

Childhood, Education and Gender. The construction of gender culture in classroom, after-school and family settings

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Editorial¹

1. In the name of the sons and of the daughters. Childhood at the centre of educational discourse

“Now at school we cannot do anything anymore. One year at school we asked the children to help clearing the table after eating by simply putting their plate on the cart, and a parent complained to the head teacher saying that we made the children work! And, with the books on gender, we know it's the same... So, you know what

¹ This paper is the joint result of the two authors' work. However, section 1 is to be attributed to Caterina Satta and section 2 to Irene Biemmi.

my colleague and I are doing at school? We are taking some of these books and reading them like we do with any other book. Without putting any labels or making any claims about “gender education courses”... Oh, I want to see if they say something to me! “[A preschool teacher].

This brief excerpt contains one of the key elements of the relationship between education, gender education, and children: childhood is increasingly becoming an object of a symbolic “battle” between adults, between different adult cultures (e.g., “teachers” against “parents” and vice versa, parents against coaches or free-time educators, parents against parents, etc.) in conflict over who has the primacy in educating children and is better able to protect them, recognize their needs, and defend their rights (Oakley 1994). This intersection has been increasingly configured as a “moral question” (Cook 2017). Speaking to (and of the) children, watching them, interacting with them, analyzing them, doing research with and on them, even buying something for them means crossing a field full of not only educational questions but also moral ones regarding the appropriateness, rightness and quality, of any product, or service, for a child. Is it right or wrong? Will it be detrimental or not? Is it suitable for a child of this age? Is it a girl’s or a boy’s toy? The relationship with children does not consider any form of neutralism but moral stances, often antithetical yet united by all being proclaimed and practiced “on behalf” of children. Experts, teachers, doctors, parents, politicians, and even marketers and advertisers tend to legitimize themselves in public speech as supporters of children, actively involved in promoting their wellbeing and in safeguarding their *moral integrity* (Cook 2009). Morality thus assumes different connotations for boys and for girls. For the former, parental dilemmas revolve more around the right dose of masculinity to be imparted and tolerated, where the threshold not to be exceeded is exactly what defines their clear difference “from females”. For the latter, it is not so much a fear of gender encroachment that permeates the upbringing practices of adults (indeed, girls are freer to play “male” games or to experiment with less feminizing clothing), but rather those that adultify them (the “little girl” who becomes a woman) (Jenkins 1998; Rotundo 1993; Walkerdine 1996). In all this rhetorical moral confusion, is assumed the child’s sacredness, his/her pure, angelic, and innocent nature which is translated into a

clear-cut adult attempt at *containing*, horizontally and vertically, any possible deviation in boys and girls from the role and image of de-sexualized infants that the society has stuck on them (Holland 2004; James, Jenks and Prout 2002; Kincaid 1992). The absolutization of this fact and the naturalization of the child (as well as of the maternal bond) end up concealing childhood's social dimension, its "nature" as a socio-cultural construct that changes in time and space, and the degree and inequitable positioning of power that individuals occupy within the gender and generational structure (Alanen 2009; Alanen and Mayall 2001; Mayall 2002). As stated by the American sociologist Viviana Zelizer, the transformation of adults' attitudes towards children is the result of a recent cultural process of "sacralization" of their lives:

Whereas in the 19th century, it was accepted that children had a market value, the new normative ideal, according to which children are exclusively emotional and moral resources, has excluded any instrumental and fiscal considerations. The primacy of children's intrinsic qualitative value has been affirmed with the prohibition of all sorts of quantitative and immediately monetary assessments (Zelizer 2009, 46-47).

Given that they are objects of inestimable worth, «economically 'useless'» and «emotionally 'priceless'» (ibid. 46), children have become the supreme good to be protected at the centre of conflicts between various interest groups.

Therefore, it is within this framework that we must include many of the current problems related to gender education – all at the centre of the articles in this special issue – that like *moral panics* dominate the political and media debate, as well as the daily micro-relations within families and educational institutions dealing with childhood.

