

Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

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Abstract

Questo contributo presenta una parte dei risultati del progetto di ricerca dal titolo "Stereotipi di genere, relazioni educative e infanzie", condotto tra il 2010 e il 2012 da un gruppo di ricercatrici del CSGE Centro Studi sul Genere e l'Educazione del Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione, finanziato dalla Regione Emilia-Romagna. Lo scopo della ricerca è stato quello di analizzare idee e rappresentazioni sui generi e i rapporti tra i generi in adulti educativamente significativi per i bambini e le bambine in età prescolare (0-6 anni) e di promuovere una riflessione sul tema delle immagini stereotipate relative all'identità femminile e maschile che ancora persistono e si trasmettono sin dai primi anni d'età. In particolare, questo articolo si focalizza sull'analisi della presenza maschile nei servizi educativi e nelle scuole dell'infanzia, attraverso le rappresentazioni dei genitori.

This contribution presents a part of the results of the research project entitled "*Stereotipi di genere, relazioni educative e infanzie*" ("*Gender stereotypes, educational relationships and childhood*") conducted between 2010 and 2012 by a group of researchers¹ from the CSGE Centre for Gender and Education Studies at the Department of Education Studies, funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region². The purpose of the research was to measure the ideas and representations of gender and the relations between genders in adults who are educationally (and emotionally) significant for preschool children (0-6 years) and to foster widespread thought on the issue of the stereotyped images of the female and male identity that still exist and are transmitted from a very early age. In particular this article presents the focus of the analysis of the presence of males from the parents' point of view.

Parole chiave: Educatori maschi nelle istituzioni pre-scolastiche, Cura della prima infanzia e stereotipi di genere, Rappresentazioni dei genitori sugli educatori maschi, Femminilizzazione del lavoro di cura e stereotipi, Uomini in educazione

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

Keywords: Male educators in pre-school institutions, Early childhood care and gender stereotypes, Parental representations of male educators, Feminisation of care work and stereotypes, Men in education

1. Some research data

The almost total absence of males in the school world poses some awkward and controversial questions. What expectations and representations do parents have over the role of male educators? Is it right and “natural” that the vast majority of teachers are women? What do parents think of the relationship between men and educational care?

Various reasons underlying the very low participation of men in these professions emerge from the voices and representations of the parents: cultural reasons persist, with consequent representations of men and women corresponding to determined - and often pre-determined - gender roles; women continue to be considered most suited to care work; this may be for economic reasons, which make educational professions undesirable occupations because of the salary, and an implicit social devaluation which may affect job choices.

Before specifically discussing the issues analysed in the wider research project, it is worth briefly illustrating the method used and the type of data gathered³.

The research project lasted for 18 months and ended in June 2012, covering a number of phases, each of which focused on the different investigation tools used within an interdisciplinary perspective. Here below is a summary of the phases:

1. Documentation phase: analysis of the international and national literature; reconnaissance of the data and research concerning the educational services in question.
2. Quantitative research in the territory: delivery of a questionnaire to educational service workers (nurseries, pre-schools, family centres, parent-child centres); data entry; statistical data processing. To carry out this phase, the research group conducted probabilistic sampling of the educational services and pre-schools in the region; it drafted two different semi-structured questionnaires, the first targeting educational and school services workers and the second for the parents of children aged 0-6 registered with the regional preschool services;
3. Qualitative research: implementation of focus groups targeting educational coordinators, operators, parents, grandparents, to discuss some of the most significant topics emerging from the questionnaires.

Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

4. Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data: through the development of a common method - in any case able to make the most of the many disciplines covered by the research – we proceeded to analyse the qualitative and quantitative data gathered in a strictly interrelated manner. In this way it was possible to identify some particularly important issues present in the material gathered starting from the proposed lines of second level analysis able to connect the results of the quantitative data with those of the qualitative data.

Quantitative phase

524 questionnaires were presented by the staff of educational services and 2803 from parents, for a total of 3327 questionnaires and 120 services throughout the region were sampled, divided as follows:

Type of service/school	no.
Nurseries	32
Micro nurseries	6
Nursery classes integrated in pre-school	10
Child minders	2
Children's centres	4
Child-parent centres	5
Family centres	2
Non-state run pre-schools	42
State-run pre-schools	17
Total	120

Almost all of the questionnaires, by both educational services and families, were answered by women: 98.1% female educators and 82.8% of mothers. As far as the schools and services is concerned, this data deriving from a representative sample, confirmed the real and well known framework of poor male representation in the educational and care professions of the reference population. As far as the families are concerned, the self-administered questionnaire could have been filled in by either parent, but mainly the mothers were more interested in the subject of the research.

Qualitative phase

To implement the **qualitative phase**, the chosen tool was the focus group. The objective was to investigate the representations inherent in the subjects identified by the research (male/female educators, collaborators, teachers, fathers and mothers, grandparents) as emerges from the "point of view" of a certain number

Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

of subjects voluntarily taking part in the survey, through the analysis of the words, expressions and verbal interactions gathered in a group situation specifically set up by the researchers.

