



# **Gender Scripts and Children's Performances that Reverberate in the Context of Early Childhood Education**

Jéssica Tairâne de Moraes<sup>1</sup>

Jane Felipe<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul – UFRGS, Porto Alegre/RS, Brazil

**ABSTRACT – Gender Scripts and Children's Performances that Reverberate in the Context of Early Childhood Education** – Based on Gender Studies and the Sociology of Childhood, this article seeks to understand and analyze the strategies that children establish to deal with the gender scripts addressed to them in everyday Early Childhood Education. The results of the analysis show that they seek more plural ways of living their experiences as girls and boys, even though they are educated based on binary concepts that try to impose a repeated control of children's bodies. The research, of ethnographic inspiration, was developed based on participant observation with four-year-old children, in a public early childhood education school, in the Metropolitan Area of Porto Alegre/RS/Brazil.

**Keywords: Gender Scripts. Performance. Research with Children. Childhoods. Child Education.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Scripts de Genre et Performances d'Enfants qui se Répercutent dans le Contexte de l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance** – Basé sur les études de genre et la sociologie de l'enfance, l'article cherche à comprendre et à analyser les stratégies que les enfants établissent pour faire face aux scénarios de genre qui leur sont adressés dans l'éducation quotidienne de la petite enfance. Les résultats de l'analyse montrent qu'ils recherchent des manières plus plurielles de vivre leurs expériences de filles et de garçons, même s'ils sont éduqués sur la base de concepts binaires qui tentent d'imposer un gouvernement répété du corps des enfants. La recherche, d'inspiration ethnographique, a été développée à partir de l'observation participante auprès d'enfants de quatre ans, dans une école publique d'éducation préscolaire, dans la région métropolitaine de Porto Alegre/RS/Brésil.

**Mots-clés: Scripts de Genre. Performance. Recherche avec des Enfants. Enfances. L'Éducation des Enfants.**

**RESUMO – Scripts de Gênero e as Performances das Crianças que Reverberam no Contexto da Educação Infantil** – A partir dos Estudos de Gênero e da Sociologia da Infância, o artigo busca compreender e analisar as estratégias que as crianças estabelecem para lidar com os scripts de gênero que lhes são endereçados no cotidiano da educação infantil. Os resultados da análise mostram que elas buscam modos mais plurais de vivenciar suas experiências como meninas e meninos, ainda que sejam educadas a partir de concepções binárias que tentam impor um reiterado governo dos corpos infantis. A pesquisa, de inspiração etnográfica, foi desenvolvida a partir da observação participante com crianças de quatro anos de idade em uma escola pública de educação infantil na Região Metropolitana de Porto Alegre/RS/Brasil.

**Palavras-chave: Scripts de Gênero. Performance. Pesquisa com Crianças. Infâncias. Educação Infantil.**

### **To start the conversation: scenes that call us**

In *Flor de Açafraão* (2017), Guacira Lopes Louro, a reference in Gender Studies, resorts to art, especially cinema, using *takes*, *cuts* and *close-ups* to analyze some themes of gender and sexuality. We believe that these exercises encourage us to see and write in other ways, refining our ability to observe, to feel, to see beyond what seems obvious, and to question. Inspired by this movement proposed by the aforementioned author, we highlight below some scenes that present situations and experiences that motivate us to re-search with children.

#### *Scene One*

A class with 20 children in the age group of four years from a public early childhood education school in the Metropolitan Area of Porto Alegre. The teacher, sitting in a circle with the class, places some images of toys in the center, such as Barbies, superheroes, toy cars, dolls, among others. She asks the children, one by one, to choose an image that represents their preferred type of toy and justify their choice. All boys choose toy cars or superheroes. And all girls select images of Barbies or other dolls, in addition to cooking utensils. The children justify their choices, basically, by saying that it is because the toy is *for boys or girls*.

At the end of the discussion, the teacher questions why no boy had chosen a doll, nor a girl had chosen a superhero or a toy car. Quickly, a boy replies: "I wanted to choose a Barbie, the one who is a mermaid, but the thing is that boys are ashamed to play with dolls".

#### *Scene Two*

A public early childhood education teacher from a city in southern Brazil sends her female colleague, also a teacher, via WhatsApp, an audio message from a student's father cursing her, because his son had played with dolls at school. In the audio message, the father tells the teacher: "My son today he didn't wanna talk, but he ended up saying that he played with a doll again. I don't think that's right, I don't want my son playing with dolls. He plays with other things, with toy cars. [...] I don't accept it at all!"

*Scene Three*

In a public Early Childhood Education school in the Metropolitan Area of Porto Alegre, the teacher of a class with 15 children in the age group of three years enters a symbolic game with the children, assuming the role of a witch, with the power to transform them into other beings. At one point, she tells one of the boys she's going to turn him into a rat, and he promptly counters, arguing:

"Oh! No, missus, I don't want to be turned into a rat!"

"So what do you want to be turned into?" — The teacher asks.

"I wanna be a girl rat!" says the boy, spinning with his hands up and smiling subtly.

