

To address gender equality since the preschool education: research and practices

Isabel Piscalho isabel.piscalho@ese.ipsantarem.pt

Maria João Cardona mjoao.cardona@ese.ipsantarem.pt

Marta Uva marta.uva@ese.ipsantarem.pt

Teresa-Cláudia Tavares tc.tavares@ese.ipsantarem.pt

Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico de Santarém - Portugal

Abstract

To study the school careers of boys and girls from pre-school is one of the objectives of a study that took place in Santarém (Portugal). With this intention, in recent years a line of research, training and organization of materials for work on gender in preschool, has been developed. In this text we analyze some guidelines of our work presenting some examples of the data collected in kindergartens on the representations of gender and age (which is to be a man, woman, boy and girl) of children in preschool. In this work we also pretend to understand the representations of "good student" and "good student" of kindergarten teachers and teachers of basic education and their implications in the boys and girls results. These representations (and, in general, the effects of a too rigid and differentiated learning, regarding the social roles of boys and girls) have effects in the children schooling and in how these issues should be worked in the initial training of health workers in pre-school and basics? We argue that the examination of the relationship between kindergarten and gender issues is crucial to understand how these issues are experienced by children and the ways of action of health staff in kindergarten.

Keywords: Preschool; Elementary School; Gender, Representation, Learning, Training

Introduction

To promote gender equality since preschool years it is not an easy undertaking.

How do preschool teachers address these issues in class? What are preschool children representations of men/women and girls/boys' gender roles? Using data

collected in nursery school's classes from both groups - children and teachers – we try to evaluate the impact that gender-equality issues have on school performances. Our informational goals are to be able to evaluate the extent to which gender expectations can shape achievement in schooling for girls and boys, to get reasonable information on how educational agents (at kindergarten and first level education) portray a “good” student (male/female) and finally to be able to relate those findings to gender-stereotypes formative process We also pretend to provide the basis for (aim at providing the basis for) developing resources and analytical tools that could (capable of) address gender-equality issues at the initial teacher training and in-service training levels.

The differences in behavior and in personality characteristics between men and women are, partially at least, socially learned from expectations or from explicit instructions imposed to each individual since birth on how-to-behave if one is a male or a female, thus building each individual specific gender-identity and gender-performance. Gender, considered here as a set of material social relations and as symbolic meaning related to biological sexes, is in every society a fundamental constituent of the personality and is lived through the assumption by each individual of a specific gender performance who can be more or less adequate to the gender role corresponding to that individual biological sex (Cardona, M^a João (Coord.); Nogueira, Conceição; Vieira, Cristina; Uva, Marta; Tavares, Teresa-Cláudia, 2010). Genders roles, in the other hand, are set of prescriptions for sexes available in every society.

Families categorization that makes 5-8 y/o children as the ones who have a more stereotyped conception of the social roles assigned to both sexes. (Maccoby, Eleanor apud Cardona, M^a João and alli, 2010: 31) Since preschoolers are actively involved in the stabilization of their gender identity process, they are especially vulnerable (to Formation) that predisposition and to develop rigid and restrictive beliefs about gender roles (Cardona, M^a João and alli 2010: 25). It seems safe to assume that the children within this specific age group will acquire even more rigid assumptions on gender roles when families, teachers and/or other authority figures and even the media share the beliefs that differences among individuals of both sexes still exist and are genetically determined, and act in consequence.

Based on the results of previous projects,¹ we aimed at studying the reality of the Santarem district in order to identify at local level to what extent the concept of gender of the children who attended pre-school education and the gender expectations of their teachers influence their educational achievement in the first level of basic education.

The subject was also included as a topic in the set of research questions that teachers-to-be met during their Educational Practice courses. Namely, they had to answer on the reasons for addressing gender issues and how to address them in kindergarten and in the first level of basic education settings. Following these work, (projects) the level of training (initial and continuous) were also undertaken several initiatives, such as monographs, training, construction materials, organization of meetings and also the organization of the necessary tools to the pedagogical practices. This work was developed with the support of the Portuguese entity for gender equality, the Committee for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG – *Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género*). It also emerged in terms of research questions in the educational practice: How to work? Why work on gender issues?

Sadly, recent studies point to the idea that as a whole they remain an area of social inequality, both with regard to socioeconomic level and to gender; in fact, according to Luisa Saavedra (2001) schools promote an excessive differentiation between boys and girls and there is a profound mismatch between political educational discourse and educational practice.

Portuguese statistics indicate a great female educational attainment, thus reinforcing the commonplace that “femininity” as a set of stereotypical traits – submission, serenity, capacity of silence, attention to routines and details - foster the learning performance, and that female role and learner role, are, in a way, equivalents or even reinforce themselves.

In contrast, but also reinforcing stereotypical views, "boys" – who, according to the gender stereotype are more rebellious and disorganized than girls – have increased school failure.