As the main agents of socialization, families and schools have traditionally been considered the first areas in developing gender identity in boys and girls. If, on the one hand, families represent a breeding ground for the most traditional views of males and females, on the other, they have taken on new configurations as a result of an increased awareness of childhood's value (Zelizer 1987) and of a "new parenting culture" (Furedi 2002; Hays 1996; Lee *et al.* 2014), based on increased attention to children and to an in-

ternal renegotiation of the gender and generational roles of all its members. In other words, sometimes the family setting can become one of the places in which, also on the basis of different socio-economic and cultural factors, a stereotyped gender culture is actively *deconstructed* and then *reconstructed* as one more respectful of differences.

At the same time, school is a place where to experiment with and encourage projects regarding “educational differences” aimed to create paths of consciousness concerning the themes of male violence, bullying, and gender stereotypes, in addition to promoting emotional education and respect for differences. They are probably minority experiences compared to a dominant scholastic model that reproduces stereotypical feminine and masculine imagery. Nevertheless, in the current climate of an “anti-gender” crusade against the introduction of any form of critical knowledge that exposes the power dimension inherent in gender relations by deconstructing the naturalizing order between the sexes (Garbagnoli 2014), they constitute an albeit varied space of resistance to a discourse that neutralizes and stigmatizes any discourse of promotion of differences.²

Non-formal and informal educational settings (play, sport, and recreation) must also be added to families and schools. These are settings where boys and girls spend much of their free time weaving relationships among peers and equally important ones with adults to construct their awareness of gender differences and of their own identity (Kay 2007; Kremer-Sadlik e Kim 2007; Messner 2000; Schänzel e Carr 2015).

However, the question of the relationship between gender and childhood has been addressed mainly from a point of view *adult-centered*, in other words, taking into consideration the adults’ perspective and giving their actions almost total importance with respect to the construction of gender identity in childhood. Moreover, it also ignores the role played by peer groups and their forms of horizontal socialization and, first and foremost, neglects the same capacities of boys and girls to *appropriate information* from the adult world and *actively contribute* to cultural production and change (Corsaro 1997; Thorne 1993). Children do not simplistically parrot the adult culture or are passive targets, but individuals with agency, i.e. capable of interpreting

² In particular, see the discussion produced by the national network of associations “*Educare alle differenze*” (<http://www.scosse.org/educare-alle-differenze-rete-nazionale/>) for a broad overview of the initiatives that involve schools themselves as public spaces to be supported and through which to build a culture that respects differences beginning in early childhood.

and reconstructing new and different content from what is transmitted to them by the media and the main agents of socialization, and which is conveyed through all these *entertainment* and *edutainment* products (games, video games, books, etc.) (Buckingham, Scanlon 2005) targeted at them.

Yet, despite the important knowledge acquired on boys and girls highlighted since the 1970s by the new approach to the study of childhood, called the new sociology of childhood (Satta 2012), the concept of socialization, at the heart of many of the essays presented here, is predominantly interpreted as a one-way process, from adults towards children. As Allison James very clearly underscores, we are witnessing a transformation of the pivotal concept of social reproduction and change: “the concept has shifted from being concerned with the way in which ‘society’ is reproduced or changed to a much more individualized and narrow focus on explaining and changing people’s social conduct” (2013, 2). In other words, socialization is still something that *is done* to boys and girls rather than being interpreted as a relational process to which they give their own meaning through their contextualized, biographical experiences. The importance of this new way of considering and studying children should not be interpreted as merely the acquisition of an additional point of view (even that of children) but understood in the antideterministic and procedural potential that it reveals. Understanding anew the experiences of girls and boys in socialization processes and recognizing that they are interacting agents who, even starting from a subordinate position, can actively reverse, transform, and re-indicate the value-related and normative content of educational practices, we go beyond binarism and educational determinism (risky or marginalized childhoods correspond to unsuitable parents and educators) in order to observe and understand in its complexity and procedures, from the indefinite outcomes, the becoming adults of girls and boys starting from their present (Satta 2017).

To understand what is happening in the field of gender education, we need to broaden our focus to the different contexts of everyday life in childhood, the different actors involved (children especially and adults, both parents and teachers or workers involved in an educational role), and the relations between adults and children.