The three situations described here can be analyzed through the concept of gender scripts (Felipe, 2019; Rosa; Felipe, 2023), which refers to scripts prescribed to boys and girls, men and women, based on historical, social and cultural expectations around male and female bodies. Such prescriptions bring with them numerous regulations that affect children's actions, choices and games, since certain scripts are triggered from an early age, in an attempt to format bodies according to cis-heteronormative ideals that are intended to be hegemonic. Making an analogy with art, especially in cinema, theater or even TV, as pointed out by Jane Felipe (2019, p. 241, our translation), "[...] *scripts* are prepared by the author or director 'with a series of written instructions aimed at guiding the performance of actors/actresses/hosts in the construction and smooth progress of the interpretation of their characters.'" However, despite the prescriptions, it is always possible to rewrite, change and resignify the scripts through the movement and interpretation of the actors/actresses in a constant movement of force and power games that are established in this relationship, because, as observed by Foucault (2009, p. 105), "Where there is power, there is resistance".

Richard Schechner (1985), when developing his script theory in the field of art<sup>1</sup>, argues that actors/actresses or any other people who will perform some type of performance always have the possibility of interpreting

or even introducing elements of improvisation in this script, being, therefore, co-authors in the structure that is provided to them to be followed.

Based on these considerations, we ask ourselves the following question: *how do children, in everyday early childhood education, establish strategies to deal with socially imposed gender scripts?* How do they mobilize to establish more plural strategies in order to live childhood? Based on these guiding axes of the research, we sought to listen to a group of 17 four-year-old children from a public school in the Metropolitan Area of Porto Alegre/RS. We observed as participants and also used different strategies to listen to the children through the different languages with which they express themselves and to ensure the ethical assumptions in research *with* children, which we will discuss below.

The analyses presented here are based on the theoretical conceptions arising from Gender Studies and the Sociology of Childhood, emphasizing the importance of contemplating gender themes in school, considering the children's mobilizations as to the gender scripts imposed on them. Often, such impositions that prescribe children's behaviors are based on expectations about their bodies, and can be posed in a subtle or even more explicit manner. However, it is necessary to note that educational institutions are responsible for working to guarantee the children's rights, ensuring their physical and psychological well-being.

What is the listening that early childhood education schools have provided to children, such as those described in scenes 2 and 3? What kind of counterargument can the teaching staff of early childhood education institutions offer the boy, whose father has such a binary and misogynistic conception that prohibits him from playing with dolls? In what other spaces would the children find possibilities to talk about their shame or to *turn into* something that goes beyond the expected script if not at school, as in the case of the boys described in scenes 1 and 3?

From a perspective of listening to children, we consider it relevant to develop research that focuses on these symbolic claims, the different strategies and languages that children use to indicate that there are more plural and diverse ways for boys and girls to live childhood. Accordingly, the focus was on the possibilities that the school setting has beyond the regulation of conduct: it can be a space for ruptures, divergences and, above all, for em-

bracing the different ways of living childhood and being a child in contemporary times. By addressing these situations, we aim to show how children think, interact and express themselves, thus questioning our certainties and providing the possibility of reflecting on gender issues at school based on these ruptures that are proposed by boys and girls<sup>2</sup>, but which are still little explored.

We also note that the article is structured into four more sections that are divided as follows: a) a brief discussion on children's rights from a perspective of intersectionality with gender issues; b) the main ethical and methodological paths we employed to carry out this research with children in early childhood education and who are the subjects; c) analyses about *takes*, *cuts* and *close-ups* with a view to expanding the concept of gender scripts from the perspective of childhood; d) and, finally, the final considerations that point to more plural possibilities and ways for girls and boys to live their childhoods.

### **In defense of children's rights (to act and perform)**

Do children really have the ability to exercise their new rights? What is the result of the Convention recognizing them as subjects with 'rights,' as long as they do not leave the social situation of marginality and lack of power that bourgeois and capitalist society requires of them? If children's rights were taken seriously, would there be a different childhood [...]? (Liebel, 2007, p. 113, our translation).

The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) notes in its text a conception of fragility attributed to children and, therefore, addresses their rights to protection and provision. However, in 1989, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), another important right was added, participation, which is one of the points that differentiates modern childhood from contemporary childhood (Abramowicz; Moruzzi, 2016), since it forgoes the view of naive children dependent on adults and starts to recognize them as powerful subjects and social actors, capable of participating in situations and decisions about them. It should also be noted that, when discussing childhood, we understand it as "[...] social construction, always negotiated between children and adults, because in each historical, political, cultural and social context childhoods are reinvented and modi-

fied according to the generations that experience it” (Martins Filho; Delgado, 2018, p. 155, our translation).

To say that children’s rights are human rights is an indisputable matter, but what is strange is the scope and how these rights are exercised. Therefore, it should be noted that this debate is not only legal, but also sociological, as it takes children’s position in society into consideration. In addition, the psychological and pedagogical aspects constitute this important framework, since they are in the position of apprentices. Finally, the economic aspect is present due to the role attributed to childhood in the production system (Muñoz, 2018).