To what extent the knowledge (even the belief) of educational agents on these stereotypes interfere with their students’ - boys and girls - school performance?

¹ Namely the *Characterization of Pre-School Education Project (PROCEPE- Projecto de Caracterização da Educação Pré-escolar)*, and the *Co-education Project (Projecto Co-Educação)*, a transnational project coordinated by the Portuguese entity for gender equality – then called CIDM, nowadays CIG (Committee for Citizenship and Gender Equality).

What is the representation of “good learners” hold by the key players of the educational process in pre-school and 1st cycle of basic education? And to what extent determine the views that they hold on the subject children school success or failure?

Find the answer to these questions is part of the research we undertake. Alongside the need to assess the main difficulties of preschool and 1st cycle of basic education teachers in addressing gender issues from an equal opportunities perspective, it seems essential - from the standpoint of either research or training - intervene at the level of their initial training, involving graduate students in research and thus contribute to the quality of teaching practice, particularly in this field.

It is also a purpose of this study to assess how gender issues are (not) integrated in educational practices. Thus, we intend to build text and grid analysis that might be used in the educators and teachers’ training to encourage work practices that promote greater equality of opportunity in the teaching and learning process.

The implementation of this project responds to needs felt by the team long and it is highly topical in the current sociopolitical context. On the one hand, it raises the concern that studying gender issues and how these are (not) considered in pedagogical practices, from pre-school on the other hand, it also heightens the need to assess the reason why these questions continue to be "large" missing training curricula in the Kindergarden-schools and elementary schools.

In this context, we feel that we need to:

- Study gender issues and how these are (or not) integrated into teaching practices from pre-school and elementary school or Basics
- Assess the main difficulties experienced by the students and teachers of pre-school and basic education in addressing this issue.
- Investigate the impact of gender issues in school trajectories.
- Build some tools, guides to help the teachers in this work

Below there are some of the theoretical assumptions on which we base the methodological options and a brief presentation of some data on previous work, as well as a better explanation for the work being undertaken and their implications for training and supporting the teachers.

1. Theoretical assumptions and background work

Contrary to what is defined in legislation, our education system, as already mentioned, is still far from promoting equal opportunities, particularly differentiating the treatment and the values passed to the boys and girls. Despite the developments that occurred since April 1974 in Portugal, there are still big differences that affect both sexes.

It is true that school failure has been a policy concern in recent decades, leading to the creation of programs and specific measures. However, they are often given false solutions to the problem, which maintain social inequities (Luisa Saavedra, 2001) and which include gender inequality.

Gender identity is a construct that involves a set of cultural representations associated to female or male. Underlying the concept of gender, we found a set of characterized ideas, revealing certain values and ideologies. These are often considered to be biological determinants, derived from sex differences rather than as culturally constructed features (Henriques, Fernanda 1994).

In addition to the family, schools and other institutions - from kindergarten-schools to higher education - are key areas of socialization where the construction of gender identity and learning is being consolidated. It is essential to consider that this process evolves throughout the development, assuming a decisive role in the way it is experienced childhood and adolescence.

Since learning of the various roles performed since the early ages, when children learn to differentiate the roles assigned to women and men, it is also too early to get a distinction that often is the basis of further inequities in the way their participation in family life, school and working.

The social differences that have proved unequal trajectories associated to school are: parents' social conditions, the source of their own ethno-national and / or their ancestors, the territory of residence and, more recently, the condition of gender.

Transition rates according to gender in elementary and secondary school along the same lines of that found in other Western countries between 1994 and 2004 are always the girls who get higher rates of educational attainment, the difference is being more significant in secondary education (Seabra, Teresa 2008).