36 focus groups were held in total, divided as follows:

Type of schools/services	No. of focus groups		Total
	Education staff	Families	
Nurseries and other 0-3 services	9	8	17
Pre-schools	8	8	16
Family centres	1	2	3
Total	18	18	36

262 people were involved overall. The division of the participants by group (educational staff and family figures) includes 134 participants in the first and 128 in the second; stronger participation of women is recorded not only among the educational staff where there is effectively a larger number of female workers, but also among the family figures, as already noted for the questionnaires.

	Teachers	Male educators	Operators	Collaborators	
Women	39	56	5	22	
Men	5	4	1	2	
Total	44	60	6	24	Total 134

Family members	no.
Mothers	83
Fathers	31
Grandmothers	10
Grandfathers	4
Total	128

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

2. *Feminisation/ devirilisation: the actual debate*

The male worker in childcare services re-opens a much-debated issue concerning not only Italy but wider international contexts, posing awkward and controversial questions. The almost total absence of men in schools is considered an element that reinforces the hypothesis of the "death of the male" reference model (Recalcati, 2011; Zoja, 2003; Zoja, 2010): some analyse it as a risk factor for the growth and development of both boys and girls, others cry out of compulsory male staffing, above all defending the equal opportunities that stand not only for a principle of equity within working environments but which should also be offered to children. This in order to promote a plurality of models starting from nursery education, a greater complexity of visions of the world, to overcome the separation of traditional male and female roles and, through new experiences of relationships, develop education that focuses on growth through the discovery and recognition of one's own gender identity (Connell, 2000).

What expectations and representations are linked to the role of male educators? Is it right and "natural" that the vast majority of teachers are women? What do parents think of the relationship between men and educational care? Is it possible to imagine greater interdependence and interchangeability between male and female educational roles in educating towards gender?

Analysing the ISTAT data for 1997 on male and female roles and family and professional choices, in 2001 Barbara Mapelli stated (Mapelli, Bozzi Tarizzo & De Marchi, 2001, p. 56): "*The data clearly indicates the existence of a problem and a central node in relations between men and women, which affects and will profoundly affect the new generations, determining choices and professional careers, as well as expectations concerning the family. In this case it is a question of looking into the heart of relationships between the two genders, as they have been structured in history: the private sphere, the home, care for women - the "inside" - and the "outside" for men, work, the public, social and political sphere. The self image of infinite generations have been formed on these divisions, and these views thrive in each of us, even if they are in contrast with new desires*". The analysis still offers very current possible interpretations, if we consider that the last report, *Education at a Glance 2012* (OECD, 2012) highlights the processes of feminisation of school systems in OECD countries, where two thirds of teachers and academic staff are women. Specifically: 97% in *pre-primary school*, 87% in *primary school*, 68% in *lower secondary school* and 56% in *upper secondary school*. As far as Italy is concerned, the percentages are respectively 98.4%, 95.9%, 77% and 63%.

The predominant, and increasingly large, presence of women in teaching, above all in lower school levels, is the subject of pan-European debate, where the lack

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

of male figures focuses attention on important problems in both educational and political-cultural terms.

In France, an article in *Le Figaro* introduces the issue with a cry of *Il faut sauver le garçon!* (2011, August 20): it refers to *devirilised* teaching, where children no longer have any male reference figures. The child psychiatrist Stéphane Clerget states: "*we must absolutely adapt schools, masculinise the teaching staff, particularly in primary and lower secondary schools where practically all the staff are female. There is more diversity among upper secondary school staff, but by this stage, unfortunately for the children, the choice has already been made. Personally, I am in favour of true equality among educational staff, not only among the teachers. If we do not make this revolution and reintroduce men into schools, we are heading for disaster*"⁴.

UK politics also hopes for a greater presence of male teachers, who are able to combine strength with sensitivity (Pech, 2011).

The German weekly newspaper *Der Spiegel* explains how male educator posts are one of the most sought-after in Germany, following the investments made to guarantee a more uniform composition of educational contexts and at the same time respond to the demands of parents: "*Men are in particularly high demand because many parents don't want their children looked after exclusively by women. According to a study carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Family Affairs, more than a third of mothers and fathers prefer day care facilities that have male staff. The higher the parents' educational and income levels, the more important they consider having male child care workers*" (Friedmann, 2012).

While on one hand, research, like this project, focuses on the analysis of representations and widespread culture to understand the influence of choices that distance the male world from the so-called care professions, on the other hand a need is emerging to investigate if the predominant presence of women in educator and teacher roles can affect the school experience of children and the construction of their identity. Sociologist Francesca Sartori, in this regard, states that "*the fact that important roles such as nursery and infant school workers and primary and secondary school teachers are interpreted as a female prerogative leads us to reflect on the possible effects that this phenomenon has on the interiorisation of reference models, on relational methods but also on the teaching and expressive methods which are strongly characterised in terms of gender. As stated above, everything that takes place at school has an educational value, so also the gender of the teachers affects the construction of identity and school experience, probably to different extents for male and female pupils...*" (Sartori, 2009, 49-50).

