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Abstract: This essay is focused on the relation between educational care and masculinities. From a theoretical perspective it falls within Men's Studies and describes an empirical research study, mainly realized using a biographical approach, on male teachers working in Early Childhood education (ECE). The aim of this study is to explore the stories of the lives of some men who do jobs closely related to childcare, three of which are summarized in the boxes below in an unconventional form to experiment with a new way to disseminate the findings of the sociological research. The interviews are focused on the biographical turning points and the reasons the men chose jobs with tasks traditionally considered to be "female" duties, as well as how these teachers feel about their work, their caring and relational approaches, and if and to what extent their jobs are changing/have changed their perceptions of themselves, and, finally, on the nature of the reactions to their choice both in the micro and the macro social context. The partial findings of our ongoing research are compared with the outcome of other international studies with a focus on some common issues emerging across different national contexts: the lack of role models or mentors in ECE; the challenge to 'hegemonic' masculinities of engaging in childcare in order to involve body, emotions and vulnerabilities; the shadow of paedophilia related to homosexuality and, finally, the role these men embody as 'breakers'.

Keywords: male teachers, early childhood education (ECE), care, qualitative research

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Introduction: Educational Care and Masculinities

Caring has always been considered a female duty so it has never been included in the hegemonic model of masculinity (Connell, 1995), with serious repercussions. First of all, the exclusion has generated an overload of work for women, and secondly has made it impossible for men to explore those aspects of themselves involving physical contact outside the sexual sphere, attention and interdependence and to open “the range of possible emotions and thus moving far beyond the cage of those permitted by hegemonic masculinities” (Santambrogio, 2018, p. 96). Underlining that both men and women can/must share caring tasks contributes to a socio-cultural view according to which diversity and differences are not conceived and socialised hierarchically but in a Gylanic way (men and women both involved in the production/reproduction) (Eisler, 1989; 2007).

Men can (and must) be told to take care of children, even very little ones, not only as new “caring fathers” (Crespi & Ruspini, 2016; Elliott 2015; Murgia & Poggio, 2011; Featherstone, 2009; Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006), but also as professionals in Early Childhood Education, performing tasks that are traditionally considered to be female duties (changing, feeding or putting babies to sleep). Involving males in body caring can, in fact, help spread “non-toxic masculinities” (Connell, 2013), widen the range of ‘male characteristics’, and be not only an effective way to prevent violence (Rentzou, 2013; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017), but also a space where men can feel free.

The main aim of the paper – which falls within Men’s Studies, with reference to the latest theories about “hegemonic masculinities” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 1995; 2013), “hybrid masculinity” (Demetriou, 2001) and “toxic masculinity” (Kupers, 2005) – is to thematize a number of key issues regarding men and educational care, such as physical contact and emotions (Ottaviano, 2017; Simpson, 2009) and experiencing vulnerability within a caring context as a way to become fully human (Ottaviano & Santambrogio, 2018).

In the background, there is also the theoretical debate about counter-narratives (Jedlowski, 2010; 2017; Formenti, 2006; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004), which, within Gender Studies, we see as a way to ‘desert the patriarchal system’ that still shapes reality, and a powerful and liberating practice of rejecting patriarchal and heteronormative logics of power. “Giving space to other narratives, which stand back from commonly shared meanings, contributes, in our opinion, to creating spaces of intelligibility and visibility for other subjectivities, able to bring into play non-stereotyped models of self-perception and of building gender relationship” (Ottaviano & Santambrogio, 2018, p. 19).

To give more space to the narrative parts we have chosen, in this section, to synthesize the secondary analysis of data in a footnote and to be very succinct also about the methodology used¹. In the second section we will present a general overview of the academic research on ECE male teachers, and in the third one we will introduce our specific in progress research. In the conclusion, we will summarize the main temporary findings of our work and we will suggest a direction for future discussion and research.

From the methodological point of view, we have thus chosen to apply a biographical approach (Merrill & West, 2009; Bichi, 2000; Bertaux, 1998), which is highly suitable to engage the interviewees, to make sense of new and/or not so popular phenomena, trying - through the observation of contextualized details rather than theories and statistical data - to portray people's lives, but also to map the traces of a social structure that integrates and structures these subjectivities. Society should give voice to whom has little either as they live on the margins or because they are too few to be included in statistical trends. Male educators/teachers within 0-6 childhood education² in Italy belong to the second category³.

A General Overview of the Research on ECE Male Teachers

It was not easy to find studies and research on this specific topic in the academic literature. First of all, it is difficult to find material on males from

¹ For more information see the book that will be published shortly (Ottaviano & Persico, 2019/2020).