Given the reality of alarming data and statistics that show how gender inequalities and violences are established since childhood in relations between boys and girls, we consider that questioning how, as adults, we defend children’s rights is relevant. It is important to underscore that, often, they have some of their rights limited, especially with regard to their participation in society, freedom of action in the world, even leading — in extreme cases — to death. In addition, it is necessary to ask ourselves about which children’s rights we are talking about, since, even if there is no doubt about the importance of an international convention on the specific rights of children, many of them were conceived in a Western, European and white context, validating an adequate way of living childhood and making invisible or even marginalizing other possibilities that exist in different locations and cultures. Thus, “[...] the notions of a developing child as a global child — with agency, autonomy and rights — have been highlighted as conceptions that universalize the way children are represented in all nations and cultures” (Castro, 2021, p. 42, our translation).

In this regard, a first point to be considered is that political movements geared toward childhood involve practices of dispute in which people who are in a condition of expressing their positions and occupying spaces of power speak on behalf of those who do not actually occupy such places — in this case, children. In outlining this discussion, Liebel (2019) considers that there is a process of institutionalization of childhood, as children only occupy places that are intended for them. That is, policies to guarantee children’s human rights are not devised with their participation, nor is it

questioned how subjective these rights are and how they should involve all people, regardless of their age.

Lourdes Muñoz (2018) emphasizes that the main legal documents that discuss children's rights, as in the case of the CRC, were built in *steps*, interspersed with discussions on the applicability of human rights to people in the first years of life. In this document, it is possible to observe tensions between objectives of advancing children's autonomy and objectives of controlling and containing their actions. Muñoz (2018, p. 19, our translation) also ponders that, if the goal is really to "[...] advance in the practice of universal human rights, it is necessary to 'deconstruct' the report created to explain children's rights in order to 'rebuild' it [...] and 'recreate' it through social policies and practices"<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, Jeans Qvortrup questions our understandings of children's rights by pointing out that:

The way we talk about children [...] is extremely confusing. If one says that children are human beings, no one will disagree, although this status is constantly disputed, since children's capabilities and competencies are supposedly incomplete compared to those of a fully grown person; children are also not citizens, in the broadest sense of the term, as they do not have, for example, the opportunity to act as members of a democratic society; they have rights, but they are far from having all the rights that adults have (Qvortrup, 2014, p. 25, our translation).

Obviously, the existence of legal documents that protect children and their rights is an important and necessary achievement if we analyze the history of childhood (Ariès, 1978; Corazza, 2004). However, for these rights to be guaranteed, it is essential to consider that they are not limited only to a legal issue, but above all to social structures, relationships and processes (Liebel, 2019), and the fact of *having rights* does not necessarily mean that they are practiced or guaranteed. Thus, authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) talk about the need for a more equitable world structure in the construction of human rights, since we cannot continue to consider childhood as "[...] an item of a universal civilizing project articulated with visions of the future and society in which the type of human subjectivity to be cultivated is established from the earliest age" (Castro, 2021, p. 42, our translation).

By this, we do not mean that there should be no policies for childhood or that we should not think about them, but perhaps it is important to question the extent to which the protective character of these actions can limit the participation of boys and girls in the movements and decisions of society. This is relevant because, to a certain extent, society considers them as producers of culture and social actors, but, on the other hand, delimits the level of this participation.

Taking this discussion to the field of Gender Studies, it would also be possible to ask: to what extent does the protective monitoring of *cis-heteronormativity*, especially as to boys, limits their possibilities of expression and action in the contexts in which they participate? To what extent is intolerance — disguised as protection, so boys do not break socially imposed gender scripts — aggressive toward them? Or, also, to what extent does a more pronounced protection around girls, seen as fragile and defenseless, limit their ability to take a stand and act autonomously, facing certain challenges? Or, also, would not the fact of restricting girls to the household setting, with the supposed argument that they will be more protected there, situate them in a position of inequality of opportunities? All these issues raised here based on the scenes we presented at the beginning can contribute, to some extent, to reflection on how, in different contexts, the needs and forms of expression of boys and girls are being ignored, misunderstood and disrespected.

The questions presented here served as the basis for a research proposal aimed at listening to children. We sought to understand the strategies they used in the daily routine of an early childhood school located in southern Brazil to deal with the gender scripts conveyed by adults and their own peers, since children's voices are polyphonic, that is, they often reproduce the discourses of adults and their expectations about them (Silveira, 2002). Above all, how can we support them, embracing their multiple ways of being and living childhood, while facing the challenge of viewing them beyond that which regulates them, puts them in a subordinate position, or lacks in them? As argued by Luciana Rabello de Castro (2021), the difference between children and adults hierarchizes them, placing them in the field of the *primitive*, which must be replaced and raised to another level.



Because of this view of childhood, children are often thought about considering that which they lack.

