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Gender Dynamics in Elementary School Teaching: The Advantages of Men

Abstract

This article presents a study that identifies the gender dynamics prevailing in a specific context of tokenism - elementary school teaching - in which the members of an otherwise socially dominant group are proportionally scarce - men. Our results contradict Kanter's (1977) theory by showing that male elementary school teachers do not experience the tokenism dynamics. In line with the Williams (1995) and gender symbolic asymmetry (Amâncio, 1997) perspectives, we have found that although men constitute a small minority in elementary education, they do not lose the social advantages they generally have, on the contrary, they seem rather to gain several privileges. Indeed, the results show strong links between the tokenism dynamics and gender asymmetry, putting the token men at an advantage. Thus, tokenism seems to be limited to contributions to maintaining the gender social order.

Keywords: tokenism, minority groups, male dominance, gender symbolic asymmetry, gender social order.

Introduction

In recent decades, gender equality has become a goal of Western societies, leading to transformations in countries around the world, including Portugal (Espírito-Santo, 2015). However, gender imbalances remain in various professions (Shen-Miller and Smiler, 2015), as is the case in elementary school teaching. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, in most EU Member States “with a few exceptions, such as Finland where there is a near gender balance, the share of women teachers in primary schools usually exceeds 75%” (EIGE, 2016: 5).

In Portugal, as in other countries (e.g., Australia, England and the USA, Bayley and Graves, 2016), elementary teaching emerged at the end of the 19th century. However, the “feminization” of teaching increased later under the Republican government. As Nóvoa (1987) notes, the percentage of women in teaching was 37.2% in 1899/1900, 52.2% in 1909/1910, 66.5% in 1925/26, 73.3% in 1940/41 and over 87% in the 1960s, a percentage that has remained approximately the same ever since (see Table 1).

Table 1. The percentage of elementary school teachers between 1961 and 2015, by sex

Year	Total	Percentage of female teachers	Percentage of male teachers
1961	26,087	87.3	12.7
1970	29,753	88.3	11.7
1980	42,501	91.8	8.2

2001	39,243	90.9	9.1
2011	33,044	86.3	13.7
2015	28,095	86.2	13.8

Source: PORDATA (2016).

According to Drudy (2008: 309), the feminization of teaching “is firmly rooted in issues relating to economic development, urbanisation, the position of women in society, cultural definitions of masculinity and the value of children and childcare”. Ashcraft and Sevier (2006) have argued that men remain outside of this profession due to the negative perceptions associated with elementary school teaching; its low salary and status; the social isolation of males within a feminine profession; and the 'push' to move into administrative positions.

Despite the over-representation of female teachers in elementary schools, management regimes are increasingly “masculinized” as highlighted by Mahony and Hextall (2000), thus stressing the gender asymmetries prevailing in the organizational structures of schools. Indeed, when we look at the sex of school principals in 2015/16, it becomes clear that more school management positions continue to be held by men (56.7%) than by women (43.3%) in Portugal (Directorate-General for Statistics of Education and Science, DGEEC, 2017).

This article therefore presents a study focused on elementary school teachers with the main goal of identifying the gender dynamics operating in a context in which men, as members of a socially dominant group, are proportionally scarce and women, as members of a socially dominated group, are the majority. Our aims involve filling a gap in the Portuguese literature where empirical research into education, carried out from a gender perspective, remains practically non-existent.

Theoretical framework

Kanter (1977, 1993) was one of the first researchers to address the problem of gender inequalities in the workplace. She argued that, in a context involving “skewed groups”, workers who are in a numerical minority (i.e., the “tokens”, constituting less than 15% of the entire group, for a salient category such as sex) face more difficulties in the workplace than their peers, the “dominants”. According to Kanter (1993: 210), the proportional rarity of tokens becomes associated with three “perceptual tendencies” - higher visibility, the polarisation of differences by the dominants, and the assimilation of the stereotypical roles associated with their group – all of which generate typical token responses that may lead to negative consequences, including reducing their performance, marginalization or social isolation, and “role encapsulation”, a kind of imprisonment of roles (Kanter, 1993: 212). She generalized these tokenism dynamics to other proportionally underrepresented social groups and to similar contexts.