The authors of the sociological and anthropological essays here presented (Bainotti and Torrioni, Crivellaro, Mercuri, Tarabusi, Ottaviano and Mentasti) focus mainly on

the worlds of school and family that are at the centre of this special issue, (with specific attention also to the role of advisory and maternal-child services in the Tarabusi essay). In those by Crivellaro and Tarabusi, the themes of gender and parenting are intertwined with that of migration, highlighting their intersections. At the same time, all the essays are the result of qualitative research in which the voices of girls and boys have been *translated* by the adults' words. We do not have a child's point of view on the educational processes at school and in the family but the adults' representations of children, of the socialization processes, and of their educational role. Boys and girls are therefore at the centre of this educational discourse but, in reality, adults project their voice on them in a kind of hermeneutical ventriloquism. If, on the one hand, this is the mirror of a methodological approach that in Italian social research still struggles to include them in their research (Belotti 2013), on the other hand, it also offers us rich research material on the type of adult-child relationships, characterized by great adult reflectivity and little intergenerational dialectic. It should however be emphasized that childhood is also an imaginary, differentiated for males and females, and that the way in which it is conceived, depicted, and described influences both adult behavior with children and the same experience that they have in everyday life (James and James 2004). Therefore, it is for this reason that the representations that drive the actions of fathers and mothers, teachers and educators, in the research presented here, assume a central importance in the study of the world of children, offering us an insight into the adults' knowledge, values, desires and fears on which the symbolic, spatial and material frames of the life of boy and girls are built at a national level.

In this monographic issue, the article by Lucia Bainotti and Paola Maria Torrioni *Che genere di socializzazione? Crescere in famiglia: percorsi di costruzione delle identità femminili e maschili (What Kind of Gender Socialization? Growing Up Within The Family: Paths of Social Construction of Female and Male Identities)* is characterized by an integrated, procedural approach to gender socialization in the family by analyzing its pervasiveness and potentiality to produce, reproduce, and renew "gender identities and roles". It does so with a special focus on the "mechanisms" and parenting practices in heterosexual families with children of either sex between the ages of 18 and 25 inclusive, by collecting information on the perspectives of both actors. Through a retrospec-

tive analysis by the young women and men with respect to how their parents raised them and any differences in treatment (especially with regards to the management of domestic and extra-domestic daily life such as permissions, going out, and clothing), the authors highlight the continuous and discontinuous elements with respect to the gender models transmitted by their own parents. The results show small revisions and “passive movements”, with respect to the stereotypical visions and gender expectations object of family socialization but within a cultural substratum still strongly permeated by traditional values and limited conceptions of the masculine and feminine.

Family socialization is also dealt with in Eugenia Mercuri’s article *Fathers, daughters and sons. The construction of gender and parenthood in father-child relationships*. However, it focuses more on construction of gender and fatherhood in the father-child (son and daughter) relationship. Integrating a prosperous and new line of studies on the role of fathers in the care and parenting of children, Mercuri has investigated the mechanisms by which gender is constructed analyzing, on the one hand, the ways in which new fathers interact with their sons and daughters, and, on the other hand, how the children’s gender contributes to the construction of fatherhood. The indicators taken into consideration in this construction were childcare practices, a retrospective re-interpretation of the desire regarding the future child’s sex and parenting expectations, the meanings attributed to their new social role, also relating to the change in self-perception as a result of the birth of a son or a daughter and their models and sources of inspiration in constructing their own image of fatherhood. The collected data reveal that a reflection and some implications on gender emerge more in the fathers of daughters. The gender difference between father and daughter creates a discontinuity in the apparently linear path of a man who has become a father who, as if it were an unexpected deviative event, demands a greater effort to rework and reconstruct his own identity as a man and a father who cannot automatically and unthinkingly draw on his own biographical experience. However, in their interpretation of parenting skills as closely related to their male biography, the fathers interviewed seem to produce an essentialist view of gender and reproduce the same male and female stereotypes to which they have been socialized.