The debate is still very much open, and there are many reasons underlying the very low desire of men to join these professions: cultural reasons persist, with consequent representations of men and women corresponding to determined - and often pre-determined - gender roles; this may be for economic reasons, which make educational professions undesirable occupations in terms of salary, compared

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

to other careers chosen by men; there is consequently an implicit social devaluation which may affect job choices.

3. Still a question of *vocation* and *inborn predisposition*?

Faced with the increasingly low presence of men in the educational world, particularly in the 0-6 age group, this analysis aims to provide some possible explanations for the distance of men from the so-called care professions, starting from the expectations and representations that fathers, mothers and grandparents have towards educational roles, particularly concerning male educators in nurseries and preschools.

The representations analysed following the focus groups concern both educational contexts in which male figures were present and contexts in which, with no direct experience, the participants were invited to express their opinions. The analysis also integrates references to the quantitative research, during which questionnaires were delivered to childcare workers, teachers and parents. Specifically, we aimed to study and highlight these representations:

- in relation to the differences in the children's behaviour towards male and female educators and teachers, as described by mothers, fathers and grandparents;
- in relation to the opinions expressed on the professionalism of the male educational figure and on the differences between men and women in the preschool education (0-3 and 3-6 years);
- in relation to the reactions of fathers, mothers and grandparents towards male educational figures.

In analysing the experiences of educational contexts with the presence of male educators or teachers, the parents and grandparents expressed very positive opinions, without noting differences in the behavioural styles of men or women and highlighting a generally enthusiastic attitude of the children.

Mothers and fathers, as well as grandfathers and grandmothers, did not initially note any behavioural differences; they generally referred to the fact that the male teacher or educator is referred to and remembered often by the children or grandchildren; they tended to highlight the positive aspects and wealth of the experience, having no trouble in accepting and indeed hoping that there will continue to be male educators in the service. Parents considered it as an opportunity for their children to have different reference models, complementary to the female and male models within the family. They appreciated the possibility it offered of bringing new visions, stimuli and different ideas to the educational context, compared to

Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

the female colleagues, and to the programme and activities, overcoming approaches that risk being univocal:

M., Mother, 38: That's also why I say that if there was also a male educator, certainly the child would have a more complete vision, because in any case men and women compensate each other, they have always compensated each other, they have some common characteristics and others that are not, but offering the child a complete vision I think that's the best thing, then...

S., Mother, 35: Fantastic, exceptional! We had a male educator at the nursery, my daughter loved him, I don't know... Now it doesn't matter if you're male or female, I think some people have more talent for the job, because there are also women who should go and do a different job! But, even though that was two years ago, my daughter still sometimes says: "Let's go and visit him at the nursery!" So I have to say, brilliant!

A., Father 46: It may break the continuity of a female system, not feminist but female...

In the data relating to the questionnaire delivered to more than 2800 fathers and mothers throughout the region⁵, answering the question on which feelings the idea of their children having a male educator or teacher aroused, the responses highlight some polarities: 29.6% express perplexity, 26.3% security; 16.7% complicity and 12.7% diffidence. 51.3% indicated "trust". Merging the answers concerning the feelings of "fear", "diffidence" and "perplexity", the total is 47.7%, compared to 84.3% of those concerning "complicity"; "security" and "trust".

Returning to the analysis of the focus groups, the parents and grandparents described the children's experiences, accompanied by comments such as "Fantastic!", "Phenomenal" and "Exceptional!". The educator is described with positive characteristics, friendly, welcoming, smiling, fun, often charming and attractive, very enthusiastic.

S., Mother, 34: [...] at the nursery there were five women and a man, and my daughter was in love with him, she was only two...

(N. 5, Parents, 0-3 and 3-6, Comacchio, Fe)

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

M.F, Mother, 34: Last year we had a male teacher, now he works at [place name], really sweet...all the children had great fun with him ... partly because he was male, so different.. and he was also young, always smiling, proactive, so the experience was very good, at least, with him...

(N. 11, Parents, 3-6, Ravenna)

Aspects also emerge that can be related to the curiosity and novelty of a male presence in the educational context, which tend to be correlated to characteristics that are considered by the parents to be female.

S., Mother, 35: No, I think that for the child it was not so much that it was different from usual as he was there when he started nursery, so he couldn't know that usually there are only females there. I think it is specifically a question of the character of the educator and the enthusiasm they put into what they do, that's what the children feel.

V., Mother, 37: I worked with a male educator and... without taking anything away from the female educators because.. but professionally he was very competent, very good, with his very own sensitivity... really good educator, great, I still remember him, fondly, I think he was great so let's make way for the men, there are too few of them, we really need to promote them.