However, subsequent research was critical of Kanter’s approach (e.g., Cognard-Black, 2004; Heikes, 1991; Williams, 1992, 1995; Yoder, 1991, 1994) demonstrating the shortcomings of analysis based solely on proportions. Conceived as “gender-neutral”, the Kanterian perspective does not adequately explain the differences existing between men

and women in their work experiences. This critique of Kanter's approach integrates "gender" in its analysis and strives to look beyond numbers and explore how men's experiences in female-dominated professions may be different from those of women in male-dominated professions and how this might relate to the cultural power associated with men and masculinity.

Indeed, although token men are subject to some gender discrimination (Coulter and McNay, 1993; Sargent, 2000), and despite disadvantages that may exist when compared with women, in general, they have advantages (Cognard-Black, 2004; Heikes, 1991; Williams, 1995), due to their gender and its status in society. If we consider those studies that analyse gender relations in terms of asymmetrical power (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1998) and symbolic relations (Amâncio and Oliveira, 2006), it becomes clear why men, perceived as individuals and universal references to humans in general, are advantaged in so called feminine professions and not affected by the dominant 'culture' of the profession. On the contrary, women, as a symbolic dominated group referent only to their own group, always remain seen as women and correspondingly subjected to the norms of female stereotypes. As a result of symbolic asymmetry, token men are better placed than token women and therefore correspondingly experience fewer negative outcomes and gain greater advantages. Two studies carried out in Portugal within the scope of the same research project, with female politicians (*Anonymous, 2016*) and female and male medical specialists in "masculine" and "feminine" specialist fields, respectively (*Anonymous, 2015*), conclude that tokenism contributes to maintaining the gender social order (Connell, 2002). Such an order, which the gender symbolic asymmetry model defines as based on male individuation and female de-individuation in relation to a common system of values (Amâncio, 1993, 1996, 1997) that divides gender categories between men – as a universal point of reference – and women – as a gendered category limited to family care, education and the domestic sphere, gets reproduced in tokenism to the advantage of token men.

Furthermore, token men react differently to the tokenism dynamics than their female counterparts (Barreto et al., 2004; Heikes, 1991). When men embrace a "feminine" profession, they neither abandon their gender identity, nor lose their gender-based privileges (Williams, 1992, 1995), as masculinity remains fused with the dominant values of the profession (Amâncio, 1989). Thus, instead of the "glass ceiling" phenomenon that prevents female ascension into the top positions in male-dominated professions, males often come across a "glass escalator" that pushes them up to the prestigious, powerful, and better paid positions in female-dominated professions (e.g., see Casaca and Lortie, 2017; Williams, 1992, 1995).

However, token men may also experience some negative discrimination in those occupations most strongly associated with women and femininity, such as, for example, when male preschool and elementary school teachers are perceived as effeminate, homosexual and paedophile (Ashcraft and Sevier, 2006; Pruit, 2015) as a consequence of the strong normativity of heterosexuality in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2002). The profession requires some nurturing and physical contact with young children, yet men's gender role expectations exclude such behaviours, hence, men fall under greater scrutiny and suspicion than their female peers (Sargent, 2000).

Given the scarcity of research on gender in the teaching field, and particularly in Portugal, this study aims to analyse perceptions about male teacher experiences in a token

condition from a gender perspective that is, developing an approach which examines the interconnection between tokenism and gender. Our theoretical framework includes the gender symbolic asymmetry model (Amâncio, 1997; Amâncio and Oliveira, 2006) as we assume that gender asymmetry influences the tokenism dynamics, fostering the advantages that men gain from their token status when compared to women. In this perspective, we have developed a research program that studies several professions with “skewed groups” of men and women. Whereas our previous studies focused on so called masculine professions, the present study focuses on elementary school teaching, generally perceived as a feminine profession.

Participants and procedures

From a qualitative perspective, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 18 teachers (8 females, 10 males) working in 12 Portuguese elementary schools. Their ages ranged from 31 to 61 years old ($M=44.06$; $DP=8.91$), with male teachers, on average, older ($M=45.50$, $SD=9.89$) than female teachers ($M=42.25$, $SD=7.78$). As shown by our sample distribution, we accepted slightly more male volunteers as they represent the main focus of this study.

This convenience sample was selected according to the snowball technique that began with the informal contacting of two female teachers (E1 and E2) who then offered to find some more contacts for us thus facilitating our access to interviewees and avoiding formal bureaucratic procedures. All participants first received details about the main goals of the study by email, along with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews took place in a quiet place (i.e., in a classroom, in a meeting room or in a library), between April and July 2016 and lasted between 41 and 113 min. With participant consent, we recorded the interviews that were transcribed in full.