The article by Francesca Crivellaro *Infanzie allo specchio. Bambini e bambine, rela-*

zioni educative e pratiche di cura nelle rappresentazioni di insegnanti, educatrici e genitori di origini straniera (Childhoods in the Mirror. Children, Educational Relationships, and Care Practices in Migrant Parents' and Childcare Professionals' Representations) is also about families and childhood as seen through the eyes of educators, nursery school teachers, and migrant parents. In fact, the essay analyzes the gender construction of migrant parenting, and of childhood, placing the family outside the intimate sphere and highlighting the stresses and expectations of the external context that seem to be even more pressing for migrant parents. In the full anthropological tradition, the article shows how, through the study of “the other”, emerge very clearly the assumptions and the data taken for granted relating to childhood, to the differences between boys and girls and the role of education that inform the care and educational practices of parents and educators in the society of arrival. Not unlike the results shown by the other essays on Italian families, it seems that this research shows instances of modernization and deviation with respect to the more traditional gender roles alternate with visions aimed at confirming a substantial asymmetry of power between men and women with the main difference that fathers and especially mothers of foreign origin must justify through their parenting skills that they are also good citizens.

Federica Tarabusi's essay *Quando nasce una madre. Cura, servizi e maternità nelle esperienze delle donne migranti: un approccio etnografico (When a Mother Comes to Life. Care, Childcare and Healthcare Services and Motherhood from Migrant Women's Experiences: An Ethnographic Approach)* instead chooses to address the issue of gender education in childhood through a rich, in-depth analysis of the construction of parenting role by migrant women from sub-Saharan and equatorial African countries who are living in Italy and are under the constant supervision of healthcare and educational services (family counseling centres, obstetrics-gynecology departments of some hospitals, childcare services and schools). Based on an ethnographic research on experiences – from pregnancy to their children entering school – of care, conflict, and negotiation with respect to these services during their journey of “birth” and “growth” as mothers who in their turn, would bear, look after, and raise future citizens in their country of immigration, the article offers a multifaceted picture of motherhood “that challenges the categories and dichotomies that we usually put in the field to think and describe it (tradi-

tion/modernity; public/private, continuity/discontinuity)". Reporting the various stages and different contexts of being a mother, but also the subjective positioning of these women who are supported by their migratory path, simultaneously getting community and institutional knowledge about body care, gender roles in the couple, rearing sons and daughters, the results have revealed the presence of "parental and parenting models that are placed critically and alternatively towards the previous generations but also towards the social and gender norms dominant in Italian society".

This first section of the editorial ends with a focus on the school environment with Cristiana Ottaviano and Laura Mentasti's essay *Differenti sguardi cattolici sull'educazione di genere nella scuola italiana: chiusure identitarie o aperture di nuove sfide?* (*Different Catholic Views on Gender Education in Italy: Identity Closures or Breaks to New Challenges Ahead?*). It reconstructs the various stages of the "no gender" mobilization, developed in reaction of the circulation of DDL no. 1680 that contained a proposal to introduce gender education courses in Italian schools, highlighting the actions and the discourse produced within Catholic associations and parties against what has been ideologically constructed and defined by them as "gender ideology" (GI). The essay reveals how much schools have returned to being the field of ideological construction of the nation (Soldani and Turi 1993, Scotto di Luzio 2007) and girls and boys are the subjects – the bodies – where the power struggles and statements on others' rights are played out in their name but without their voice. Moreover, it enriches the phenomenon's framework by providing an account of the positions of those Catholic associations and exponents who have distanced themselves from the "anti-gender" movement and in turn seek to deconstruct a discussion that re-naturalizes and essentializes gender differences.

2. Growing up on parallel tracks: schools and gender inequality

Stereotypes and prejudices, including those regarding gender, are the result of social categorizations aimed at dividing individuals into groups, distinguishing one's own group (*ingroup*) from external groups (*outgroup*) (Allport, 1954). The most direct consequences of this categorization are "inter-categorical differentiation" and "intra-

categorical assimilation”: individuals are prompted to exalt differences between members of external groups and to overestimate the homogeneity of their own group (Brown, 1995). Social categorization is a cognitive process that is an inescapable part of human existence: the world is too complex of an environment for an individual to be able to survive without finding some basic strategy to simplify and order it. Gender categories, like all other social categories, thus have a social use inasmuch as they effectively perform a series of functions: they reduce the material complexity; they order behavior offering a basis for anticipating future events and for the determination of objectives; they guide attention filtering information; and they structure generalizations and interpretations (Martin, Halverson, 1981).