Initially the parents and grandparents noted no differences in the behaviour of males and females, in terms of the gender of the educator. It didn't seem to be an issue, for the children, and the relationship is described "asexually", the difference makes way for "unisex" attitudes until the time comes for cuddles.

F., Father, 35: I'm talking about my daughter who's in her first year, when she wanted a cuddle she would go more to the woman, looking for a female presence.

The educational work is in fact mainly identified with the affective dimension, maternal instinct, which particularly emerges in female educators as an inborn, natural characteristic. In these exchanges, working with children seems to be a fe-

Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

male prerogative: this confirms the trend that the younger the children the greater the female connotation allocated to the care professions.

L., Mother, 44: [...] Being a bit mother hen, as I call it, is difficult for men! But perhaps each of us is different. By culture and experience, women tend to embrace, that's how they are. Men do things differently, maybe the same thing, but differently.

M., Mother, 35: Certainly the educational role is seen principally in relation to maternity, I think, and so to women, right or wrong it may be, but I believe that that's the general thought.

While on one hand behavioural differences emerge in children in choosing the female figure, more loving and patient, and therefore more suited to satisfying the need for cuddles and tenderness, on the other hand some mothers described the behaviour of their daughters towards the male educator as being more "flirty", referring once again to inborn factors.

G., Mother, 41: [...] In her approach to men or women, I see that my daughter, even last year, she had a different type of attitude...

M., Mother, 43: She's more flirty...

[...]

M., Mother, 43: It's inborn.

G., Mother, 41: Ah, that's right, I was amazed because she was only 4 ... but it's true. But also with my mum and my dad, she acts differently, even at 4 years old she acts differently towards men than towards women, it's like she's out to conquer, in a good way, but she knows that if she makes that face she'll get what she wants, it's true!

Even very young children have already interiorised their role as males or females, the rules that characterise them, and the models of adults of the same sex to refer to, imitate and identify with, and it appears they know what to expect from them (Gianini Belotti, 1973; Lipperini, 2007). Despite the studies and long battles to fight cultural conditioning that defines gender roles, prejudices and stereotypes persist in discourse, in the mass media, in school books, permeating everyday life (Coltrane, 1996). From this exchange of views between mothers, the image re-emerges of the female sex aware of being attractive to men, seeking consensus, aiming to *conquer* as if he was a knight in shining armour.

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

This element of erotisation, but also of opposition between inferiority/weakness and superiority/strength can be connected to a male identity model based on virility, a mask of huge symbolic power, confirming the rigid division of family roles, and which, where recognised in the educator/teacher figure, can be considered a cause of the fear and diffidence expressed by the parents. Where on the other hand this virility is queried and the man takes on female tasks and qualities, the fear of homosexuality seems to emerge more or less explicitly.

In this regard, in the introduction to the Lipperini's study, Elena Gianini Belotti wonders (Gianini Belotti, in Lipperini, 2007, 14-15): *"Is the male identity such a fragile thing as to fall to pieces before the slightest change? Which is experiences as an attack on virility, implying the much-feared risk of homosexuality? We need only see how shocking it appears when a little boy chooses a toy or a game considered to be "for girls" or how irritated we may be, telling him not to act like a little girl when he cries. In fact, in young more evolved couples, things have begun to change and right from birth fathers also look after the baby, cleaning them, changing them, feeding and cuddling them, putting them to sleep. It is first and foremost a gift to oneself, as the experience of physical contact with a fragile, defenceless body that depends wholly on our care offers emotions that have always been forbidden in male life, it softens gestures, modifies the character, cancels out awkwardness and fear, sweetens eroticism"* (Ciccone, 2009; Melandri, 2011; Caputo, 2012).

Parents and grandparents in any case expressed a certain awareness when discussing the diffidence they harbour towards male educators. This is not a characteristic that is recognised in the children but is rather a reaction of adults, as can be seen in this dialogue:

T., Mother, 37: Perhaps we have in our minds the idea of always having...

E., Father 32: Perhaps...

T., Mother, 37: ...the female figure...

E., Father 32: ...but, well...

T., Mother, 37: Well I noticed a certain amount of diffidence when there was a man rather than... I mean by the adults...

S., Mother, 36: Me too.

T., Mother, 37: ... there was a male teacher at the preschool... I heard comments like, "Oh, but he's a man, I don't know..."

S., Mother, 36: Will he be able to cope? [laughs]

T., Mother, 37: ...Yes, comments from parents, finding out that there was a male educator, perhaps because we grew up with the idea of the mother figure...

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

The questionnaire delivered to the parents aimed to provoke thought also over the possibility of increasing the number of male staff in childcare services. 71.2% agreed with the as-yet unaccomplished, yet much debated idea proposed by the European Commission in its document *Men as Workers in Childcare Services* (Jensen, 1996), produced in 1996.