The interview script addressed the issues discussed on gender and elementary school teaching. Thematic analysis of the interview corpus provided for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). This positioning is informed by a feminist perspective in gender studies (Nogueira, 2009), which understands texts and discourses as constructions of reality anchored in social, political, historical and cultural contexts (Gergen, 1973). We focus on the interview material related to the topics detailed in the theoretical framework, specifically on the over-representation of women in elementary school teaching in Portugal; the reasons this happens; and the effects of tokenism experienced in the professional context, in keeping with the sex of the participants (female, male).

Results

We identified two main themes that we then labelled as follows: gender imbalances in elementary school teaching; and gender dynamics of tokenism (see Figure 1). All participants contributed towards both themes even while varying to a greater or lesser extent in their levels of representativeness.

[insert Figure 1]

Gender imbalances in elementary school teaching

We here identified three major subthemes: awareness about the over-representation of women in elementary education, which is not perceived as problematic; the understanding that a greater gender balance would be beneficial to education standards; and, detailing how biology, gender ideology and the educational ideology of the Estado Novo dictatorship constitute the main reasons for this imbalance.

The main subtheme conveys how male and female teachers are aware of the numerical differences between men and women among the elementary education system teaching staff with the females employed predominating in numbers. Nevertheless, respondents do not deem this situation problematic. As the result of historical trends, this gets perceived as “reasonably normal”, especially as this reflects a phase when children get on better with women who are, in the main, their carers:

I do not consider this any problem. That’s what I think... I do not consider this a problem. [E1, Female]

I believe this is reasonably normal. There is a history and all professions have their histories. There is a history of heavily female recruitment over the last 70, 80 years. And, therefore, it’s normal that this is today a very feminised profession. [E5, Male]

Despite this, all interviewees agree that they would like to see a better balance between males and females in the profession and believing in progress in this direction. Indeed, they believe that greater gender equilibrium would bring benefits to education, both for children, who also need a “male reference framework”, and for the ambience prevailing among peers:

I think teaching would benefit from having more men in elementary teaching (...), especially because there are many kids that need a male reference, don’t they? Effectively, there are boys that need a masculine reference, therefore, male teachers might make all the difference. [E2, Female]

It might be better if there were more men, demystifying a bit this idea that a teacher in the 1st cycle is something for women (...), but also out of a question of the ambience among colleagues that would be better balanced. [E4, Male]

The third subtheme, which incorporates the reasons identified for the “feminisation” of elementary teaching in Portugal and revealing how these derive from diverse factors with biological, sociocultural, historical and ideological roots. Furthermore, most participants (6 females; 8 males) state this happens out of a question of option or vocation.

Nevertheless, there is also the notion among the two participating sexes that this option is not actually ‘natural’, resulting from the influence of various factors, especially interlinked with gender and political ideologies.

Indeed, one half of these teachers identify sociocultural factors, which orient males and females towards specific professions, in accordance with stereotypes and traditional gender-based roles, as is the case with elementary teaching associated with maternity and the role of carer. Correspondingly, males have generally been oriented towards other professions, those requiring greater rationality, objectivity and physical strength and therefore not so frequently opting for elementary teaching:

Normally, men get immediately induced to other areas: the sciences, chemistry, mathematics and... the women, even if only in a subtle fashion, are induced into areas such as education. [E1]

It's not in anyone's mind that the husband stays at home or is reduced to the home... with his children from an educational perspective. Because women, the role of women involves taking care of the house and educating the children (...), these numbers in the profession reflect all this... indeed, our heads have not yet changed. [E13]

There is also the understanding among female teachers that the "feminisation" of elementary teaching stems from the political and ideological options for education enacted by the Estado Novo dictatorship. Indeed, they for example understand that in opting to pay teachers badly in this level of education, the state undermines the profession and making it unappealing to men to become elementary teachers as they shall thus then not be able to sustain their families. On the other hand, as women are perceived as more obedient, they were deemed the most appropriate persons to enter this profession in keeping with the ideological framework of the dictatorship:

They were the educational options of the 1930s (...). They undervalued the profession of men and paid badly. Therefore, as they were paying badly, it was not acceptable for men to become elementary teachers as they were not able to govern their families (...). This was a political option and an ideological option. Furthermore (...), it was very easy to teach them [to women] the principles of Salazarism (...), they were far more tender hearted... [E3]

At the beginning, they were men. I don't know whether this was because of the respect, for a more aggressive attitude, more severe then. Afterwards, the situation changed somewhat at the time of the Estado Novo as it was then the women. The men ended up doing another type of work, they had to work in other areas. [E12]

This perception was induced to such a deep extent that most of society is still not today open to men becoming elementary school teachers. Two restrictions are identified as ensuring that men will continue not to opt for this profession: maternal competences, perceived as "natural" in women; and the difficulties in dealing with the emotional affections in this age group, thus, effectively underpinning the belief that they may lack the competences or the patience to deal with children at a stage when they still need a lot of care:

There is that issue of dealing with little kids, isn't there? If you really think that you don't have the competences to deal with such young kids who, on occasion, still want to be picked up, who cry, who need you to be in the canteen helping them to have their snack (...). Perhaps, they tend to avoid a bit this age group. [E10]

I don't know if the age group is a barrier. If they do in fact think it's more difficult working with younger children... maybe, the age group does make a conditioning factor and, very probably, dealing with those

questions, also at the level of behaviours and affections, in this age group.
[E9]

Male teachers accept that the “maternal” question might end up deterring men from entering the profession and attracting women, who are furthermore deemed to hold a better vocation for caring for children in this age group than males who instead opt for “harder” positions. Indeed, perceptions of this profession as “feminine” do not seem to captivate these men, who do not see themselves as reflected within its scope. Additionally, they would also seem to lack this kind of vocation, the “capacity for suffering” or patience for such young children. Additionally, even among those who do opt for the profession, some do express shame at taking on a “woman’s profession”:

Initially, I felt a bit displaced and I thought: *“Well, this isn’t for me!”*. Because I thought from the outset that this would be a female profession (...). At the beginning, I felt a little bit: *“Well, this is not for me! It’s not me here...really, this is only women, what am I doing here!?”* [E15]

“This may relate to... I would not say with the taste for teaching but, perhaps, the men don’t join perhaps because they consider this a more female profession and choose to work in more, I’m not sure how to say it... harder jobs in some way. [E8]

Another of the reasons identified by male interviewees for elementary schooling having become “feminised” stems from the Estado Novo educational policy. Indeed, male teachers also point to the political and ideological education options taken in Portugal in the 1930s that led to the integration of many women into elementary teaching and the departure of as many men even while remaining dominant in the management and leadership positions:

This is also therefore bound up with this historical phase, isn’t it? (...). I think this also owes a lot to the Estado Novo. [E14]

Being a teacher in the first cycle was primary and the men did not want to be associated with primary as that would devalue them as persons. [E6]

Gender dynamics of tokenism

As regards their experiences within the professional context, another three subthemes stand out in interviewee discourses interconnected with the consequences of tokenism and revealing: there is a higher visibility for male teachers but this does not generate performance related pressures; the polarisation of the differences existing neither marginalises nor raises obstacles to their careers; and the assimilation of stereotypical male roles benefits them.

In fact, our analysis confirms the higher visibility of token men in elementary teaching. Most respondents (N=15; 7 females, 8 males) understand that, as men are scarce in the context, they are much more visible than their female colleagues, with everybody knowing their names, for example. However, the successes of male teachers and, above all, their errors, are not perceived as gaining higher visibility than those committed by their female peers reflects the perspective expressed by seven interviewees with eight respondents also believing that male colleagues do not feel that they must prove their

competences more than their female peers in this “feminised world”. Indeed, apart from two respondents, the male teachers do not feel that their errors or successes become more visible than those of their female colleagues:

In the 1st cycle, I am [the only male teacher]. Yes, I am more visible, more observed. [E15]

I don't think so. Indeed, there is a logic and a tradition of collaborative work in this profession and therefore the successes of some are the successes of others, the failures of some are also immediate... [E5]

Except for one teacher, the interviewees did not identify any polarised differences between male and female teachers able to marginalize the former nor were there any specific career obstacles.