² The data concerning the Italian situation - unlike the international ones - record the number of nursery school teachers - which are called 'teachers' in this essay. We used the term 'educators' to refer to Italian men working in crèches as in Italy only teachers teaching 3-6 year-old are considered "teachers" by the regulation and institutional arrangements with important differences in terms of the respective training and national educational guidelines.

³ Teachers are predominately female in the main industrial countries for a long time: the average percentage is 68% in 2014 (OECD, 2017a). The gender gap is not, however, homogeneous, but gradually decreases as the level of education increases: if in ECE female teachers are 97% of the staff, the percentage gradually decreases to nearly the opposite in tertiary education, where male teachers are predominant (57%). Italy specifically is one of the countries with the highest gender gap: the percentage of female teachers - from ECE to secondary school - is close to 83% in the school year 2016/2017 (<https://www.dati.istruzione.it/opendata/opendata/catalogo/elements1/?area=Personale%20Scuola>). The very small number of men teaching at intermediate levels of education almost falls to zero in ECE, and below 5% in most European countries (OECD, 2017b). The situation in Italy seems far more polarized, with 99.3% female teachers at the nursery school in 2017 (<https://www.dati.istruzione.it/opendata/opendata/catalogo/elements1/?area=Personale%20Scuola>). The situation in US is quite the same (see Zhang, 2017). This also contributes to the "re-genderization" (Abbatecola & Stagi, 2017) of early childhood, leading to a clear, yet often unwitting preservation of the gender order and of the 'cages' in which both females and males are put. In Italy, in particular, in crèches and in nursery schools, people take the exclusive presence of women as caregivers for granted, and strongly resist any change (Biemmi, 2017²; CSGE, 2012).

a *gender-sensitive* (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2013) perspective in Anglo-Saxon literature where the crèche and nursery school from primary school are clearly separate; secondly, some studies focus on both male teachers and trainees, and there seem to be more research on trainees than on teachers. In our first and rather substantial bibliographical research we were all the same able to locate a number of interesting research studies.

An essay by McGowan (2016), for example, about the stereotypes and the prejudices that may cause the (self-)exclusion of male teachers from ECE in the USA as they might be considered paedophiles or homosexuals, or violent 'by nature' and, as a consequence, unsuitable for childcare; or authoritative, therefore better suited for other tasks and jobs. The aim of this study is to make people more aware of these prejudices in order to fight against the marginalization of males in this educational sector through the application of a specific method called 'Covey's Seven Habits'. Similarly, Mistry and Sood's study (2013) which is based on questionnaires and interviews of English ECE male trainees and teachers, examines gender stereotypes and prejudices about males as not being able to take care of children, and makes an appeal for an increase in role models in order to move beyond such non-scientific theories.

In line with the previous research studies, a study carried out in Turkey, presented eight interviews of male teachers and administrative staff working in pre-school (Erden, Ozgun & Aydilek Ciftc, 2011), shows that those who enter this sector do not do it by choice, but as a result of a selection procedure that assigns the students who got low final marks to that career. ECE teaching is not well considered socially: it is a low status poorly paid 'female' job⁴. All the interviewees claimed to have been insulted and/or to have received negative comments or to have been considered 'weird' by their families and friends. The aim of the researchers is not only to expose the discrimination males have to face in this sector but also to suggest possible courses of action needed to accelerate a change that is very slow in Turkey, as well as in other countries.

Other studies focus more specifically on the almost total lack of black ECE teachers and small number also at higher levels of education in the US (Bryan & Milton Williams, 2017). Another theoretical essay, supported by empirical research carried out in Austria and in New Zealand (Koch & Farquhar, 2015), claims that there is a real 'glass ceiling' for males, which is invisible but actually operational in this sector and a German ethnographical study, focused on 11 male school teachers (3-6 year-old children), under-

⁴ The issue of low pay and working conditions in ECE but, more generally, the gender gap in all workplaces would deserve a specific paragraph (for more information see Da Roit, 2010; Sabatinelli, 2017; Neri, 2017; Argentin, 2013; Perra & Ruspini, 2014).

lines the need to expand Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinities' (Buschmeyer, 2013).

Among the research examining the narratives of training students, one of the most remarkable is that of Heikkilä and Hellman (2017). It is a Swedish study, carried out through 38 semi-structured interviews of students from three universities and focused on the concept of the negotiation of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995), which, in a few words, identifies two key issues: the role of 'breakers' that these students claim to embody (males who choose to picture themselves working in a sector that is still seen as 'female' - even in Sweden), and their resulting pride.