In educational work in both the 0-3 and 3-6 age groups, a large percentage recognises the same skills in male and female educators/teachers. Referring to the following tables 1 and 2, the parents stated that the dimensions of welcoming, relationships, learning activities, active play and the affective area are present in both educational figures. The highest percentage concerns the learning activities, at 78%. Some data worth highlighting emerges: in the 0-3 age group, the welcoming skills, while on one hand recognised in both with a percentage of 53.5%, on the other hand is considered a female skill by 45.5%; concerning the affective area, 46.1% stated “both”, while 53.4% consider it a specific dimension of female educators.

20.6% of parents attribute specific skills in active play to the male educator: this is the highest percentage indicated among the male skills. Generally, excluding the latter, those not attributing equal skills to both were inclined to express themselves more in favour of female workers.

Analysing the 3-6 age group, the data trends are similar: the percentage of mothers and fathers who consider male and female teachers to be equally competent in the various educational dimensions (with frequency ranging from 56.7% for the affective area to 83.2% for learning activities); the trends emerging for the nursery services are confirmed, with lower percentages. Female workers are attributed greater skills in welcoming, relationships and learning activities, respectively 31.7%, 22.9% and 12.3%; 41.4% was recorded for the affective area; male teachers are considered by 21.3% of parents to be more skilled in active play.

Tab. 1

Skills parents attribute to female/male educators in nursery services (%)

Dimensions	Female educators	Male educators	Both	Total
Welcoming	45.5	1.0	53.5	100.0 (N=2629)
Relations	34.1	2.6	63.3	100.0 (N=2612)
Learning activities	17.8	4.2	78.0	100.0 (N=2620)
Active play	10.7	20.6	68.7	100.0 (N=2621)
Affective area	52.4	1.5	46.1	100.0 (N=2622)

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

Tab. 2
Skills parents attribute to male or female teachers in preschools (%)

Dimensions	Female teachers	Male teachers	Both	Total
Welcoming	31.7	1.8	66.5	100.0 (N=2559)
Relations	22.9	2.9	74.2	100.0 (N=2553)
Learning activities	12.3	4.5	83.2	100.0 (N=2556)
Active play	7.0	21.3	71.7	100.0 (N=2566)
Affective area	41.4	1.9	56.7	100.0 (N=2560)

In educational contexts with so few male workers as to almost be able to talk of male absence in education, the social imagination that emerges seems to accept the male figure, recognising in him the natural instinct and vocation that is attributed to female care work.

While on one hand the opinions expressed by the parents on the professionalism of the male educational worker and the difference between men and women in the 0-3 and 3-6 age groups indicate perspectives that are willing to overcome the feminisation process, recognising men's specific professional skills, on the other hand positions emerge which risk strengthening stereotypes and slowing down the possibilities for change. The professional success of the male educator seems to depend on his vocation, a very strong motivation (“a lifetime career”, “they do it because they really believe in it”...) and their predisposition linked to aspects such as “strong female sensitivity”. In some focus groups close attention to the behaviour of male workers emerged:

T., Father, 42: A. [child's name] had a really good male educator last year and I noticed differences, different approaches to those of the female workers this year. I saw a man who had a true vocation for the job. At first I was rather surprised, because it's culturally strange, because seeing a male figure is strange for us, like when you see a woman soldier, we stop and look, even though we know she could be as good as the boys if not better! It is an inborn stereotype for us.

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

L., Father, 33: [...] but there is a different relationship with a male middle school teacher compared to a male nursery teacher... We had a very positive experience with a very, very good male educator, really sensitive, when he left everyone really missed him. And here too, in our mental paradigm, they are men but with very female sensitivity. For us, to do this job we think they need very female sensitivity, as if the job was only suitable for women.

T., Father, 42: I think there are only a few men who do this job because perhaps it's a lifetime career, there are only very few so the few there are really believe in the job, and perhaps because it's their lifetime career that's why they're really good at it. This also happens with women, it's not that women do the job because they're unemployed, I don't want to make that kind of mistake, but because the few that there are really do believe in it.

I., Mother, 33: I wanted to tell our experience of male and female influence, we parents are actually very used to having women teachers and educators, as mothers we have a particularly supporting role, we place great faith in them, at the infant school we had a male caretaker, and we mums were petrified, because a male in a normally female environment where usually... and the teacher told us that often having a male figure can also be a point of reference for our children, who doesn't relate only to women, but like at home with their father they can also have a male reference figure. There and then I was on the war path, but now I think about it, I say "let's see how it goes with this new person who first of all I saw as annoying".

To further analyse the representations of professionalism among male and female educators and teachers, we may refer to the data emerging from the questionnaires, in the question asking parents to express their level of agreement on various statements, concerning the presence of male or female workers in childcare services. The underlying aim was to investigate the possible reasons for the feminisation of childcare and educational professions.