According to the above author, many of the understandings about and even defenses of childhood result from developmental theories that universally offer the same fate to all children, which is overcoming immaturity and rationality, becoming full-fledged in adulthood. Only then are these subjects considered able to actively participate in social and political issues.

In addition, when these discussions that call us to contemplate other ways for boys and girls to live childhood involve gender issues, it is also possible to criticize according to the very concept of gender, originally from English, which presents some gaps that are not debated precisely because it has been translated into many languages other than English, as analyzed by Judith Butler (2021). Accordingly, the author points out that this concept should be criticized, considering that it is not a dogma. In this regard, one of the criticisms refers to the generalizations and the conceptual non-equivalences when *gender* is translated into other languages, that is, often “[...] what happens in one language cannot be completely or adequately translated into the language of the other” (Butler, 2021, p. 372, our translation).

Consistently, Berenice Bento (2022, p. 16, our translation) discusses the limits of the gender category, emphasizing that “[...] the debate on the production of the subject is based on a binary racialized conception of the masculine and the feminine, which is effective in the frameworks of the family.” The author’s criticism is aimed at underlining the need to produce other possibilities of linguistic operation that can contemplate other bodies that do not fit into the male/female binarism. In this sense, according to the author’s understandings, it is possible to comprehend that “[...] in order to understand power relations, it may be necessary to think that there is an earlier analytical moment that refers to corporealities that cannot be recognized as man and woman” (Bento, 2022, p. 17, our translation).

Hence, we think that studies and debates in the fields of Gender Studies and the Sociology of Childhood, conducted in an intersectional manner, can contribute to imagine more plural childhoods, so other ways of being a child can arise from the margins to the center. We think that intersectionality can enable new ways of acting in relation to hierarchies and the inflexi-

ble, universal and binary ways of children living childhood. We also consider that intersectionality, as a concept, can contribute to understanding the forms of sociocultural regulation of subjectivities (Pocahy, 2011). Thus, inspired by these studies, criticisms and tensions, we ask ourselves how we can broaden the debate about gender and childhood issues intersectionally, so we can conceive new ways of being a child that do not fit into a global, binary and idealized standard.

### **Changing the costumes: researching *with* children requires new outfits**

When researching with children, especially on topics considered *sensitive*, such as gender issues, it is necessary to strip ourselves of some of our own knowledge and understandings to dress in creativity, developing strategies that can capture the voices of children, who do not always express themselves through speech. Therefore, we consider that research with human beings, especially with young people, requires ethical rigor to design methodologies and strategies that are appropriate to the subjects' ages. As previously mentioned, this research was carried out with 17 four-year-old children, from an early childhood education class at a public school located on the outskirts of a city in the Metropolitan Area of Porto Alegre/RS, in the second half of 2022.

To think about ethics in the context of this research, we refer to Pereira et al. (2018, p. 763) to present some questions: "How to balance the notions of protection and participation that, at times, are opposed and related? [...] how is the ethical dimension able to encompass the diversity, complexity and alterity of childhood?". Thus, the authors consider that it is necessary to consider the structural inequality that exists in the relations between children and adults, since they are the ones who produce and endorse scientific knowledge. Hence, we understand that a theory about childhood is strongly associated with an ethical dimension. Therefore, it is possible to say that ethics in research with children does not occur only through contracts that validate and normalize the researcher's contact with them, but permeates the periods *before*, *during* and *after*<sup>4</sup> the research process.

When we talk about the period *before*, we refer mainly to the researcher's conceptions and theorizations about childhood and their objectives with research. In addition, we emphasize that the commitment to consider

ethics in research with children before it even happens is part of a position that involves gender issues, since relying on and believing in listening to children is also believing in the boys' and girls' potential to contribute to the debate about prejudices and inequalities.

Regarding the period *during*, in addition to field research — often, it is in this sphere that ethics is most mentioned —, we think that it also concerns the researchers themselves theorizing about childhood, dialoguing with what has already been produced, said and analyzed, thus contributing to the production of new narratives about childhood.

With regard to the period *after*, we take into account that it is necessary to consider the participants' right to access information and here we highlight the return of research results to children. In addition, another issue that involves the ethical dimension of the period *after* is to consider how the *possible findings* of the research can be socially relevant to childhood and children, which implies an ethics also at the time of analysis and interpretation of the data obtained.

Taking into consideration these dimensions about ethics, this research was developed through participant observations that occurred between September and December 2022, three times a week. Photographic records of the children during their school journeys, a notebook, drawings and play propositions were used as instruments. In addition to the Informed Consent Form (ICF) sent to the school and families, an Informed Consent Form was prepared for the children, adapted in comic book format, telling, in a language consistent with the age group, the objectives, possible risks and authors of the research. We informed them that confidentiality would be preserved, which instruments would be used and that they would have full freedom to participate in the research or not.