Italian academic studies on masculinities are still very few and recent, although there has been some change and there are interesting interdisciplinary intersections (Ciccone & Nardini, 2017; Gasparrini, 2016; Chemotti, 2015; Deiana & Greco, 2012; Ciccone, 2009; Mantegazza, 2008)⁵. Regarding our topic specifically we have found only two empirical research studies⁶ focusing on educators or educators in training. The most recent one (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2016 and 2018) concerns the academic choices of 18 students attending Education Sciences, Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Social Sciences, Neuropsychiatry of Childhood and Adolescence degree courses in three Tuscan Universities⁷. The study highlights the cultural and family prejudice that continues to contribute to male training/working segregation and makes some degree courses/jobs less desirable. Taking care of people is not a highly valued job and some tasks are even considered 'de-meaning' for men; moreover, women are seen as 'naturally' predisposed to take care of children; finally, the lack of male role models makes it difficult for men to picture themselves working in these sectors in the future. Those who have dared to oppose the general trend, in fact, do so as the result of far "more difficult and painful experiences" (ivi, 194) than those of the females who have chosen to attend a degree course traditionally considered to be 'for males'.

⁵ Further evidence about the difficulty of dealing with the issue of gender roles in Italy is the debate - from my point of view, groundless - within public opinion about the alleged "gender ideology", a debate that also threatens to slow down the work of Italian scholars engaged in Gender Studies (see, among others, Ottaviano & Mentasti, 2017 e Ottaviano, 2018).

⁶ Though not so recent, the more theoretical study by Mapelli, Ulivieri Stiozzi (2012), whose aim is to understand the reasons for the small number of men working in the educational sector, is interesting. Another qualitative research study was conducted by Letizia Carrera (2013), but involves primary school teachers.

⁷ In the same research project, 22 female students attending Aerospace Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electronic and Telecommunication Engineering, Information Technology, Geologic Sciences and Technology, Oenology, Botany, Physiotherapy, Earth Sciences degree courses, were interviewed.

The other study, carried out by Cecotti (2013), is presented in a video⁸ showing seven male educators who were working in crèches in Friuli Venezia Giulia in 2012. From the interviews, it comes out all the complexity of a job in which there is constant interaction with children, but also with parents, female colleagues and with their own deep identifications; the need to realize they are males who grew up with unconscious traditional identifications, with the fear of being unsuitable for and/or rejected in a context that is new to their gender; the stress on a wider variety of experiences in contexts where children live daily in contact with male and female educators.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for more research and sociological analyses, to which we wish to contribute in order to promote a cultural change and foster career guidance initiatives allowing males to think they are capable of educational care.

Our Research on Male Educators/Teachers: Key Issues and Biographical Turning Points

A total of 7 men from the Lombardy region were interviewed across nursery schools and crèches in the Spring of 2018⁹. Selection of potential interviewees was based upon the authors' local knowledge of educators/teachers or by word of mouth. It was challenging to identify and reach all of them. A biographical interview was used to explore the life trajectories and deepen some topical issues¹⁰. Three of their stories are hereby reproduced individually, in a narrative form, to give an account of the life and educational experiences (collected in the first part of the interviews) that made these men embark on such a career, and to highlight the possible biographical turning points that led them to choose a job involving tasks traditionally considered 'female' duties. Those three stories are examples of life and professional trajectories which we interpret in a euristic way. Further on, through a cross and comparative analysis of all the interviews realized, we focus on some key issues in order to understand how these men feel about their work, their caring and relational approaches, if and to what extent their job is changing/has changed the perception of themselves, and the reactions to their choice both in the micro and the macro social context.

⁸ M. Cecotti, *Essere educatori*, Commissione Pari Opportunità-Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2013.

⁹ For lack of space, this essay only presents a capsule account of some stories; the research on caring education and masculinities will proceed with other interviews and focus groups of school managers and parents, and will be published (Ottaviano & Persico, 2019/2020).

¹⁰ The interviews are recorded, transcribed and analyzed against key topics.

Stories of Male Educators/Teachers

Table 1. The group of the interviewees

Name (fictitious)	Age	Level of education	Province
Matteo	35	Crèche	BG
Giovanni	63	Crèche	BG
Sandro	32	crèche	BG
Stefano	46	crèche	BG
Moreno	49	nursery school	MI
Miro	36	nursery school	BG
Pino	38	nursery school	BS

Matteo: a would-be primary teacher speaking about his experience with little children