In fact, all the female teachers stated that there was no differentiated treatment in schools negatively discriminating against men in favour of their female peers, considering the former to be perfectly integrated and included. On the contrary, were there any discrimination, this would be positive in nature as the men are clearly subject to better treatment and cared for by the women, who display greater care and attention towards them. Furthermore, they more rapidly ascend to school management positions than females sometimes due to the latter considering that the males hold a more legitimate right to such positions. Indeed, even in situations in which men are ‘weaker’, in terms of competences, they still end up experiencing faster tracks to promotion to management positions because they are placed there by women:

I don't think there really are any differentiated treatments (...). No, sometimes, rather on the other hand, they get a coffee, they get a tea made for them (laughter). As the men are fewer, there is always somebody, “*Ah, look...*” or because there is a certain lack of knack or whatever that thing they think that women have... that is innate, of preparing things for other people and, as they are fewer, well then, there is always this... I think there's this, not discrimination, but rather care to the contrary. [E1]

There is always one man who is like that, who has certain problems and then afterwards they make him the coordinator of something and so forth so as not create any more work. [E3]

In turn, with one exception, all the male teachers stated that they have never encountered any differentiated treatment between them and their female colleagues that negatively discriminated against them or raised career obstacles due to being male. In the school, on occasion, they notice differences in treatment in cases where discipline is required with men called upon to resolve such situations. This also identifies differences between males (perceived as more relaxed) and females (perceived as more competitive and observers), especially when taking management positions with relationships with male directors perceived as easier than those with their female peers. In summary, male teachers always feel well integrated and included and even as recently as 2008 they were feeling a sense of positive discrimination and frequently pushed by women into management positions, a phenomenon that is today less visible as power is centred around the School Management Board:

I never felt [discriminated]. Yes, I feel very well integrated (...). I always feel fairly appreciated, I'm always well looked after and hence I can feel comfortable. [E4]

“I feel very well integrated, without any discrimination. They treat us well. There is one aspect here of discrimination, even if not actually negative discrimination but rather more a trend towards... in every school I have been allocated to, whenever there is a need to find people for coordination or management roles and posts... they normally look to me. [E5]

The last subtheme reveals how there has been the assimilation of the stereotypical roles of males among most interview respondents (N=15; 6 females, 9 males) that benefits the token men.

While the discourses are fairly heterogeneous among the female teachers and, on occasion, ambivalent or even contradictory, it nevertheless becomes clear that they do perceive differences between themselves and their male colleagues. In turn, this derives from the belief that men represent added value to the profession. Initially, female teachers report some resistances, referring to how, when teaching, being male is equal to being female; that there are neither advantages nor disadvantages in being male in the 1st cycle; that there are no differences in the classrooms; and that relationships with colleagues also remain on an equal footing. However, over the course of the interviews, opinions begin dividing: some maintain that women hold the same expectations as regards male colleagues. Furthermore the men, while first considering that they engage with the profession in the same way as their female peers, often end up accepting that there are different expectations held by females towards male teachers simply as men in the profession. As an added value to its professional profile, they are then expected to undertake the supposedly “masculine” tasks (e.g., those interconnected with authority, respect, and physical strength):

There are many female teachers that think, yes, the males do have more discipline, that they get more respect as men, because they have the strength of men and when there is the need for the use of physical strength? [E13]

[The expectation] “It’s just that the men are an added value to that entire group of women. And what does that mean? That the males are able to do things that we are not able to and, therefore, they can help us with those things (...). Whenever there is a discipline problem, the man intervenes. [E2]

In addition, practically all female teachers end up identifying differences in terms of the attributes and characteristic features of male and female personalities with the former generally perceived as more objective, rational, capable of imposing more respect and rules than their female counterparts. Furthermore, the males get listened to better and can more easily handle subjects such as physical education and music, ‘having more control’ over the children as they are physically strong as well as being simpler, relaxed, humorous, direct, practical and coping better with challenges than women. Hence, they necessarily end up having different relationships with their classes and teaching in a different way to women who sometimes apparently lose themselves in the details:

I think that there's added value from having another gender here in the school. And, in our daily routines, that brings those more practical questions I was talking about: a less complicated person, perhaps with a more facilitating personality when something needs to get resolved, I think that it helps having a masculine personality around. [E9]

For example, in concrete situations of opinions... then they get taken more into consideration than their female colleagues, if they are given, or when after advice, requesting some counselling, you get listened to more if a male colleague than if a female colleague. [E2]