We also adopted the use of green and red badges for children who wanted to be photographed or not during the observations. However, as the days passed, we decided not to use the badges anymore, paying more attention to the silences, suspicious or uncomfortable looks of the children when approached by one of the researchers. It was possible to perceive that, with the establishment of contact and bonding with the children, the issue of the badge started to have less credibility in the expression of their real acceptances. Therefore, we also used the “ethical radar” (Skanfors, 2009),

avoiding to being limited only to seeing which color of badge the child was wearing. Instead, we were willing to forgo certain choices and what we thought was best and most appropriate at times so as to try to understand what the children's voices, desires, and refusals really meant through their silences, gestures, and expressions.

In addition, we also used a timeline that the children filled out to make a *countdown* of one of the researchers in the field and, at the end of the observations, the children were provided with a pre-feedback of the data through an exhibition of their photos captured during the observations. The final feedback to the class, as well as to the teaching staff, was also planned, and the fictitious names used throughout the research were chosen through a draw held with the class.

Considering this overview of how the research was carried out, as well as its ethical assumptions, we then present some analyses based on the data produced with the children.

### **Thinking about the concept of genre scripts based on the children's performances**

We understand the concept of gender scripts, as well as the concept of gender itself, as a theoretical-analytical and political tool to understand the mechanisms of oppression in patriarchal societies, which build narratives about bodies according to certain historical, social and cultural expectations in order to control the subjects and their ways of perceiving and participating in the world. However, during the field stage of the research with children, examining more closely their movements, performances and strategies to circumvent — or not — certain<sup>5</sup> genre scripts enabled us to perceive other nuances and focuses that we needed to consider so as to try to understand what that particular group of children was trying to tell us.

When referring to children's gender performance<sup>6</sup>, it should be noted that, in this article, it should be understood as behaviors, gestures and symbols that are taught to subjects, intentionally, that attribute and reinforce binary scripts of femininity and masculinity based on an essentialist understanding of biological sex (Butler, 2018).

Considering this context, we realize that, in addition to the socially expected scripts that they incorporate into their actions and performances,

due to their biological bodies, there are other possibilities to think about childhoods, especially with regard to gender issues, through *takes*, *cuts* and *close-ups*, as suggested by Louro (2017), which will be discussed below.

### ***Takes: the visible and naturalized***

Helena, with the help of her teacher, dresses like a bride, wearing a white veil on her head and holding plastic flowers. She says she is going to marry Julia. Lorenzo hears that and says: 'You're going to marry me, gal!'. Helena poses to be photographed and Lorenzo stands next to her to also appear in the photo, as a groom. But Helena says: 'Get out, I will not marry you, I will marry Julia!'. Lorenzo does not accept that, tries to force a hug on her, and then removes her veil, saying that it is time to put it away and that the game is over. Helena does not take a stand and goes to the other side of the room, looking for something else to play with (Caderno de Anotações, 5 dez. 2022).

From the beginning, when we explained what the proposal was about, even for the children to be able to choose whether or not they would participate, Bernardo and Guilherme ask: 'But will there only be girl stuff? Won't there be anything for boys?' (Caderno de Anotações, 16 nov. 2022).

By presenting these excerpts from situations experienced by the children during the observation period, we intend to discuss some tensions, which we will call *takes* here. Thus, they were understood as the children's visible performances of the scripts generally expected for boys and girls. They are understood as attempts to produce scenes that, in turn, are developed from certain scripts. When these *takes* are not in the pre-established script or destabilize the scripts by means of some unexpected movement or action on the part of the actors (in this case, the children), these actors receive some sanction or reminder so they are not circumvented or forgotten and thus may be able to compose the scene.

As can be seen in the situations, they are corrected by the children themselves for being, to some extent, destabilizing. Lorenzo reminds Helena that she cannot marry another girl, and that he is the one, as a male representative, who should play the role of husband. Bernardo and Guilherme question one of the researchers when she proposes something that also deviates from the expected script — in this case, it was playing with dolls and kitchen utensils.

We also consider that, in order to try to understand these situations, it is necessary to take into account the issues of interdependence between children and adults, since they do not inhabit a world apart, needing support, care, affection and protection from those who care for/educate them. As observed by Alexandre Bello (2006), children easily perceive what they should say and/or do to please adults and, in addition, they also self-regulate, correct the behaviors and performances of colleagues and older people who deviate from the standard script. Such situations show the need to understand that it is not only adult people or institutions — school, family and churches — that try to *format* and control the behaviors, gestures and tastes of individuals. The children themselves prove able to act, produce and regulate the scripts so they are not forgotten, even though they also operate toward circumventing them. Thus, these *takes* become part of the script to be followed. Therefore, it becomes imperative to consider “children as competent actors in society and to perceive childhood in structural terms” (Qvortrup, 2014, p. 34, our translation).

Also, as a continuation of the descriptions of the second fragment of the notebook that opens this section, it was possible to perceive the following situation:

At first, all the children present wanted to go to the space. When they got there, all the boys went to the corner of cooking play, which consisted of real pots and cookware, seeds, raw pasta, leaves, etc. The girls were split between the space with baby dolls and that with ethnic Barbies. After some time, I noticed that a group of boys began to invent other symbolologies for the kitchen elements, running through space and pretending that the spoons were swords, playing police and thief (Caderno de anotações, 16 nov. 2022).