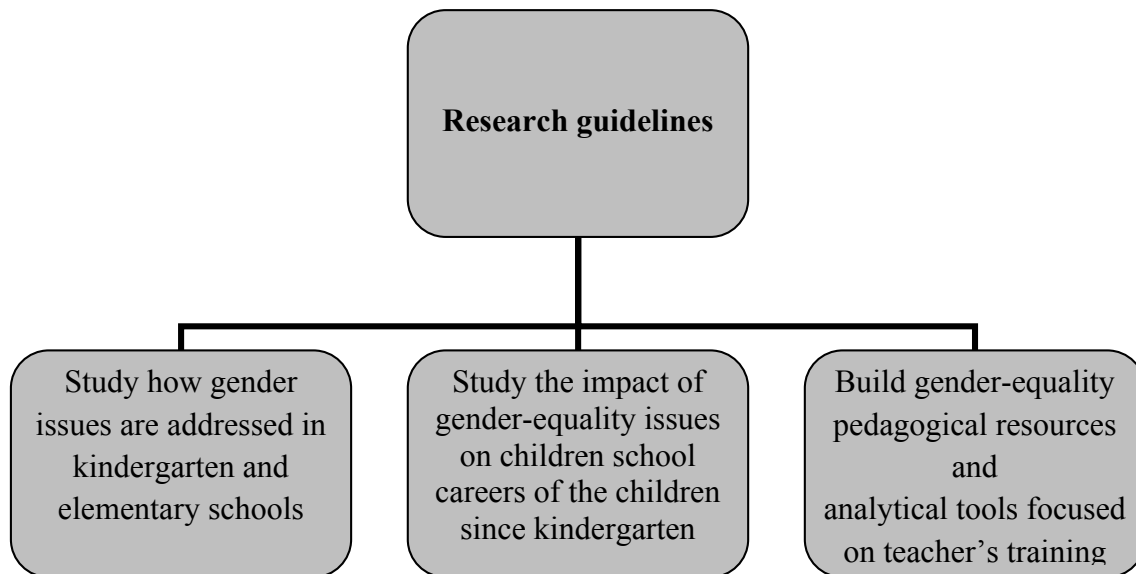
The twentieth century is the century of women's education, but the sharp increase in the education of girls is similar to the maintenance of segregation of the sexes in the schooling process (Christian Baudelot Establet & Roger, 1992). The statistics indicate a better student performance from girls reinforces the stereotypical idea that girls adapt better to school. Their behavior allegedly calm, silent, meticulous and submissive is said to help them to endorse the student role. On the other hand, girls good results are viewed as the result of work, not creativity or intelligence.

This Girls “student energy” (Baudelot & Establet, 1992) occurs mainly due to precocious family and kindergarten over-demands. Teachers, for instance, tend to consider that girls must help them to keep the group discipline.

Boys are allegedly rebellious and unstructured. They are more exposed than girls to inconsequent behavior, they are unhappier at school, don't do their home work and skip classes twice as girls do. (Macmillan, Bonnie, 2005). Besides manifesting more tendency than girls to behavior problems, boys score badly in all levels of study and in almost every course themes. They don't care, as well, about continue studying.

Regarding the specificity of the theme in question there are few studies available nationally, about the influence of pre-school educational success and in promoting greater gender equality. As we point out the exception, noted above, Project Co-education which opened lines of research that we intend to continue. Studies in this field are thus in Portugal a relatively recent history, perhaps during the last decade has seen a greater dynamism. For this development, has done much work done in graduate courses that began in this area. It is important to distingue the work of the Portuguese Association of Women's Studies (APEM- Associação Portuguesa de Estudos sobre as Mulheres) and the CIG- the Portuguese entity for gender equality. (Fernando Henriques, Teresa Pinto, 2002: 34).

Evaluate the extent which gender expectations shape on school performance; get information about how reasonable educational agents (kindergarten and first level education) will portray the "good student" (male / female) and report findings to those gender-stereotyping process. This work also pretends to build resources and analytical tools to work gender-equality issues at the pedagogical practices and formative level.



2. Methodological Options and different stages of the project

In this research work we are located in a predominantly qualitative approach, although they are considered some quantitative data to better understand the problem. We can differentiate in this project different steps, that reflect the work already done and the work planning.

In the moment, all the work is planned to be realized in Santarém district. But in other phase of the work, we think to begin data collect in Lisbon, in some preschools and elementary schools of the city, to have a better comprehension of these questions in a different zone, more urban than Santarém.

These steps have not a rigid sequence; they are connected to the global work and to the project objectives.

In a first moment, we'll begin the analyze of the statistical data on the educational achievement nationwide. This work is always in development because we have new dates or we feel necessary to profound these analyze.

Then, we build some instruments to collect dates in the preschool classes, with the teachers and with the children, and in the elementary school, also with children and students. We have already questionnaires and guides to the interviews, that we have already tested.

In parallel of the study, with our students of initial training and with the teachers who work with the stages of our students we begin to build grid analysis and materials that could be used in the training of teachers to encourage and promote inclusive educational practices for combating school failure and improving teaching and learning. This work is done in collaboration with the CIG – the Portuguese entity for gender equality. These tools will be tested and evaluated in other zones of the country with the aid of the CIG and the aid of services of Educational Ministry.

3. Work already done

As we have already told, in other things, we designed a brief questionnaire focused on teacher's practices and to listen to the children's opinions on gender roles. At the moment we have already listened to 167 children - 92 girls, 75 boys. The survey was conducted by kindergarten classes in 39 of the same geographical area (in the Santarem district).

In each class girls and boys did the following answered questions:

- Which tasks have mother inside the house?
- Which tasks have mother outside the house?
- Which tasks have father inside the house?
- Which tasks have father outside the house?
- Which are the difference between men and women tasks ?
- Which are the difference between boys and girls tasks?