At the moment Matteo, who is 35 years old, is working as a psychomotility therapist with children and families in ECE services and in therapeutic care structures. He grew up in a small village, with a six-year older brother and his parents (of humble origins). M. only knew his maternal grandparents and was mainly in contact with his mother's family. His upbringing was quite traditional: his mother, a housewife, was the authoritative figure and responsible for the childrens' upbringing, while his father was seldom at home. M. only remembers going to Mass with him on Sundays and playing, above all sports games, on the weekends. He began his education at a private nursery school of which he has only painful memories. He remembers not being ready to leave his mother and wanting to stay home with her. M. says he was a good, obedient and respectful and also very shy child. M. remembers very specific rules regarding good manner delivered by his mother in an authoritative, sometimes authoritarian, but never abusing way. His upbringing was based on traditional models like the 'good child' one. In part due to the difference in age and experience and upbringing, there is a certain distance between his brother and him. For M., attending a primary school with two male teachers was pivotal; he remembers one teacher in particular, loved dearly by the children for his innovative approach (he was also a theatre director), but a little disorientating at the time for the adults. His brother had more traditional and supportive female teachers. The theatre was a crucial element of M's education both as a child and a teenager: he played in a theatrical company for 15 years, with which he also went abroad. So, the theatre allowed him to come into contact with different cultural contexts that his family and social environment might never have offered him.

M. studied very hard in junior secondary school but was good at all subjects and did not have any special inclinations. This did not help him choose the right secondary school. He ultimately decided to attend a teachers' training college because of his admiration for a female teacher he met by coincidence and at the urging of his father and his brother who wanted him to contribute to the family budget as soon as possible. Attending university was not taken into consideration at the time, although M. enrolled at the Faculty of Science of Education after finishing the secondary school. Some of his female friends could see him as a teacher perhaps reflecting about their 'legendary' male teacher-theatre director. His female peers were a very important point of reference for M., better liked than males for their creativity and more welcoming behaviour, and perhaps also because of his shy personality. Throughout secondary school he continued to keep his distance from his male schoolmates who had different interests and styles and to prefer the company of his female friends. After finishing secondary school, M. went to the nearest university still dreaming of becoming a primary teacher.

One day unexpectedly the headmaster of his village's nursery school called him to replace a teacher on maternity leave. M. accepted the job conditionally, explaining that the children were too little for him. Despite the initial difficulties during the first school year (which he shared with a skilled female colleague), he warmed up to his job and stayed five years at the same school he had attended and hated when he was a child... maybe a 'compensating opportunity' to experience it again, this time, though, in an 'adult school pinafore'. He then received two job offers: a position as a temporary teacher at the public primary school (it was time for him to do what he had always dreamt of) and an unusual proposal to set up a company with three partners with two female colleagues from his summer projects to increase the educational options of a micro-crèche. M. took the second opportunity and has been an educator and a psychomotility therapist for 13 years.

Giovanni: from a factory to a crèche, through disability; from omnipotence to vulnerability, through self-awareness

Giovanni, who is 63 years old, comes from a family of humble origins and is the elder son of seven children. He remembers from his childhood his father entrusting him with the care of the whole family as he was the first-born. He spoke very highly of his father, who died 11 years ago, particularly about how he helped with the housework. His father was a meek person, whom G.'s mother (a housewife, of course) delegated with the discipline of their 'rascal' children. He preferred sending them to bed without having supper than giving them a beating, then asking his wife to make up for it. G. says his parents were very united and shared precise values such as the importance of

studying, being honest and polite. Of the time spent with his brothers and sisters, G. remembers the big farmyard where they used to play, also with their male and female friends. At home, the elder son and the elder daughter were equally in charge of the housework and care of the youngest children.

When G. was five years old, he went through a very hard time. He had to stay in a hospital, 200 kilometres from home, for two years due to a case of pleurisy. He remembers arriving at the hospital, sitting on the bed and staring at the glass windows for a long time without crying. This unique and, perhaps, dramatic way of growing up taught him to face separation in adulthood quite serenely, both in the case of loss and when he has had to say good-bye to children finishing the school cycle. When he returned home, he resumed primary school which he had started in the hospital with a frighteningly violent male teacher who beat the boys.

In junior secondary school he had better teachers: a very good female teacher of Italian language and, in particular, a male music teacher who was blind but very independent and fond of his job. When he was in the third year, there was another important biographical turning point. The village parish priest suggested that he go to a seminary. G. took the advice but had a negative experience which did not last long. The next year he returned home and enrolled in the teachers' training college. When he turned 15 he wanted to contribute financially to the family and gave up studying for four years to work in a printing house. Then, at the age of 30 he enrolled at a private school to become a childhood community assistant (today called a social service operator) where he met an eminent figure in the educational sector in his city who became a reference point and mentor for G.'s formative and working career when he could no longer bear his factory job.

With his parents' and his fiancée's support, G. resigned and embarked on a risky venture in the social sector which he had already been in contact with thanks to theatre projects and workshops. He worked for five years as a collaborator in a cooperative that would become very successful some time later. He was the first employee and in the beginning, his work mostly concerned rehabilitation: disabilities, drug addiction, psychic disorders and detention. In parallel to this work, he studied to become a professional educator.

