidenced only that which is socially expected from boys and girls, the teaching assistants who participated in this study reinforced the established norm, making deviations and conflicts produced by the individuals and non-prescribed practices invisible. According to the teachers:

Girls are calmer, they sit on the rug to play with the toys given, with toy pots; they make believe they are cooking. Now, boys [...] are a bit more agitated, walk around the class with toy cars, like to play fight [...] (T.I. Jul. 12, 2017).

The routines of Nursery Class 3, as well as the teacher's and teaching assistant's statements repeatedly indicated differences between boys and girls, and through a set of practices, these markers of gender were restated everyday without questioning. Thus, the "ritual" of conducting the class and the absence of explanations about what a boy and a girl are seem to be based in the "principle" that different bodies produce different behaviors and desires. In this way, male bodies produce masculinities that "naturally" are distinct from the femininities produced by female bodies. Despite having long been questioned and "deconstructed" by researchers in the gender and sexuality field, what is called a "feminine

essence" and "masculine essence" seems to work as "knowledge" that supports "gender technologies"^{16,19}. Made up as a set of techniques and procedures with the aim of updating the effectivity of the power that normalizes behaviors, this technology places gender in the condition of a social and cultural organizer³ that, in the specificities of this study, manifests itself in pedagogical practices in the daily activities at the school, as well as by stimulating and interdicting certain behaviors. Likewise, other studies have identified and analyzed similar practices, despite their distinct educational contexts. As an example of this, many studies that have looked into gender relations in Physical Education classes have pointed out that boys and girls are stimulated to join different activities, which has contributed to a naturalization of performances and interests of body practices²⁰, that is, representations based on the sex-gender system have been reinforced²¹⁻²³. Thus, while pedagogical practices are proposed based on behaviors expected from each gender, a complex system that makes the biological body an identity marker is set in place. Its results manifest in the production of desirable behaviors and, therefore, worth of confirmation, as well as ways of behaving that should inspire care²⁴.

However, curiously, the teachers of Nursery Class 3 did not seem to recognize themselves as subjects who taught gender norms. When asked about the distinct behaviors of boys and girls in the interview, the teachers assigned this difference to the family. "*I believe that this comes from home, the way the parents play with them...*" (T.I. Jul. 12, 2017).

The teachers' statement is reinforced by strong markers of gender in the toys that the children took to school. A regular practice in the weekly routine of the class investigated is the "home toy show and share day"; the children were allowed and stimulated to bring their toys to school and share them with classmates. In the teachers' perceptions, "[...] *Girls brought dolls and bags and boys brought more masks, swords and toy cars*" (T.I. Jul. 12, 2017). The field journal notes showed no record of boys or girls bringing toys unexpected for their sex, which, to some measure, reinforces the teachers' views, as well as those of some studies that state that very early on children have been object of pedagogies that produce highly normalized gender experiences within families^{18,22}.

However, it is worth pointing out that the teachers and the school staff considered that the strong gender markers expressed in the "toys brought from home" were not a problem or object of pedagogical concern. Observation in the days when the children brought their toys to school revealed a tacit agreement between the school and the families, since the toys and the teachers' pedagogical conceptions agreed with the gender norms and did not disturb the instituted order.

However, if on the one had, in general, the toys the girls took to school were related to maternity, beauty and frailty, and the boys' toys were related to physical effort, competition and fight, both boys and girls played with toys and played games considered not adequate to their sex. Regarding toy sharing and stimulation to playing in small groups as a pedagogical proposal objective, boys eventually playing with dolls and girls playing with toy cars seemed to be allowed by the teachers and the children themselves. As an example, the field journal notes from July 18, 2017 reveal that:

As the teachers made wooden cars and building blocks available for the children to play, a group of boys headed straight to the toy cars and left the building blocks aside. While the other pupils played with the building blocks, Ana went up to the boys' group and asked if she could take a toy car. With her classmate's agreement, she took the toy and went back to play with the previous group. (F.J. Jul. 18, 2017, Nursery Class 3).

In the event above, the boy's permission indicates a certain authority that was granted by gender relations at that moment, although the toy cars and building blocks belonged to the school. Without greater conflicts, the relation established between the children at that moment was followed by the teacher, who did not need to interfere in the process, after all, a girl could ask a boy permission to take a toy car, which seems to agree with the modes of operation of that class. However, remaining at certain places considered not appropriate, or becoming an authority in "girls" plays did not seem to be a possibility for boys in that class.