Despite this, various female teachers maintain that men also face some disadvantages in elementary teaching in comparison with women, with the emphasis placed on showing affections and the difficulties of working in a "feminine" profession. According to the female respondents, men must take additional care with students as regards displaying affections, taking into account the norms in effect for male sexuality. Generally, a male teacher should (and is able) to take on a more paternal relationship, distant from the students and less affectionate and caring than their female peers, who are (and are able to be) more maternal. Additionally, and reproducing a misogynous discourse, some respondents consider that it is not easy to work in women dominated professions as there is correspondingly a great deal of conflict. This same reason explains why many deem the arrival of more men in the profession to be a positive factor as they smooth out the working environment:

There might be some disadvantages. Being a male teacher. Yes. Because I am thinking how in the 1st year, for example, the kids really like being picked up, kissed. Sometimes they come and sit in your lap. I'm not sure, with how everything is, with all of the hysteria that there is around paedophilia and so forth, I don't know whether this would not be seen more badly for a male than a female teacher. [E13]

It's not easy. Firstly, because they work with a lot of women and it's not easy working with women (laughter), as women, very often, are conflictual (...) and the males, very often, calm down this environment a bit (...). It's not easy working just with women and it's much better working with men. [E16]

The male interviewees reveal the same ambivalence as regards what expectations female colleagues hold about them as males engaging in the profession: either they think their expectations are the same or they think they are different, or they simply ignore this dimension.

The former consider that the expectations of females towards their male colleagues, as men, are just the same and undertaking the profession in the same fashion. On occasion, different methodologies might be noted but the results are the same and therefore the same is expected of male teachers as of female teachers apart from specific issues such as physical strength. Indeed, there are references to how, inside the classroom, what becomes most important is the program and regardless of the personal characteristics or sex of each individual. Therefore, in the classroom context, there are fewer differences

identified between the professionals as they must all complete the program even while able to manage this objective according to their own approaches:

I don't think that the way of teaching is different in relation to between men and women. [E7]

"In the classroom context, there aren't any [differences]. Of course, each one of us has our own methodologies but in complying with the program, these things, no... there are not any differences, you must comply. Of course, we all have our own methodology and way of explaining that is different to others, but I do not see any differences in this field. [E17]

As regards those male teachers who feel their female counterparts hold different expectations towards them, these get defined as females expecting males to display greater objectivity, exercise more authority and gain respect, knowing how to grasp the attention of the class and maintain order particularly in more complicated school environments while not expecting them to have the kind of affectionate student relationships that female teachers build up. Over the interviews, all respondents told of how there are various situations in which women turn to men to carry out certain tasks deemed "masculine", particularly anything related to information technology and new devices, minor repairs and physical strength or whenever there are problematic students:

It is natural that it is thought that women teachers think that this is the expectation of a man who has authority, who has the class in his 'hand'. [E4]

Yes, there is a certain type of observation made: 'As you are a man, come over here and get this child into order!'. Or, 'As you are a man, you are strong, come here as I can no longer cope with this child!'. Or, of the type, they know on the door: 'Look after this one as I cannot put up with him and you're a man and can cope better!' I had that throughout some time (...). Yes, indeed it was because I was a man. [E5]

The ambivalent male interviewees divide over the dis/advantages of males in elementary teaching. Among the positives identified, in terms of relationships with students, respondents highlight issues around respect associated with the male figure, and as regards those among adult respondents detail how males are the centre of attention and give the example of the privileged treatment they receive from canteen staff who are more cheerful and generous towards them. These male interviewees also referred to advantages deriving from having men in elementary school as they bring different visions to those of women, help in maintaining a balance in the professional environment from the relational point of view as well as greater objectivity and fewer conflicts:

I think that, at least in part, in terms of respect, I think that it is very different. Even in terms of the tone of voice, authority is a man. [E15]

The advantage of being unique is that we sometimes feel ourselves to be the centre of attention and our own colleagues, of everything that is going on around. That is the only advantage because for the rest, in terms of working, it's just the same. [E15]