Among the many deaths from drug addiction or suicide he had to face, one in particular left a mark on him as a turning point leading him to take care of very little children. Lorenzo had been given a sentence, but was deemed suitable for part-time detention, although because he suffered from a psychic disorder that was quite debilitating he could not work. G. spent hours with the boy everyday and they developed a strong bond. Every time he could, Lorenzo washed himself and shaved with a razor blade ('Why are you washing yourself, Lorenzo?'). He answered: 'Don't you see all this dirt? It is the prison

dirt'). Two years later, Lorenzo recovered and was quite well mentally and physically. "He was a nice big boy", who had been placed in foster care. One day - two months after being released - he died in his bath perhaps, due to a heart attack).

G. was very upset at the loss. The frustration at not having been able to save Lorenzo made him feel powerless, but also keenly aware that nobody is omnipotent. And that people cannot be 'saved' but only helped, supported, maybe making prevention.

In 1993 G. faced another crossroads. He entered a competition for the position of educator to care for very little children at the local crèche. G. will be retiring in a few months after 25 years of taking care of the 'seeds of humanity'. He changed his workplace only once, after 10 years, to move to another village and that day he cried.

Moreno: a frantic search for something... he may have found

Moreno is 49 years old. He is the youngest of three boys and was raised by his parents. He now lives in a city but he grew up in a green area where kids could play in the streets. His upbringing was rather traditional. His father was a trader and his mother helped him part-time, but mainly devoted herself to her children. M. remembers his mother as very loving, while he was a shy, introverted, silent, careful observer. His father, whose only day off was Sundays, was a playful man, but also a very serious and good parent. M.'s most significant family memories are of their Sunday outings spent fishing, picnicking or skiing.

M.'s mother died of a cancer when he was 17. Three years later he began taking care of their grandmother with his father and two brothers. M. began the primary caregiver because he was the only one who had enough time to take care of her. He was 26 years old when she died, after which he decided to leave home.

M. has only a few memories of nursery school: playing in the garden, the sand, the toys, the little houses and the wisteria. The first day of primary school M. had a big blue ribbon pinned to his black school pinafore, which his father, who was a little old-fashioned, wanted him to wear. Fortunately, M. managed to take it off when he saw he was the only one wearing it.

School was not so bad, but M. always got only 'passing marks'. In secondary school his performance deteriorated further as a result of his mother's disease and subsequent death. However, thanks to his teachers' help, M. managed to complete his studies and obtain his secondary school degree.

Among the educational figures outside his family, M. mentioned only women: a kind and motherly red-haired female teacher; an after-school teacher and a number of junior secondary school teachers. He did not mention any male coaches or educational figures. M. said he was too shy to do any sports or activities. The relationship with his

peers (in particular, those living in his own neighbourhood) was very good both during his childhood and later on. They played with a ball or a frisbee all together, males and females, in the open air, “endless matches in endless fields”. They were true friends. Most of them still live in the same quarter and M. often goes out with them. The relationship with his elder brother, who has always been very protective towards M., is not so close but it is very strong. He has a closer bond with his middle brother who he shared almost everything with until they were pre-teens.

When M. finished his third year of junior secondary school, his teachers recommended that he attend a technical school as he was, and still is, very good at drawing. His mother wanted him to go to an Art school but in the end M. enrolled at a chemical school, qualifying with pass marks. Being a teenager was not easy since M. was not fully developed. He was very short, with childlike hobbies such as doing his homework, playing football, riding his bicycles. He kept in the background until the third year, when he grew 30 centimetres taller. Among his teachers, the one with the most positive influence was the Italian teacher who stirred the students intellectually and very effectively by contextualizing notions and making examples taken from their everyday lives.

M.'s life then proceeded to get very dynamic, both from the educational and working point of view. First, he enrolled at the Faculty of Geology but attended only three times in six months, so he decided to look for a job. All his interviews at chemical industrial firms were unsuccessful. He then started to work as a petrol pump attendant, then as a glass maker, and eventually as a night-shift taxi driver in his brother's car. Two years later, he realized that he liked the job and bought his own licence which he used until the age of 29. He then met his wife-to-be (they still have no children) and decided to enrol at Brera Academy. While he passed the entry test he attended only the first year. It was simply too hard for him to study and work, so he chose a comics school. He liked it but it did not offer him any job prospects. He then enrolled at the Faculty of Architecture, where he could combine his passion for art with his drawing skills. He graduated with a degree in architecture at the age of 36 and, after taking the national exam, he worked in the private practice for six years during which time he felt as if he was not able to fully express his artistic talent.