A group of girls got together to play "mom and daughter in the sand box." When Geovani asked to participate, Vitória said that he could play only if he played the father. At that moment, Andressa said: - "It is because you are a boy and boys have to play fathers". Then he joined them in the play. Vitoria told him to go out to work all the time, while Geovini expressed a desire to stay there at the same place with the girls, sharing the toys, which was not permitted. Some minutes later the boy was clearly upset and quit playing. (F.J. Jul. 06, 2017, Nursery Class 3).

Once more, without causing greater conflict, assuming the gender expectations and capable of recognizing themselves as sexuated subjects, the three-year-old children managed to establish behavior limits without the teachers' intervention. The place of each subject, the expected behaviors and the obligations seem to be closely associated with the marks that differentiate children biologically. Boys and girls seemed to be granted some freedom to play as long as they did not go beyond certain limits. Girls playing with toy cars and boys playing "mom and daughter" were not forbidden practices, even though this suggested some "shifts". To move to and from male and female universes in that class was possible as long as the subjects acknowledged themselves as "strangers" in those practices and that access were granted by those whose bodies and gender made them an authority.

Likewise, on another occasion the girls asked the teachers to give them lipstick and makeup for them to play, which was promptly granted. The girls pretended to comb and dry their hair and looked at the mirror to put makeup on, showing signs that they understood what beauty represents for women in our society. Two comments are pertinent here: not every girl had the same degree of involvement with beauty practices and this practice did not seem to allow boy to come closer. Being a fundamentally female responsibility, beauty has been an obligation to women, who, quite often, are required to answer for the care of the body^{25,26}.

As an activity "reserved" to girls in the class, the boys who dared to come closer were readily reminded that that practice was inadequate to their bodies. As observed one morning, while the girls played makeup, Caio watched them play carefully and at a moment when the teaching assistant was distracted, he took a brush and repeated the girls' gestures, putting blush on his face.

When Paulo saw Caio repeating the gesture of the teaching assistant making up the girls, Paulo ran up to him and said: "You can't! It is only for girls." Without saying a word, Caio put the brush down and went to the other side of the classroom. (F.J. Jul. 07, 2017, Nursery Class 3).

Despite the clear desire of some boys to experiment with those materials, the marks left by makeup do not seem to be so superficial and ephemeral to them. After recovering from that inconvenient desire to share that space and practice with the girls, the boys went up to other groups clearly frustrated and played something else.

During the observation of the dynamic of that class, it was possible the see that although it was possible to move between the male and female universes, there also were some limits; disrespect would provoke regulatory interventions to redirect the behavior of those who went beyond the limits permitted. Otherwise, what was permitted or interdicted agreed with the presumption of heteronormative assumptions, which were not appropriated and exercised by only the male and female adults who circulated in that school. As previously said, the "sex-gender-sexuality" system was already understandable for the children in Nursery Class 3 to the extent that it became a reference to guide their behavior, as well as to reprimand deviant behaviors. As a knowledge-power regime, heteronormativity produces an understanding that the sexuated body is a "gift of nature" upon which the linearity that binds sex to gender is discursively built, and, in turn binds it to sexual desire^{24,27-29}. In this process, the heteronormative matrix becomes a mechanism capable of producing subjects and institutions that make heterosexuality "normal" and "natural". However, since this system results from power relations, it generates conflicts, tensions, and abject bodies and behaviors as an effect to the extent that normative mechanisms are not capable of capturing/normalizing deviant subjects⁷.

Thus, in the class investigated, heteronormative behaviors quite often were tensed and transgressed by Caio, a boy who seemed to refuse the "traditional" models of gender representation at times³⁰.

Caio was playing with a bath tube and a doll close to a group of girls where Bruna, Andressa, Helena, Ana and Flávia were and also played with these toys. When Ana noticed him, she reprimanded him and asked him to return the doll and go play with a toy car with the boys. Ana also said that the teacher had given the dolls for the girls to play. After being reprimanded by his classmate, Caio returned the doll, but did not go play with another toy. He sat there, close to the girls, without playing or doing anything. When the teacher realized this situation, she approached Caio and asked him to go play with something else and leave the girls. (F.J. Jul. 14, 2017, Nursery Class 3).