The main reason is attributed to the fact that women are more suited to care work with the under 6's. Combining the answers "very much" and "quite" agree, Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

the highest percentage of those interviewed, 72%, agreed with this statement, compared to 28%, a lower percentage, expressing "not at all" or "not very much". Compared to the total number of mothers interviewed, 70.5% state that they agree with this position; there is an even higher percentage of fathers, 79.2%. Therefore the men themselves express a feeling of unsuitability towards a model that makes care work "women's work".

The issue of low pay is significant for only 27.5% of parents. On the other hand it is quite relevant that 55.8% think that women's choice is due to the greater possibility to reconcile work and family. Particularly, 58% of women express their agreement, compared to 43.5% of men.

Another important factor is the low social value attributed to care work, deemed to be an important reason in men's choice for 42.2% of parents. Parents are on the other hand equally divided on the level of agreement with the statement that, among the causes of the lack of men in childcare services, they were not educated to look after children. The variable concerning the family cultural index affects the level of agreement with this statement: 67.2% of those interviewed with a low cultural index stated that they very or quite strongly disagreed; quite or very much agreeing, on the other hand, almost expressing a greater awareness of gender roles and models, are 58% of parents with a high cultural index.

The few models received by those who preceded them make the process of changing gender identity, the construction of new social, family and working roles more difficult. This, together with the thoughts on the feminisation of educational work and its role, raises a crucial question on the transmissibility of this model, through work which ends up "reproducing itself", women's work, by instinct and by vocation, that men shy away from. As a provocation, we may refer to the words of Lipperini (2007, p. 149) who stated: "The teacher's role is female. Fine, but why? Why still today do women continue to think of themselves as those who take care of others, rather than as professionals? Why, once again, is looking after children a "vocation"?". Or again (Lipperini, 2007, p. 151): "If, finally, we continue to be compelled to repeat the mechanisms that we only rarely stop to think on, we accept, and unfortunately perpetuate that which has always been women's prison: they are the first to defend the current situation, guardians of the dominant culture, wardens of their own kind".

62% of parents however think that the presence of men in childcare services will increase due to the cultural change that is bringing men closer to children. Even if they are not "built for working with children" aged 0-6, there is a vague possibility of overcoming the determinism of some characteristics that are considered to be inborn. 69.8% in fact express their disagreement with the statement, "The

Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?

presence of men in childcare services will remain low: they have no inclination for working with children aged 0-6”.

3. From *mothercare models* to professionals: the possibilities for change

Despite the clear open-mindedness and positive opinions expressed, on a deeper level the fears felt by mothers and fathers towards male workers also emerge. Often the initial surprise of finding a male worker in a school environment becomes diffidence, which is difficult to attribute to a cause and which is rarely acknowledged in an aware manner:

M., Mother, 35: To tell the truth I would find it rather strange, I admit, because it's something which doesn't... but for example, I work in a nursery, and the other week a man came to do supply work for a colleague, and I found it a bit strange, I admit, but he wasn't in my class so I can't say... but yes, the first impression was a bit... but I don't think I would be particularly prejudiced, I mean...

L., Father, 33: Well, if I think of my daughter I would find it more annoying, but it's more a case of the jealousy of a father towards another man in my daughter's life... I'm being very sincere, not thinking of violence but really of jealousy, it depends on the relationship with the father. I would have trouble with the idea of a male figure for my daughter.

This diffidence risks becoming a very explicit fear, with statements that underlie prejudices linked to paedophilia, for example referring to the toilet routine or similar events, such as in the changing rooms.

P., Mother, 31: I was thinking of a 5 year old girl with a male worker, I think of when I take my little boy to the swimming pool, as he's a boy both my husband and I can take him. I could go in the female changing rooms or my husband in the men's, but if it was a 5 year old girl he couldn't! I mean, I wouldn't like it at that age, it's something that I have thought of just now, a 5 year old girl with a male adult, I don't know... It's true that if you're an educator... but... I don't know.

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

R., Mother, 32: In that case, maybe he didn't look at what the children were doing, so I think it was a real shock... I heard some of the mums saying "Oh but if he has to go to the bathroom, there are children..." so they were thinking about this!

S., Mother, 35: [...] simply because he was male, and many fathers didn't want him because he also had to take the little girls to the toilet, to clean them up, only when you think about it and in any case you see these things on the news, women have done it too, so it doesn't make any difference if they're male or female. And now we're all ok with it.

M., Father, 33: I think you need to be in that situation.

M., Mother, 39: [...] the impact was very strong, and then it's true that most paedophiles are men...

S., Mother, 35: then lots of fathers signed a petition...

V., Mother, 39: fathers of little girls [...]