The need to spread a differentiated system of behavior based on biological sex is therefore intrinsic to society: gender schema organize knowledge of the social reality. The fact that we perceive sexual differences of male and female roles to be socially inevitable, as intrinsic to the natural order of things, is the most evident proof of the fact that it rests on a “naturalized social construction” (Bourdieu, 1999), absorbed from earliest infancy.

The formation of gender roles occurs so early that its effects are already manifested in the first years of life, precisely because of this there is a risk of their mistakenly being considered “innate”. The split between male and female destinies is shaped from early infancy when males and females begin to weave different biographical paths in the family. This is the result of small but continuous daily choices that gradually channel the course of the one group and that of the other towards different, ever more divergent, routes.

Gianini Belotti writes:

To produce individuals who are, to a certain degree, agreeable to pre-packaged destiny, which begins even before birth, it is necessary to resort to a suitable conditioning system. The first element of differentiation, which rises to value of symbol, is the color of the baby clothes prepared for the unborn child [...]. The more these models are differentiated for males and females, the more the result appears to be guaranteed. This is why, beginning in early infancy, everything that could make

them similar is eliminated and everything that could make them different is highlighted (Gianini Belotti, 1973, 25-27).

If the decisions made by the adult world with regard to the education of sons and daughters are based on stereotypes that have already been tested by tradition and are automatically re-perpetuated, the boys and girls paths will be separated in the simplest and most natural way. For every crossroads there is a sign that clearly indicates the direction to take. These crossroads do not necessarily coincide with the big decisions, on the contrary, often they are passed without being noticed, almost with indifference: getting pink baby clothes for the baby girl and blue for the baby boy becomes a simple routine act, buying a doll for a girl and a little car for a boy, or even reprimanding a girl for being too active and encouraging a boy to be too active; deriding the little boy who cries because he is behaving like a “femminuccia” (sissy) and at the same time accepting it as natural for the little girl to express her feelings and vulnerability (Biemmi 2010, 32).

In childhood, pink and light blue represent two extremely effective, functional markers for gender maintenance. This rigorously binary order does not make provision for trespassing and thus cages not only females, but also, and perhaps especially, males (Abbatecola and Stagi 2017). At the center of it all is a different system of social expectations that we adult men and women put into action every day so that the boys and girls gradually conform to the image that we have of one group or the other (Ruspini, 2009). This slow but relentless training in female and male roles manifests as early as the entry to the kindergarten, around three or four years of age. At this age the boys and girls have already identified with their roles and perfectly understand the behavior that is appropriate for their sexes.

Who are the actors entering the field to direct this characterization of a childhood so rigidly polarized on male/female dualism? Despite the multiplication of training and socialization agencies – peer groups, sports groups, associations, and above all, the mass media, families and schools continue to maintain their role as agencies in charge of the education and formal socialization of new generations. Paradoxically, it is precisely in this age of “educational polycentrism” that the role of traditional agencies should be strengthened. if possible, schools, together with families, should take on an interlocuto-

ry role, of mediation and orientation «aimed above all at the acquisition of filtering criteria as well as the analysis of codes and messages in an attempt to find and give meaning to a communicative experience that could instead dissolve into insignificance and indeterminacy if governed only by the power of the media» (Besozzi 1993, 176).

Schools and families are also the first areas in which the paths of identity training for girls and boys are activated. The school especially highlights experimental and promotional experiences with “gender education and affectivity” projects (Gamberi, Maio and Selmi, 2010), which however remain minority compared to a dominant school model that, instead of acting as an engine of social change tends to repeat, and thus legitimize, a highly deficient and limiting image of females and males for both girls and boys. In Italy since the early 1980s, with a special emphasis in the 1990s, some education experts (Covato and Leuzzi 1989; Erlicher and Mapelli 1991; Bolognari 1991; Ulivieri 1995) have tried to bring into schools those issues emerging from the neo-feminist debate of the 1970s wondering how a school can promote in class a new way of conceiving the relationship between the sexes, based on the idea of equality, while respecting and making the most of differences. Unfortunately, to date, we must note that the issue of gender equality has not been well assimilated by our educational system and by our faculties, which continue mainly to reproduce a sexist and conservative culture (Biemmi 2009).