We hope to finish the collection and analysis of children answers during 2011. For the moment, some children testimonials from a semi-rural area within Santarém district are significant. Questioned about the difference between men and women tasks, in almost every case the answer is that only the women work inside the house. In most cases, for children, at home, women tasks imply household chores: "*Mum cooks, prepares my food, range and cleans the floor*", says a 5 years old girl. On the contrary,

men tasks at home don't always mean any kind of work, as we can see in the answer of another 5 years old girl "*Dad sees TV, eat chocolate, sleeps.*"

For these children household chores can be shared ("*Men and women do the dishes*", says a 5 years old boy) but as a rule, even if mothers are career-women or simply have jobs, children see women as conforming to the gender-code that relate them to domesticity.

Listing her mother activities outside family home a 5 years old girl details: "*Mum goes shopping, works in Santarem and walk me to the swimming pool*". A 5 years old boy echoes: "*When she [mum] leaves the house, she puts the trash in the trash bin, goes to the coffee house and goes to work.*"

We notice that to both mothers' career is not a relevant feature of their lives, and they don't even mention what are their mothers doing for living. In fact these children, the majority of whom have mothers with a full time job, seem to connect women work only to the household chores: according to a 5 years old boy, "*Mum works a lot when she's at home: she irons, cooks, give me bath and see TV.*"

On the contrary, children detail fathers jobs, explicitly considered as work: "*Dad works: he puts traffic signs in roads*", says a 5 years old girl. Even if in most of the families both father and mother are breadwinners, almost every child answer implies that father "works" and earns the family money.

So far the children's answers analysis told us that gender-role stereotyping is obvious since early age and it's stronger in girls. It seems as well to be stronger in rural children than urban children. Gender-role stereotyping is not obvious when children speak about boys and girls, but is noticeable when they mention mother and father occupation and schedules, or the "world of grownups" in general.

We can maybe assume that the children who gave us these answers will conform to the gender stereotype as first level of basic education students.

Overall, kindergarten teachers mention that "*matters related to gender issues are clearly present in day-to-day life of children*" or that "*gender issues are a matter of education*". They globally recognize the importance of gender-equality (even if they don't connect it to academic achievement) but do not feel able to deal with the gender related issues concerning pedagogical resources selection, organization of kindergarten classroom space, fostering of activities, leadership group dynamics, conflict management and interactions.

In the sequence of the work already done, we redefined our methodological approach and we developed some resources and analytical tools to deal with gender-equality issues at the pedagogical practices and formative level.

With this concern, we have worked with CIG in the production of a guide on gender and citizenship in kindergarten education, a handbook aimed at kindergarten teachers (Cardona, M^a João (Coord.); Nogueira, Conceição; Vieira, Cristina; Uva, Marta; Tavares, Teresa-Cláudia, 2010) and we begin one other to the elementary education.

This guidebook is retrievable online (www.cig.org.pt/guiaoeducacao/) and will be disseminated through various training initiatives in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. It was build upon the data furnished by a group of kindergarten teachers who gathered multiple situations of gender-roles discussion in kindergartens settings and upon data gathered during the initial training of kindergarten teachers.

The data collected while producing the guide corroborate other studies that show girls as more compatible with the "ideal student". According to these teachers they have more stability, more attention, more self-control, and more autonomy. Are more study and effort prone, are more work-focused, more resilient, more obedient, more assertive, more ambitious. As a kindergarten teacher puts it, "*girls like to play in larger spaces to make-believe, for the boys any corner will do.*"

Conclusions ? No, work to be accomplished...

The content analysis of teachers and children answers is helping us to redefine the methodology of the project. It showed us that gender-equality promotion in early age is a sensitive issue that nevertheless should be dealt with since the early years.

Our next step will be to confront kindergarten teachers to the fact that their attitudes and beliefs on gender-equality promotion shape their work with children on this issue.

Given the expected results at the end of the project, our efforts will help teachers to take a greater awareness with regard to their conceptions of gender. We'll develop strategies to support educational practices that promote greater equality of opportunity between boys and girls, with an impact on academic success.

A closer look at the organization of the educational environment - space, time, group dynamics - as well as the selection of books and teaching materials is essential to oppose gender stereotypes.

In short, it becomes increasingly important to identify to what extent the gender of the children who attended pre-school education and the expectations that teachers have about them influence their educational success. In this sense, the data collected should enable the evaluation of the academic performance of boys and girls from pre-school from a gendered perspective. Another dimension that must be considered from initial training will be the assessment of how gender issues are (not) integrated in the teaching and learning, featuring the issues underlying the different work practices is essential.

This is a difficult area of work. In this sense, our main goal will be to build educational resources and to get the collaboration of all educational and health care staff working with young children.

All this work has to be integrated into a line of research that supports it. The production of knowledge about how to address gender issues within global educational practices in teachers training is a key factor to the qualification of kindergarten/first level of basic education teachers who will promote, in fact, equal opportunities.

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