One day he stumbled upon a leaflet advertising a three-year training course to become a teacher at a Steiner school. The part-time programme included painting, sculpting, music, and theatre and allowed him to work. After the course, students were asked to do one-year training in a nursery school. At the age of 43, M. began working in the school where he is still now. That was the turning point that, at

least up to now, helped him interrupt the frantic search for a professional direction which had tormented him for so many years.

Key Issues in the Educators/Teachers' Narratives

After asking them to speak about their lives, we asked the interviewees to discuss the actual work with the children.

With regard to care, nearly all of them came from quite traditional families: very busy fathers, often away for business, and mothers more involved in the housekeeping and the upbringing of the children, even when working outside the home. The importance of the father figure is partially 'retrieved' in some stories (in Moreno's story for example) from adolescence or adulthood. However, one of the most influential male figures in a number of stories is, above all, the grandfather. For example, Miro's maternal grandfather¹¹ played with him every day, but also took such good care of him that the news of his sudden death when Miro was five years old came as a great shock to him. Stefano's memories of his grandfather are linked to both the act of "pulling out a milk tooth" - which was always done by him to his grandson's satisfaction as there was a "body relationship" between them - and to the task of looking after the poultry.

As to what career they would choose after finishing school, none of the interviewees had ever thought of becoming an ECE educator/teacher. Although their stories are different, they have something in common: this job is an arrival point (for some of them even after turning 40 years old). Literally, for Giovanni, who will be retiring soon after working in completely different sectors for almost all his life, but also for Sandro, who took some time to understand what he really liked. Or for Matteo and Pino, who had always pictured themselves as teachers but never with children *under six* years old. Stefano wanted to be a confectioner while Moreno did four different jobs at least before becoming an educator.

There is an interesting convergence with the results of the above-mentioned Swedish research (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Also in that case most of the teachers in training in the sample came from different life and studying careers. This is connected with some key issues in the debate, such as the lack of social and economic recognition of this job, the stigmatization of care as a 'female' duty, but also the lack of male educators and teachers as mentors (Mistry & Sood, 2013), and shows that it is unlikely for a very young boy to dream of being an ECE teacher, and it is probably necessary to have life experiences - professional and personal - to be able to consider and, then, choose that career.

¹¹ Miro is another nursery school teacher we interviewed. His story is not reported in this essay for lack of space. All the stories will be included in a specific book to be published (Ottaviano & Persico, 2019/2020).

The question of the lack of role models in the extra-domestic context seems crucial. In their narratives, our interviewees mentioned lots of female educators or teachers they “had often been in love with”, but only Matteo and Miro have real good memories of a male teacher. For Matteo, in particular, the primary school male teacher was a model to imitate for a future career throughout all his adolescence. Stefano did not mention any teachers, except for “the Master” par excellence in Catholicism, Jesus Christ, an exemplary figure teaching important values he learned through parables, not through clergy people.

I loved Jesus from the very beginning: not for the way they spoke to me about him at the Sunday school, but for what he taught... words, parables, what was written in the Gospels. This was, undoubtedly, a very important figure in my life, at least till a certain point... [Stefano].

Giovanni did not have positive male role models at school either and before starting to work in a crèche he had lots of different jobs both in the socio-educational field and in other sectors. Choosing to be an ECE education/teacher was the ‘inevitable’ end of a long and, above all, human journey of experiencing vulnerability, but also impotence towards pain, that of being able to help young people stay out of trouble and avoid suffering. Moreno’s various formative and working experiences took him to the same arrival point: children, inhabitants and co-builders of a privileged place where you can experience freedom and counter-intuitive logics different from adults’ ones and also life and rhythms of thinking very far from the anxiety he suffered up to and over the age of 40.

After two weeks here, I felt very well... I was fed up with working on my computer all day. My choice was made after long pondering. I have gradually understood that what I do now is very rewarding and makes me a better man. It obliges me (this is not the right word) to change, to learn every day. The children teach me lots of things, more than what I teach them, and I am very happy now. I feel at home, and I would never change my job [Moreno].

The issue, mentioned by Giovanni, of frailty and vulnerability - a human, not a female characteristic and/or the stigma of specific ‘fragile lives’ - is very important for us, as it is linked to the subject of the body, emotions and violence (in particular, men’s violence). These are, in fact, the topics that - more than others - involve a necessary aspect of male identity, which - as the literature suggests - cannot be considered fixed and unmodifiable any longer (“hegemonic masculinity”, as Connell defines it), but changing and increasingly hybrid (Demetriou, 2001).

The body comes out in the narratives in different ways. It is explicitly mentioned by Matteo, who says he is shy and a little clumsy, and remembers taking a bath as his first body care experience.

The strongest emotional memory I have is taking a bath because we had a small bathroom. I liked it so much and my mum gave it to me on Saturday afternoon. She switched on the little heater if it was cold, ran the water profusely and then poured Avon bath foam into the bath... It was really a good time. I did not like the water in my eyes, in my ears... but I liked the smell of the bath foam, and Mum washing me with a sponge... [Matteo].