Still in relation to the *takes*, we noticed that the children, through them, showed us other directions for our initial research question, because, if we wanted to know about their performances to destabilize or circumvent certain genre scripts, they acted in order to demonstrate that, in addition to these strategies that we wanted to investigate, there are also those that moved in another direction precisely in order to maintain the pre-established scripts. It is interesting to note that the boys questioned if there was *anything for boys too*, since there were only dolls and kitchen utensils. However, with the researcher’s denial and dissatisfied with the possibility of not participating in the game, they moved to perform what, according to

their understandings, they should perform: they used spoons as swords and pots as shields.

Moreover, we understand that, in order for the research to reach the ethical dimension of the period *during* and even of the period *after*, as mentioned in the previous section, we cannot focus only on at what answers our research question. We also need to give due attention to that which the subjects show us in relation to blurring borders when it comes to gender.

### ***Cuts*: about the subtle blurring of borders**

Time to put the toys away. The teacher warns about the time and that it is time to organize the room. At this moment, it is possible to perceive that it is the time when boys take the opportunity to move, touch and observe the toys that are from the corner monopolized by the girls (the kitchen/house). As they move, they take the opportunity to play, almost in a clandestine manner, with doll cribs, baby bottles and little broomsticks. Meanwhile, the teacher warns them, saying that it is not time to play, but to put the toys away. Then, after these quick uses, they gradually put them away (Caderno de Anotações, 10 out. 2022).

When it comes to storing the toys, Guilherme, just like the other day, takes the toys from the kitchen/house to store. He stores and plays at the same time, looking to the sides, to see if the teacher does not see him to warn that it is time to store them and not to play (Caderno de Anotações, 09 nov. 2022).

In the example above, it can be noticed how much the children, especially boys, realize what the expectations as to them are and, at some possible moments, try to escape from this control. This means that, from a very early age, children learn how they should behave, what they should or should not say or do in order to be more accepted in their social group. When they perceive some chances of not being under the scrutinizing gaze of other colleagues or even of the teacher, they allow themselves to look in other directions, even if they collaborate so that certain scripts are maintained. They also act in order to suspend them, even if *clandestinely* and momentarily, because they understand that it could only occur like that: in invisibility, otherwise they would soon suffer sanctions so they return to the pre-established genre scripts.

Therefore, *cuts* (in audiovisual language) implied these shifts between one shot and another, that is, from what is expected of them in terms of behaviors, tastes, gestures, speeches, etc. to what they do in *informality*,

when there are no vigilant eyes to govern their bodies. We observed that, when storing toys, boys allow themselves to play with objects that are commonly associated with the female gender. It is time at the time of storing that *everything is allowed to be taken and performed*, since no one will tell them to drop that toy or that they cannot take it. After all, if they are handling it, it is for *safekeeping*; therefore, not only can they do it, but they should do it.

Perhaps the time for organizing the room and storing the toys is not considered problematic, since it is associated with an organizational practice necessary in the daily routine of early childhood education, as well as other common situations in the routine of a school. However, the children show us that it is precisely in these moments that another facet of childhood can be manifested, suspending some of our understandings about the way they create performances from other scripts, learning and experiencing the world and its relations with it. Bernardo and Vinícius also demonstrated that in the situation that we will describe below:

Bernardo enters the room to store a toy, sees Beatriz's bee tiara and puts it on, hidden, with a smile on his face. Then, Vinícius sees it and also asks to put it on. To do so, he hides behind a toy shelf (Caderno de anotações, 06 out. 2022).

Such situations once again show how curious children are to experience certain situations and/or objects supposedly intended for a specific gender and often only do not do so because of the interdiction of the culture of which they are part. Hence the need to operate with more flexible perceptions involving gender issues and children's rights, arguing that they can have the opportunity to be protagonists of their movements while participating in life in society in a fair and egalitarian manner, supported by adults. We consider, therefore, that defending children's rights is something that is (or should be) part of the feminist agenda, since, like misogyny, adultcentrism is also something that underestimates and violates the subjects through unequal power relations in the patriarchal society.

### ***Close-ups: to better see the details***

On this first day, when observing the children, an interesting fact we noticed was that, to play in the kitchen corner, where there are many pink and purple toys, the boys allow themselves to try the utensils when there is no girl around. However,



when a girl arrives, they immediately give way, without any girl saying anything, and start assuming other roles in the game so they can also occupy the same space, such as: wall builder or cats (Caderno de Anotações, 28 set. 2022).

Bruno enters the kitchen to play. He picks up some plastic food items and begins to represent cooking movements. With Helena's arrival, he soon asks her: 'Let's play hide-and-seek?'. And then they start hiding food in the fridge. Soon, he proposes, 'Let's make her some food?', pointing to the doll Helena had in her hand. 'Let me give it to her,' he says. And adds: 'Let's give her milk? Just let me!'. And also takes the broom to sweep (Caderno de Anotações, 09 nov. 2022).