There is thus a strong need to introduce teaching activity in schools that will promote more equitable educational models and allow us to overcome the sexist stereotypes that still strongly limit the “field of thinkability” (Biemmi and Leonelli, 2016, 71) – dreams, life plans, and self-perception – of boys and girls as well as young men and women. The educational work to be done is truly wide-ranging. On the one hand, it is necessary to critically revisit scholastic programs, textbooks, and teaching subjects, i.e., the whole culture handed down to make women’s contributions visible in the various disciplines (Sapegno, 2014). On the other hand, it is essential that male and female teachers are equipped with the critical tools necessary to implement a culture of equality in their daily teaching practice. In this project to generally reconsider “teaching”, one cannot think of isolating the gender variable. Instead, it must continually intersect and provide an opportunity to interact with other inequality-producing variables, first those related to so-

cio-cultural background (Bonini 2012; Romito, 2016; Ballarino and Checchi, 2006) and then the intercultural one (Bolognesi and Lorenzini, 2017). Intercultural and gender studies lend themselves particularly to a joint analysis aimed at exploring that complex set of practices, attitudes, and beliefs that produce processes of discrimination and inferiorization. Although two specific systems of differentiation and domination, sexism and racism are rooted in the same interpretative paradigm of reality based on the “naturalization” of socially constructed relationships (Campani 2000; Rivera, 2010).

The contributions contained in this monographic issue have questioned, in various ways, the relationship between nature and culture. They are united by the desire to unmask, both through historical-theoretical considerations and empirical research, the false naturalness of roles and characteristics that are evidently the product of historically entrenched social practices. Some of these essays focus on schools – the contributions by Magazzeni, Scierri, Lorenzini, Cardellini, Guerrini – highlighting, as a whole, the gaps in our school system as regards the actual creation of a way of learning that is oriented toward gender equality and non-discrimination. In her contribution *Sartine e cacciatori. Modelli scolastici di genere nel lungo Ottocento e nel Novecento (Seamstresses and hunters. School models of gender in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)*, Loredana Magazzeni has analyzed the arrangements and contents of some reading books for post-Unification elementary schools, with particular reference to teacher training schools. As Magazzeni points out, the aim of these books was “the moral and physical training” of pupils directed at guaranteeing the unitary state “a portrait of the perfect citizen” – hence a clear division by gender of curricula for females and males. In girls' schools, the bulwarks on which the skills necessary to fulfill a young woman's primary social task for young women were founded on housekeeping, hygiene, and tailoring: “women's” work. Instead, the boys' schools used a military model based on physical discipline, strength training, and learning how to use weapons – hence, “seamstresses” and “hunters”. Despite the formal barriers that forced males and females into different studies and separate classes, it makes one think that, after a century and a half, the division of female and male courses of study are still so dramatically current. One need think only of the low number of male students in the educational and nursing sectors and of female students in the scientific-technological sector. If proof were still

needed, this shows that symbolic-cultural barriers are just as powerful and constrictive as legal ones.

Building these cultural barriers, these impassable borders between genders, has – unfortunately – been schools themselves. Not those of the late 19th century, but the school of 2000. Irene Scierri in her essay *Stereotipi di genere nei sussidiari di lettura per la scuola primaria*, (*Gender Stereotypes in Primary-School Reading Books*), focuses on what can be considered in all respects the driving force of the sexist imagery spread in classrooms still today: textbooks. This imagery is cultivated by housewife-mothers confined in closed-private spaces (usually inside the home); free, adventurous males move freely among a thousand professional opportunities and possibilities (while women are relegated mostly to educational and nursing jobs); boys perpetually in action; and girls praised for their physical appearance, rather than for their intellectual gifts. It has been clear for twenty years that Italian textbooks must change radically, i.e., since the Polite project (equal opportunity in textbooks) at the end of the 1990s outlined guidelines for school publishers so that the textbooks were free from sexist legacies and stereotypes. More recent indications can also be found in the *Extraordinary Action Plan against Sexual and Gender Violence* (Law 119/2013), where the objective is to “promote, within the curricula of schools at all levels, the education for non-discriminatory relationships towards women, sensitizing and training students, and preventing violence against women and gender discrimination, including through the development of these themes in textbooks”. Scierri's research was conducted on a large sample of primary school books published until 2014 and does not show any signs of positive change.