The only male teacher disadvantage in elementary education highlighted by male respondents (also by female respondents) stems from expressions of affection. Indeed, while identifying the importance of the profession irrespective of their sex, the power to exercise the other side to authority, thus the softer, more maternal side, there is acceptance that male teachers need to show greater care in the expression of affections. Female teachers display (and may display) greater tenderness towards their students than their male counterparts. The latter require greater care simply due to being male given that, as is accepted by this group, people perceive expressions of tenderness differently when displayed by females or males. Thus, various of the male respondents state that they do pay attention to this dimension before adding that they personally do not pick up or embrace their students both out of thinking that this is not a means of education but also out of fear of being misinterpreted whether by colleagues or by parents:

A male teacher has to be a lot more careful, also because of this, as male teachers. There are social factors that restrict us, that create some barriers, in a certain way (...). Let us add a disadvantage to being a male teacher. Yes, there is the disadvantage of a sexual type... perhaps, any show of affection, any more tender attitude towards a student might really get interpreted according to other views. And there, yes indeed, we have to show some care that might serve as an obstacle. [E18]

Conclusions

The results report the widespread awareness among all female and male teachers regarding the overrepresentation of women in the Portuguese elementary education system. Although those interviewed do not perceive the situation as a problem, they think that a greater gender balance in the profession would be educationally beneficial, both for children in general and boys in particular, who also need masculine role models, in keeping with the stereotypical gender roles of the traditional family model. This view also applies to peer dynamics as we will discuss below but it is important to remember that primary/elementary schools in Portugal are not effectively “feminized” because, as seen above, they remain “masculinized” in management and power positions (DGEEC, 2017), pointing to the persistence of masculine management and organizational regimes (Mahony and Hextal, 2000).

Nevertheless, the results clearly show how despite the gender imbalance in elementary education, where women are indeed a majority, the tokenism dynamics are conditioned by gender asymmetries as demonstrated by previous research on other professions (Anonymous, 2015, 2016).

Considering the three “perceptual tendencies” of Kanter’s model and beginning with visibility, most male and female respondents acknowledge that male teachers (tokens) are more visible in elementary schools than female teachers as is the case in contexts in which women are tokens. However, contrary to the case of token women, the visibility of male teachers neither creates pressures over performance nor elicits doubts about their skills nor even to any need to prove themselves to their female colleagues.

Moreover, there is no polarisation of differences between the women and the token men either marginalizes the latter or hinders their careers. Indeed, female teachers do not identify any differentiated treatment in schools that discriminates against men negatively,

on the contrary, they sometimes maintain that men are discriminated against positively, generally more cherished and reaching senior positions faster. Male teachers also admit to this preferential treatment, feeling always included, well integrated by their female peers and sometimes subject to positive discrimination, especially when “pushed” into management positions. Therefore, both sexes perceive gender asymmetries in this context of tokenism, with advantages for men. This result is interesting because it counts on the contribution of women, a group socially dominated in the majority context, which does not prove the case when men are in a majority context.

Furthermore, there is no negative feeling regarding any “imprisonment of roles” as identified by Kanter (1977). On the contrary, women mostly highlighted examples that favour men, seen as added value to the profession, for being stronger, objective, rational, capable of imposing more respect and rules than women, and expressing positive expectations about their skills and abilities, especially for leadership. There are also several examples from male teachers, who also consider that their female colleagues have positive expectations about them in terms of their computer skills, new technologies, bricolage or physical strength. They realize that the fact that there are men in elementary education is seen as an added advantage because they bring different views to their female counterparts, which is positive both for classroom and for peer dynamics, and often encounter preferential forms of treatment. Thus, our results confirm that assimilation generates positive results for men, allowing for better inclusion, compared to token women, and pushing them up the glass escalator (Williams, 1992, 1995).

Nevertheless, two disadvantages are perceptible for men in elementary education. Both sexes stress the manifestation of affection as a major disadvantage, with female teachers adding the difficulty of men working in a “feminine” profession. Indeed, this misogynist position held by several female interviewees is quite visible and legitimizes men's options, denigrating their group of belonging. The position held by these women reproduces and reinforces their dominated condition and the discriminated position of the teaching profession in general.

In short, the tokenism dynamics thus seem to display a strong connection with the prevailing gender order in society, allowing token men to maintain, or even exceed, the advantages otherwise generally held in society. On the other hand, the stereotyped view of masculine and feminine, seen as natural and immutable 'ways of being', reproduced in the discourses of male and female teachers, and associated to the absence of an awareness of gender asymmetry, does not ensure the scope necessary for any potential changing of gender relations in this profession.

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