When observing closely (*close-ups*) the dynamics that are expressed in the daily routine of early childhood education institutions through the different languages with which children communicate, it is necessary not only to pay attention to the discourses they produce through their verbalizations. It is also important to consider their movements and performances that happen frequently when they are in a group or even alone.

The two excerpts from the notebook above describe child's play situations that we could consider trivial in the daily routine of early childhood education. However, by focusing more on the scenes and *zooming in*, it is possible to perceive that boys establish some strategies to stay in that space, traditionally intended for girls. What do the different strategies adopted by the group of boys, especially to enter the kitchen space during play, lead us to think about childhood? Would it be possible to find other possibilities to educate children by breaking binary and dichotomous conceptions of gender, which end up legitimizing behaviors that are intended to be hegemonic? It may not be possible to easily break such scripts, but children's performances during play provide us with possibilities to think about their rights to occupy certain spaces and access toys and games, regardless of their gender. Embracing and supporting the ways girls and boys experience their childhoods, with numerous possible experiences, necessarily involves the knowledge of how children develop and the relevance of thinking about teacher training to deal with such issues.

Bernardo again plays kitten in the kitchen with a group of girls. They do not include him in their symbolic game. Then, he starts looking at them and saying 'meow, meow!', asking for attention. They do not look at him. Then, Bernardo starts to nudge them, but, even so, he is unsuccessful. Sometimes, one of the girls says, 'Get out of here, kitty!'. When Maria turns her back and Caroline leaves the



kitchen, Bernardo picks up a pink fork to play in the kitchen. Then Maria turns to him and he, with a startled expression, drops his fork to the floor and immediately starts meowing. The teacher, when she noticed I was watching Bernardo, commented: 'When he plays with the girls it works out better. With the boys, there is always conflict' (Caderno de Anotações, 05 out. 2022).

As a complement to the situation described above, it should also be noted that whenever Bernardo played kitten with the girls in the kitchen, he adopted a docile and submissive posture, saying that he was a *baby kitten* so as to receive care from the girls. It is interesting to observe the boy's strategy to receive attention and feel included in the game, since the girls limited his actions in this context, giving the directives at that time. This performance adopted by Bernardo shows that, like him, many other boys may be interested in having different types of experience that are not limited to the scripts they are expected to perform, such as courage, strength and domination. As pointed out by studies (Bello, 2006; Leguiça, 2019), they undergo constant surveillance in control and regulation networks through rituals, discourses and behaviors so, from a very early age, they assume the scripts of masculinity.

It should be noted that the questions presented so far about the discussions on gender scripts refer not only to these performances of children in themselves and in isolation, but also to how the requirement of certain behaviors represents and sustains the inequalities between the subjects from the earliest childhood. What we want to point out is that, through their performances, children tell us that trying to fit them into a binary pattern is to diminish them in their capacities, causing unnecessary emotional mistreatment. Within their possibilities, children are telling us, albeit in a subtle and symbolic manner, how much they demand conditions for them to live more fair and plural relationships.

### **Questions for further debate: thinking about childhood in a more plural way**

Given these arguments, we consider that it is necessary to understand how children's movements and even small *transgressions* invite us to think beyond, expanding our understandings of gender issues and of the very scripts. Thus, we are led to seek not only which scripts children try to bring



to the scenes through *takes*, *cuts* and *close-ups*, but also what these new scripts reveal, what they denote about the children's interests and what new scripts we can think about based on these childhood performances.

The reflection we make now is whether we would not be sustaining inequalities and oppressions by ignoring the strategies they establish to break some of these scripts addressed to them (Felipe; Guizzo, 2022). We note that an isolated action of a single child may not mean evidence; however, a set of movements that children perform in the school setting, on a recurring basis, carries a meaning: perhaps the ways we have thought about the structure and routines of early childhood education schools, the division of groups, the modes of exercising teaching, the physical spaces (or the lack of them) and materialities, in a way, contribute so children limit their actions, their performances and their ways of being and intervening in the world.

In this sense, the questions that remain and we share here for further reflection are: how could we think early childhood education schools in a manner that genuinely embraces and support the multiple ways of boys and girls living their childhood, with a view to guaranteeing their rights to act and perform more freely? How could these other performances contribute to fairer experiences and relationships between children, especially at school?

Thus, we emphasize the need to think about children's interests more comprehensively, especially with regard to gender issues, as their choices are often conditioned by binary scripts. To this end, we think it is important to examine the common actions of children, especially in schools, in order to broaden our understandings of childhood and gender scripts.

In addition to these tensions, we consider that it is necessary to think about the needs and interests of girls and boys in an articulated way, since the needs refer to basic human issues, even if they change over time. In outlining this discussion, we understand that playing can be interpreted as a need and, therefore, a fundamental right for childhood; however, through their performances when playing, children exhibit some interests, namely: a) exploring the unknown; b) trying different roles and performances while playing; c) doing something for the first time; d) having new relationships; e) inventing new games.