We will continue to monitor textbooks but, in the meantime, we must ask the following questions. Are the teachers currently working in schools aware of the gender stereotypes that found in textbooks and are they able to decode them together with their pupils? Can teachers take on the role of a change agent capable of promoting equal opportunity principles in schools? In *Educare alla parità di genere a scuola. Verso la costruzione di buone prassi: un'esperienza nel territorio fiorentino* (*Teaching Gender Equality at School. Towards the construction of good practice: an experience in the Florentine territory*), Valentina Guerrini asked these questions and reports the result of a project carried out in some primary schools in Florence with the objective of getting not only

teachers and headmasters to consider and become sensitized to the widespread gender roles and stereotypes in the domestic and professional spheres but also male and female students. The research has opened up a setting in which lights and shadows alternate. On the one hand, it comes out that school rarely deal with gender-equality issues and that, on average, teachers have a superficial knowledge. On the other hand, when informal paths are initiated, there is a positive response by both the teaching staff and pupils (especially by the girls) who are involved and interested in examining the issue.

Margherita Cardellini's contribution offers a positive sign in *Il «genere» nelle parole di bambine e bambini di scuola primaria in Italia: tra stereotipi ed esperienze* ("Gender" in the Words of Primary School Girls and Boys in Italy: Stereotypes and experiences"). Starting from an intersectional approach, she conducted research directed at investigating representations of girls and boys in the last two years of primary school vis-à-vis two "elements of individual difference": gender and skin color. The presentation of photographs to girls and boys as part of a focus group to talk about gender identity, gender stereotypes, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. It highlighted a markedly – and perhaps "unexpectedly" – thoughtful knowledge regarding "gender" issues.

Stefania Lorenzini moves from the key juncture between gender and interculture. In her essay Her paper, *Un'analisi educativa – interculturale e di genere – di esiti di una ricerca in Emilia-Romagna. Il punto di vista di genitori e insegnanti su bambine/i e famiglie di origine straniera* (*An Intercultural and Gender Educational Analysis of the Results of Research in Emilia-Romagna. The parent and teacher perspectives on foreign-born girls/boys and their families*), presents the findings of an interdisciplinary research that involved significant adult figures for children aged 0-6 years: parents, grandparents, educators, and teachers from the Emilia-Romagna Region. The study started from the assumption that "research on gender in the educational field must focus attention on the growth contexts in childhood, the adults responsible for their upbringing and education as well as emotionally important, their somewhat informed ideas regarding gender, the implicit and explicit messages directed at the youngest, and the relationships and educational practices that they make concrete". Despite some of the survey results highlighting differences in the ways of understanding the roles and characteristics of men and women in foreign-born families compared to families of Italian

origin, Lorenzini is careful in drawing conclusions that would risk “generalizing” certain dissimilarities, thereby confirming stereotypes and prejudices. Nevertheless, according to the author, this risk must not lead to undervaluing a solid piece of data that emerges constantly: the hypervaluation of males against the devaluation of females (women and girls) that is more accentuated in certain cultures.

This result leads us to the heart of a thorny question. If, from an analytical point of view, we can only consider the category of “gender” as a binary construct that implies a joint and parallel analysis of the social construction processes of masculinity and femininity, we cannot conceal the fact that binary thought, which has always opposed male and female poles, is not limited to simple fixed “differences” but builds hierarchies of power and symbolism. So, if it is right from a pedagogical point of view to ask “for girls and boys”, analyzing the cultural cages that prevent both girls and boys from developing in the way that is most congenial to them, regardless of the sex they belong to (Gianini Belotti 1973, 8), it is equally important from a socio-historical-anthropological point of view to continue to study the systems of inferiorization and practices of domination that have always been practiced in all human societies towards marginal groups (Ulivieri, 1997), primarily women and girls.

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