The body is mentioned again when Matteo speaks about his theatrical experiences, which had a deep influence on his development: a tool that probably allowed him to learn and make use of different means of communication, including the body, also “to obviate the shyness and the hypersensitivity that made him rather unpopular among his male peers” (even as he was appreciated by his female friends). The memory of his pre-teen awkwardness comes out again when Matteo tells us about the first time he had to change a baby which he solved by asking for help from a female colleague. The experience also made him choose to specialize in psychomotility, as if he wanted to search and face his limits, as well as to find an effective means of communication for interacting with subjects still unable to speak.

Giovanni entered in contact with his body through the theatre too, but also through bioenergetics. These experiences made him realize he needed to entrust himself to others, unburdening himself - at least for a while - of the responsibility his father had given him when he was a child thereby creating space for his own vulnerability and weakness, which he needed in order to be able to embrace the others' ones.

I have brought with me stories and experiences of body contact I had in the past through both the theatre and bioenergetics. The female therapist guided us through exercises of visualization... I told a story and she said: ‘Your father must have invested you with a lot of responsibility; I see that from your chest because it leans forward...’. She made me lie down (she was a bit sturdy...) and she got on my chest with her feet, standing there for fifteen minutes! I could not bear her, so I made her get down. She said: ‘What were you waiting for?... Now, look around and choose the person you think is the weakest’. There was a girl who cried all the time; I said: ‘That one!’. ‘Now you turn your back to her and, when you are ready, you let yourself go’. It took me 17 minutes to be able to do it!!! Then, there were the theatre workshops... I understood what it meant to be with children and bring the body into play... [Giovanni].

Maybe, the sort of ‘traditional’ male Giovanni was in the first part of his life ‘disintegrated’ to make room for a man really capable of care and acceptance. As he recognized and accepted his weakness and his limits, and maybe also because the five-year-old child, who had been far from home for many months and had never cried, at the age of 50 was finally moved when he stopped working in his first crèche.

Hegemonic masculinity and its cages played a key role in Paolo’s life too, partially delaying the realization of his educational vocation which he had had since he was very young. According to what he told us the socio-pedagogic secondary school was, in fact, too female, therefore unable to offer him the identity model he thought necessarily should come from the ‘herd’. In the end, his original vocation prevailed and it was only thanks to his school-leaving certificate that he could consolidate his economic and working position and, perhaps, also gave him the necessary formative experience to be both a teacher and a mindful father.

Body contact and masculinity cages evoke another key issue in the debate on male care: the shadow of paedophilia (unfortunately, often associated with homosexuality). Although none of the narratives contains any reference to such episodes, almost all the interviewees spoke about parents being very frightened when they see a male educator in a crèche, or about the allusions coming from other people, which are also mentioned in international research (Mistry & Sood, 2013; Joseph & Wright 2016; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). It is as if the association between masculinity and (sexual) violence were taken for granted and justified; almost as if there was no way to avoid the stigma of the assaulting and/or perverted male.

As soon as the parents knew there would be a male educator (I was not there), a mother said: ‘I do not want a man to be close to my baby girl.’ So the coordinator answered her: ‘When the educator comes, you can speak to him... so you can express all your perplexities’. ‘Men do not take care of children, women do. And then, he will be touching my baby girl...’. She thought a male educator was unable to take care of a little child, but she also alluded to something else... [Giovanni].

The parents’ astonishment (and the related fears) when they see a man in ECE is also the not so unexpected result of the almost absolute lack of male educators/teachers in that context (see the statistical data in footnote 4) and highlights a vicious circle: how can a man ‘face’ and, above all, wish to do a ‘female job’, done only by women? How can a boy picture himself performing a caring task if in all his life he has always seen, only or mainly, women doing it? Without widespread models, how can it be possible both for men and women to get out of gender cages? (Ottaviano & Mentasti, 2015).

We do not wish to take part in the often sterile debate on the alleged need for a female and a male figure in children’s development; instead, we believe

it is absolutely necessary to offer the same opportunities to both men and women, respecting their own personalities and their wishes. Moreover, parents' initial astonishment or mistrust is often naturally overcome during the first days in the crèche or at the first parent-educator class meeting.

At first, parents are a bit hesitant... I have been asked: 'Do *you* change the babies?'. 'Yes, of course!...' Maybe, there was a bit of initial confusion, but during the fitting in phase or in the first year it did not happen again... One goes to a crèche and, obviously, thinks there is a female educator, instead: 'What? There is a man!...' [Sandro].