In some occasions, when Caio joined games considered inadequate for his sex, he became visibly embarrassed when he was reminded of the "incompatibility" of his male body with practices considered feminine. However, in other occasions, Caio seemed to refuse the place reserved to boys aggressively and crying, breaking the silence that made agreements and the consent of that class towards gender expectations understood.

On July 09, 2017, when the children were lined up to go to another place at school, taking advantage of the teacher's distraction, Caio joined the girls' line. "Caio stared at the teacher, apparently expecting some reaction of disapproval from her". At that very moment, the girls close to Caio asked him to go back to the boys' line. Being ignored, the girls asked help from the teacher, who intervened promptly. "- Caio, are you a girl by chance to stay in this line? Go to the other line and stop playing up."

Joining the girls' line, taking and playing with a doll, making up his face and doing what contradicts that which is expected from boys, Caio questioned some normative issues that regulate the behavior of the children and organize the school. In this very peculiar way, Caio seemed to refuse the traditional models of production of masculinity by insisting on getting closer to that which has been historically associated with women and girls^{31,32}. This process showed a break away from some limits that the teachers and pupils in that class considered fundamental and sound, the linearity and supposed coherence between sex, gender and sexuality. When Caio presented other models of constituting himself as a gender subject, to a certain measure, he posed a risk to heteronormativity, which, in turn, triggered regulatory mechanisms that fell upon his body in an attempt to normalize it²⁴.

Thus, every time that Caio disobeyed, at every conflict established between him and the gender norm, his name was mentioned and a deviant figure was gradually built around this boy. As the teacher and the children started to consider Caio's behavior inadequate, he came to be seen as being "odd", a marginal subject who destabilized the instituted order, who served as an example of that which should not be⁴. In this way, his persistent defiance disturbed the apparent stability of the class described by the directors as being "quite calm".

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Caio's "inadequate" behavior clearly disturbed the teachers and the other children, while, even though being inconvenient, a deviant figure in class seemed to be productive. As the teacher and other children took to pointing out and naming transgression as an example of that which should not be or should not be followed, they reinforced and consolidated the hegemonic representations of gender³³⁻³⁵.

A deviant figure was gradually constructed through comments, plays or strategies that stifled or reprimanded deviation, and, in this process, the eccentric subject seemed capable of conferring authority to the boys and girls who adopted gender norms as a reference to judge his behavior. Caio was a difference necessary to lend centrality to desirable identities.

Conclusions

In the context investigated, gender was used by the teachers involved to produce pedagogical practices with normative nature and who, at certain moments, seemed not to realize the resistances and the subjects who deviated from the center, getting away from "norm" or what was "desirable". This situation was made evident in the teacher's and the teaching assistant's statements when they mentioned the boys' and girls' games and plays and only that which is normative and taken as true in our society: boys were represented as being agitated and interested in toy cars and swords, while girls were represented as being calm and interested in dolls, makeup and bags. Caio, the boy who deviated from this norm, as well as the other boys and girls, who passed by "practices not corresponding to their sex" to some extent were not mentioned, even considering that, as shown by the field observations, these "deviants" were "reminded" of the places that they "should" occupy to a lesser or to a greater extent. This silence, however, seems necessary to reinforce the power relations, since, when the deviant subject was identified, the heteronorm that references plays and pedagogical practices could be questioned.

In this way, gender served as a category in the routines observed and crossed pedagogical practices, not as a theme capable of pointing out problems in such practices, but as a social historical phenomenon that drove pupils to their "proper places". As a mechanism of management of bodies and behaviors, the teachers and the board of directors did not formulate gender as a problem; on the contrary, the norms were endorsed to the measure that biological determinism was taken as "truth" in the process of organization of times and spaces at the school, and by taking a direct relation that made sexuated bodies references of behaviors and desires of children as a norm. Discussing these questions would mean to problematize everyday pedagogical practices, tearing down and rediscovering meanings, questioning concepts taken as well established. Discussing gender relations could be risky, particularly because it would lend new meanings to the stories of each of the women and children involved in that school.

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