M.F., Mother, 34: Anyway, getting back to the point about diffidence, it's true to some extent, I mean last year when I saw P. [name of the male teacher] I said, "Who knows why he decided to become a teacher?!" [laughs] "He's not by chance a...?" I mean, you always think, going back to the thing about fear, the media sends out messages of fear all the time... paedophilia, you see? I don't know, as you don't see that many, sometimes you have to wonder. Then you get to know them, and you are reassured, and say, "Oh, in fact he's not interested in our children, but"

Parents and grandparents mainly stated their consent over the presence of male workers in nurseries and preschools. Some say that being male or female makes no difference, what is important is *how good they are*. The role of female educator and teacher is recognised in the woman's ability to be "mother", opinions identifying the skills gained through teacher training are much rarer and weaker.

M., Mother, 35: Or maybe they refused... maybe in the first years they refused to have a male teacher... maybe it's culture that women have always looked after the children and so you can see who is better equipped, who has more experience, who has always done it... so men, fathers were less involved in this, in changing nappies,

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

taking care of this and that... maybe it's a mental or cultural thing, that isn't necessarily right, because it's not right, is it?...

As far as male workers are concerned, this skills is defined by the ability to be as similar as possible to women, which for fathers means becoming effeminate.

It is harder to imagine men in care work, because they have not experienced maternity. In studying the concept of *skill* in this type of profession, the importance of correct, respectful behaviour emerges, reassuring against the diffidence and fears linked to paedophilia.

The representations of parents and grandparents seem to consider innovative the fact that consent is expressed for an increase in the number of men in childcare and educational services and that in cultural terms men are more able now than in the past to help out in the home and look after the children, playing roles that are interchangeable in managing the family and work.

G., Father, 36: But I think... I think this diffidence will fall off, it will decrease because times are changing, parents, males, dads, change nappies from when the child is born... so a little at a time I think that.... I mean, it's already happening... if I had asked my parents it was completely... they were far more diffident, I think, they were much more... for that age group.

J., Mother, 26: I think that before men had practically no links with their small children, because as we said they started to take care of them after the nappy was changed, from preschool... but now fathers do the work that mothers do, so they change their nappies, give them a bottle, all that... they are closer, it's not the same thing, but a male educator... I wouldn't be shocked to see one with a 10 month old baby that can't walk...

With a few exceptions, the opinion seems to prevail that there are more women in childcare because they are more suited to care work, and at the same time the situation is also attributed to the low social value assigned to the job:

F., Mother, 35: Because we live in a male chauvinist society, and there are only women in the low jobs, the higher you go the more men there are.
[...] We're still in the stone age from this point of view.

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

I., Father, 33: Yes because jobs working with children are considered minor professions anyway...

This complex issue will not be resolved by fixing compulsory quotas of male workers, it is not a numerical problem that is solved a priori by ensuring that more men can do these jobs.

I., Father, 33: I would not start from the point that more men means better, I prefer that they be good educators whatever their sex, and I think we all agree on that. [...] My opinion is that I want to be operated on by the best possible surgeon, whether male or female, smurf or martian, it doesn't matter, and I want the same thing for P. [son's name] I want all the educators to be the best, [...] I don't know if I've explained that well, it's not that more men are a priori better.

This thought raises serious questions on the risk of considering male educators as particularly good simply because they belong to a very small minority, which is recognised as having a special motivation; and on the even more serious risk of considering them *good emancipated male mother* or potential paedophiles.

On one hand, we need to stop considering schools and educational services, particularly early childhood services, as places that are predominantly female simply because beyond the domestic walls they offer continuity with the maternal care dimension and we must fight the "maternal rhetoric" that ends up likening educational work to the work women do in the home free of charge. As Annalisa Marinelli states in the book *Silenzi. Non detti, reticenze e assenze di (tra) donne e uomini*, this process seems to be "the consequence of a forced exile that the care dimension has suffered in our culture, exile from political life and reclusion in the private sphere of emotivity. The sphere of female domain in a social organisation that has women as guardians of the private dimension and men actors of the public dimension" (Marinelli, in Ciccone & Mapelli, 2012, p. 95).

On the other hand, to break this process of feminisation, we must overcome the belief that a male teacher must necessarily represent the father figure or else be effeminate, with the same vocation, which reproduces the same dichotomies and the same segregations, denying the possibility to develop their own educational professionalism and respecting the right to be different in relationships.

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

4. Conclusions

It is not by introducing compulsory quotas of male staff that we will encourage more men to work in schools, but rather through changes which can open up real possibilities for interchangeability, overcoming the rigid interpretations of gender roles, at school and in the family. This research hopes for this possibility for change, and in line with other recent studies confirms the trend of feminisation of care work and stereotypes which make this an extension of the care function recognised only to women (Mapelli & Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2012).

This divide between the sexes is explained by the parents involved in the sample with reasons running from the greater possibility for women to reconcile work and the family, to the low social value recognised to care professions and to the poor education men have received in looking after children. The analysis of these reasons leads us to state that the job market, cultural and communication models and the relationships between fathers and mothers constitute elements that strongly characterise different models of gender identity in our post-modern society (Saraceno, 2012). As Saraceno explains (2012, p. 31), "*modifying this situation, increasing the level of freedom for women and promoting less rigid male and female gender models requires action on various levels: in the forms of labour market regulation, in the supply of services, in cultural models and in socialisation*".