In the narratives of our interviewees, their female colleagues always appear to be very happy to work with men taking care of even very little children, maybe for their skills (they can move heavy objects, repair the furniture, play in a "more physical way"...) or, maybe, as somebody conjectures, for males' "peculiar energy"¹².

In contrast, it seems that the coordinators of the Cooperatives Miro has applied to are not as untroubled. Several times Miro has urged the coordinators to grant his request to pass from the nursery school to the crèche but his requests have always been rejected for reasons that are unclear.

Our conclusion... as a beginning

Obviously, our research on male educators/teachers and care is only a first step, and much still needs to be explored about masculinity in Italy. Men are urged to change although - or, maybe, just because of that - the end of patriarchy is more of a narrative than a matter of fact: the males who move beyond traditional models are considered "breakers" (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017), exploring new possibilities, proud to do so but burdened with a heavy legacy as hunters and breadwinners from time immemorial (see also Cross, 2002). 'Men in movement' or, also, 'ethical cells' (Lizzola, 2009) who, proceeding forward through trial and error, making mistakes, working hard and learning... show how complex all men are/can be, although they still do not know it. Our field work - as well as other research - show it: the males interviewed are not aliens or brand new men without any trace of hegemonic masculinity but people who necessarily combine tradition with innovation and have grown stronger through experimentation. They carry a heavy burden but they are able to move beyond it.

Just like Sandro, a football fan, who most of all likes playing but also helping little children with daily activities such as eating or going to the bathroom, without making any distinction between 'female' and 'male'

¹² This could be the starting point for an interesting new research on the real reasons for such a welcoming attitude and the possible stereotypes related to it.

tasks. Similarly, Matteo, who suffers from performance anxiety, lives up to his female colleagues' expectations (a male educator or teacher performs masculinity by taking up a normative role and embodying the authoritative figure), also and above all showing tenderness and care. Giovanni, who - being the elder son - had to take on significant responsibilities very early on, and then learn to cope with the frustration of feeling powerless and, after thinking of changing the world (of suffering people), decided to start anew with little children. The same happened to Pino, who struggled at length to recognize his educational vocation because he needed to feel he was part of a male context, but then, ultimately surrendered to himself. Miro persists in fighting against his male employers' prejudice but recognizes it is difficult to experience role equality within the family context.

After looking for something new every day and trying to find his own way sometimes a little compulsively, Moreno was finally able to recognize and seize the opportunity to grow and be in harmony with children. Just like Stefano, who entered, almost by accident, the ECE sector when he was still after working in a confectioner's shop.

These are day-to-day acts and choices that heal wounds. Being close to precious little children to face one's own vulnerabilities - which all of us have although in different ways - ("being without a father", "uneasy with one's body", "with unsatisfied delusions of omnipotence", "with an inexhaustible thirst for novelty") and, maybe, also social ones: at a time of crisis (of masculinity, as well), is this not a great resource?

Experiencing the frailty, the tenderness, but also the 'smaller power' of little children could be a good way to stop opposing freedom to bondage, independence to dependence... to live something we could sum up in one word, "autokoēnonia"¹³ (Hoagland, 1988), the synthesis of opposites, autonomy within the community, independence within the bond, interdependence: on our own, but with the others. Something that is not so different from the proposal for a responsible welfare or a generative welfare (Giaccardi & Magatti, 2014; Cesareo, 2017). In the last few decades, in the western world they have tried to implement, not always successfully, equal opportunities policies designed to help women obtain positions usually considered to be for men; but what has been thought and done to give men the opportunity to picture themselves performing a caring task? Besides allowing individuals to express all the aspects of their humanity (strength but also frailty, empathy, tenderness, body emotions...), we would bring into play a different idea of humanity and different models of relations between human beings, men and women: more equal, mutual, Gylanic (Eisler, 1989).

¹³ This neologism is made from the Greek word αὐτός (self) and κοινωνέω (to participate). Κοινωνία refers to the bond and the relationship, based on solidarity and participation, among human beings.

There is still a lot to do. Statistical data is insufficient, interest in masculinity as a specific research area is recent and ECE is still mainly entrusted to women. However, we think it is absolutely necessary to focus on this issue by listening to those - still few - males who, deviating from the norm more or less consciously, are moving towards a world we have been dreaming of: a world, also professional, in which people gain access not because of alleged gender peculiarities or settled traditions, but thanks to personal qualities, wishes and specific life experiences. We believe that implementing care thoughts and actions, experiencing our own and someone else's limits and frailties make us aware of what being human really is, and highlights the need for us to be together, to share what we have and to collaborate, discouraging any imperative, hierarchical, violent and domineering dynamics. Our research deals with a world that may seem utopian, but an imagined (maybe, already inhabited by somebody) utopia is partially already here.

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