Based on these interests, shown by the children, we also ask ourselves: what motivates boys and girls to articulate individually or collectively in relation to binary gender scripts? How can we, according to the children's interests, rethink practices in early childhood, especially in early childhood education schools, providing the possibility that they live more plural and less binary and hegemonic childhoods?

Given these tensions, we rely on the idea that thinking about children's rights to gender equity as an important aspect that helps build a fairer and more plural childhood can perhaps be seen as something that involves the rights of all children. As can be inferred from some statistical data, such equity is not yet fully present in several places in the world<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, we argue that it should be possible to accept the *takes* that deviate from the pre-established *script*, to bring the *cuts* to the scene and see in more depth — through *close-ups*, without the lens of universal, binary and hegemonic models — the multiplicity of childhoods and their performances.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To learn more about the *Performance Studies* movement in the field of art, see Veloso (2014). In this article, we will use the concept of performance based on Judith Butler (2018).
- <sup>2</sup> We also emphasize that we consider the use of *children* in a generalized manner in certain analyses of gender studies, perhaps, as another way of treating childhood from a hegemonic view, since the statistics and life situations of children in Brazil are different if they are boys or girls. Therefore, when we use, throughout the text, *boys* and *girls* to refer to children at certain times, we do not do so in an attempt to fit them into a genderized standard, but rather to emphasize the recognition of the particularities and inequalities that are advocated according to the gender of the children – which does not nullify the possibility of other countless ways of experiencing gender.
- <sup>3</sup> In the original in Spanish: “[...] avanzar en la práctica de los derechos humanos universales, es preciso ‘deconstruir’ el relato creado para explicar los derechos de los niños, para ‘reconstruirlo’ en su esencia original y ‘recrearlo’ a través de las políticas y de las prácticas sociales” (Muñoz, 2018, p. 19).

- <sup>4</sup> Thinking the periods before, during and after in research with children is a consideration already debated by childhood scholars referenced throughout the text. We used these loan understandings to specifically highlight the ethical dimension of a research with children in early childhood education that addresses gender issues. It should also be noted that the research in question is part of a larger project entitled *Ignorar para Acobertar ou Informar para Proteger?: scripts de gênero e sexualidade na prevenção das violências contra crianças* [Ignore to Cover or Inform to Protect?: gender and sexuality scripts in the prevention of violence against children], coordinated by researcher Jane Felipe (project No. 38749, approved on Mar 9, 2020 as per the UFRGS Committee on Ethics and Research on Human Beings).
- <sup>5</sup> The concept of scripts in the field of art, especially in theater, was widely discussed by Schechner (2002). Their positions are similar to the conceptions we have developed about gender scripts in the field of education. According to the aforementioned author, the concept of script plays a central role for performances, since they are based on scripts, guiding the action. Such scripts can be literary, theatrical or can be experienced more broadly, encompassing cultural and social norms. Still, on the same concept, it is worth mentioning the studies of Diana Taylor (2003), according to whom scripts are a set of actions, words and gestures that are repeated and reenacted over time, playing a fundamental role in the construction and preservation of cultural memory and identity. Taylor emphasizes the importance of the body as the primary tool for the transmission of these scripts. In her theory, therefore, scripts are more associated with cultural preservation and transmission than with creative improvisation.
- <sup>6</sup> According to Veloso, the term performance was consolidated and expanded from the 1970s as an artistic expression with its own and effective characteristics for the hybridization of art. “Thus, it integrates a variety of theories in the human and social sciences, such as phenomenology, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstructivism and feminism” (Veloso, 2014, p. 193-194, our translation).
- <sup>7</sup> Studies carried out by global organizations, such as the Global Early Adolescent Study, which operates on all continents, indicate that, in both more conservative and more liberal societies, children internalize the idea that boys are strong and independent and that girls are vulnerable.

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**Jessica Tairâne de Moraes** is a doctoral student and master in Education from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, with a period of studies at the Universidad de Oviedo, in the Doctoral Program in Gender and Diversity. She holds a teaching degree in Pedagogy from Universidade Feevale. She is an Early Childhood Education teacher in the Municipal Education Network of São Leopoldo, having also worked in the same function in the Municipal Education Network of Novo Hamburgo (2007–2021). Winner of the 5th RBS Education Award in the Gender category (2017).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8317-2072>

Email: [jetairane@gmail.com](mailto:jetairane@gmail.com)

**Jane Felipe** is a retired full professor, linked to the Graduate Program in Education of the School of Education of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (PPGEDU/FACED/UFRGS). She holds an undergraduate and full teaching degree in Psychology from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), a Master's degree in Education from the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), a doctoral degree in Education from UFRGS, and a postdoctoral degree in the field of Visual Culture from the Universidad de Barcelona/Spain. She works in the following themes: childhoods, gender scripts, sexuality, early childhood education, education for sexuality in school, pedophilia and pedophilization as a contemporary social practice, gender violence and women's eighth working day.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4802-2113>

Email: [janefelipe.souza@gmail.com](mailto:janefelipe.souza@gmail.com)

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