Once again we are in an imaginary world where subordinate roles and identities are in conflict, where different generations of men and women are trying to image change, possible only if they are able to overcome univocity and dichotomies, in a plurality of possibilities of building gender citizenship.

Hoping for or perceiving possible changes in educational contexts in which there is a predominant female presence, starting with a cultural change which brings men closer to childhood, means trying to overcome the "inbornist" concept of the qualities that characterise and oppose male and female roles, and the temptation to standardise the male and female model, to offer illusory equality.

This research highlights changes in progress in family roles, parents talk of new symmetries in the family, where the new generations of fathers pay attention to housework and have a growing interest in looking after the children⁶ (Canal, in *Osservatorio Isfol*, 1/2012; Murgia & Poggio, 2012).

Despite the transformations in participation in care duties by fathers, which query old-style relational models in favour of new more balanced models of parenthood, this is not enough to bridge the gap underlying the process of feminisation of schools or to transform the depreciation which on one hand makes care

Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

professions unappetising for men and on the other hand makes them increasingly necessary for women in order to be able to reconcile work and family.

Caputo (2012, pp. 52-53) states: "*But now that many women, albeit among a thousand ambivalences and grey areas, have refused their fate as guardians of "the home, children and sexuality"*", since many men refuse the ancient "advantage" of exclusion from the relationship with children, powerful and omnipotent mothers are a real threat, which cannot be fought with the privileges of a gender that was the strongest, a law which recognised them as the only holder of rights, of a society built in their image and likeness. Today paternal irrelevance is laid bare, it has no defence and no cultural representation that can transform it into an unquestioned symbolic relevance. It is however precisely this revealing that can make the time ripe for change, given the liberation of the male from the oppressiveness of the mask and weight of the armour, uniform and warrior poses. But also from the categorical imperative to hide emotions, suffocate feelings and swallow back tears".

Faced with transforming family models, parenthood that is no longer represented solely by heterosexual mothers and fathers, couples with plans for parenthood that are increasingly complex and distant (Volpi, 2007), the need for change becomes increasingly urgent, with the recognition and indispensability of the other, offering the possibility to develop models that are freer from stereotypes, more able to promote choice and construct a gender identity that does not need to interiorise the self-image dictated by others in order to enjoy its own rights of citizenship.

Notes

¹ The research group includes: Chiara Cretella (Sociology), Francesca Crivellaro (Cultural Anthropology), Manuela Gallerani (General and Social Education), Giovanna Guerzoni (Cultural Anthropology), Stefania Lorenzini (Intercultural Education), Elena Malaguti (Special Education), Rosy Nardone (Teaching and Learning Strategies and Special Education), Federica Tarabusi (Cultural Anthropology), Elisa Truffelli (Experimental Education), Federica Zanetti (Teaching and Learning Strategies and Special Education).

² Specifically, the research project was promoted by the Equal Opportunities Department and Social Policy Department.

³ For more information on all the data and topics analysed, please refer to the research report published on the link <http://statistica.regione.emilia-romagna.it/news/stereotipi-di-genere-relazioni-educative-e-infanzia>. Moreover, Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

the book including the analysis of all the topics emerging has been published in Italy: C. Cretella, F. Crivellaro, M. Gallerani, G. Guerzoni, S. Lorenzini, R. Nardone, F. Tarabusi, E. Truffelli, F. Zanetti, *Generi in relazione. Scuole, servizi educativi 0/6 e famiglie in Emilia Romagna*, Naples, Loffredo, 2013.

⁴ Original text: "Il faut absolument adapter l'école et masculiniser le corps enseignant, surtout au primaire et au collège, où quasiment tout le personnel d'encadrement est féminin. Il y a davantage de mixité dans le corps enseignant au lycée, mais, à ce moment-là, malheureusement pour les garçons, la sélection est déjà faite. Personnellement, je plaide pour une véritable parité du personnel de l'Éducation nationale, et pas seulement les enseignants. Si nous ne faisons pas cette révolution, si nous ne réintroduisons pas les hommes à l'école, nous courons à la catastrophe".

⁵ A total of 2736 parents answered the questionnaire, respectively 17.1% fathers and 82.9% mothers. 61.7% of those interviewed were aged between 30 and 39 and 28.7% between 40 and 49. As far as qualifications are concerned, average to high qualifications (high school diploma and degrees) counted for 69.6%, with an extra 6.9% with a post-graduate qualification.

⁶ This trend has been recorded above all in international and European contexts. In Italy 71.4% of all care work is done by women, although new models of family organisation and parenthood are emerging. We talk of "high care fathers", a still small group of parents or spouses who collaborate fully in the housework and looking after the children.

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Federica Zanetti – *Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?*

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Federica Zanetti – Male educators in parental representations, among stereotypes and change: care professionals, nature or nurture?