

"They could be good players if they trained": exploring the football discourse of five-year-old boys and girls

Abstract: This article is part of an ethnographic study that aims to explore the power relations that are created between the different masculinities in the game of football, in a school located in Portugal. The data collected show that the social and cultural conceptions that exist around football serve to exclude girls from this sport and also children with less sports skills. However, we found that boys who were excluded from this sport did not always aspire to reach the dominant masculinity represented by the game of football. At the same time, boys who play football combined hegemonic behaviours of masculinity with behaviour proper to young children during the game. This article tries to confirm the existence of a model of "flexible masculinity" which serves as an analytical tool for future research on the construction of masculinities in young children.

Keywords: ethnographic study; football discourse; playground; hegemonic masculinity; flexible masculinity

Introduction

In this article we explore the role of football in the construction of a hegemonic form of masculinity in a school located in Portugal. The statistical data collected by the Portuguese Institute of Sports (2017) show that out of the 624,001 federated in any of the 70 sports federations that exist in Portugal, 176,349 were federated in the football modality. Paradoxically, taking into account the centrality of this sport in Portuguese society, there is a very small number of spectators who travel to football stadiums. On the contrary, there is a massive following of this sport through media such as television and newspapers. Three sports newspapers are published in Portugal, in which 90% of the information we find relates to football matters (Coelho & Tiesler, 2006). Boys, therefore, observe this widespread social phenomenon in Portugal and begin to practice it from a very young age.

The data we present is part of an ethnographic study that understands the school, and more specifically the playground, as a learning space where children are constructed as active gender agents. This article shows the power relations that are created from the game of football in the playground and also the football discourse used by preschool children when they talk about this sport. This study is relevant because, although there is much research into the role of school in the construction of a dominant masculinity from football during the primary education stage (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Keddie, 2005; Renold, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Swain, 2000), there is less empirical research regarding the

role of this sport in the development of hegemonic masculinity in younger boys. Based on Connell's theory of masculinities (1995, 1998), this document defends that football acts from an early age within the school context as an important source for the construction of a dominant model of masculinity that excludes femininities and that subordinates to other masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity in childhood

Connell's theory of masculinities (1995, 1998) was initially formulated to theorize the pattern of practices that legitimizes the patriarchal system in our society and, therefore, the global dominance of men over women. To this end, Connell proposes a system of hierarchical masculinities where hegemonic masculinity manages to remain in a position of power through practices such as heterosexuality, violence, control or domination. In opposition to this hegemonic masculinity, Connell points out the existence of other subordinated and marginalized masculinities that move away from the hegemonic ideal, as well as femininities, relegated also to an inferior position. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is relational, so it is only understood in its relationship with the rest of masculinities and femininities, and in a way that it manages to keep them in a position of subordination. With this, Connell points out that, although this hegemonic ideal is represented by a minority of men in our society, most men are accomplices of this unequal gender system and enjoy a "patriarchal dividend" that grants them certain privileges.

Connell's theory of masculinities has received various criticisms (see for example Demetriou, 2001; Donaldson, 1993; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Whitehead, 1999). Among the main criticisms, the ones which stand out are: the lack of specificity about who really embodies this hegemonic ideal (Beasley, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2012); the understanding of hegemonic masculinity as something produced only by men without assessing the active participation of women in its construction (Hearn, 2004); and the difficulties presented by the model to examine gender relations in local environments (Lusher & Robins, 2009). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) respond to these criticisms and propose a more dynamic version of the concept that allows us to grasp the contradictions and ambivalences in the construction of masculinities. At the same time, the capacity of agency which is granted to subordinate groups while recognizing that hegemonic masculinity, can be challenged at times. However, despite the various criticisms that Connell's model has received and the efforts of some researchers to formulate an

improved version of this theory, the absence of childhood within the model has scarcely been contemplated until now. In this regard, we must bear in mind that, although there is a tendency to apply Connell's concept in empirical research with children and young people; Connell does not provide a consistent explanation of how the concept of hegemonic masculinity works in young children (Bartholomaeus, 2012).

Moreover, author 1 and author 2 (2019) recently verified that Connell's theory was insufficient to explore the way in which young students negotiated their masculinity through sports. The authors discovered that some children embodied a "flexible masculinity" that was characterized by combining hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. With all this in mind, the study we present uses Connell's theory of masculinities as an analytical tool to explore the football discourse of five-year-old students in a school located in Portugal. We use Connell's theory because it allows us to study the female detachment from the game of football; as well as the hierarchy that is established from football among the various masculinities from within the school context. However, due to the young age of the students we interviewed, we understand the concept of "flexible masculinity" as an analytical category.

Construction of masculinity from sport: research at school

Messner (1990) suggests that the strong, virile and powerful body acquires more and more importance in the construction of gender order. In this way, sport acts as an important organized institution that helps in the incarnation of hegemonic masculinity. Several studies (Messner, 1990; Pringle & Markula, 2005) have shown that sport serves to reinforce a hegemonic version of masculinity that is characterized by traits such as hardness, competitiveness, heterosexuality and tolerance to pain. For example, "boys are exposed to 'lessons' on how to get back up after being knocked down, how to express themselves physically, how to impose themselves forcefully, how to mask pain and how to follow team rules" (Hickey, 2008, p. 148). Therefore, several investigations have observed schools, and more specifically their playgrounds, as a privileged scenario in which children can exercise these types of hegemonic practices through sport. Thus, Swain (2006) points out that competitive sports that are practiced in school (football, netball, hockey...) should not be seen as a mere entertainment, but as a strategy that serves to reinforce a hegemonic model of masculinity that is imitated, in the most part, from adult male professional sports.

Likewise, most scholarly research has studied the role of football in the construction of hegemonic masculinity because it is the most popular sport among children in diverse socio-cultural contexts. This is so because, as Swain (2000) suggests, football is full of masculinizing meanings and practices that help in the production and reproduction of high-status masculinity within the school. In this sense, various investigations (Campbell et al., 2018; Light, 2008; Renold, 1997; Warren, 2003) have proven that practices and skills such as strength, speed, individuality, control of space and violence are highly valued for the performance of football within the school context. Thus, the hegemonic form of masculinity through football is strongly linked to physicality and the bodies that are perceived as passive are excluded from the playing field.

Hence, due to cultural conceptions about the inability of female bodies to be adequate for sport, girls are usually expelled from the football field, in turn producing a male monopoly of space (Fagrell, Larsson & Redelius, 2012; Karsten, 2003; Paechter and Clark, 2007). Various investigations have shown that children often devise strategies that facilitate female disengagement from football. For example, Skelton (2000) found that some children used a coded language that prevented girls from understanding the operation of the activity. On the other hand, girls who choose football as an activity often occupy a marginal role and are described as "tomboys" (Mayeza, 2017). Fagrell et al (2012) observed that girls who played football had assumed that it was the boys who took charge of the game and agreed to the rules of the game. Therefore, girls learned the rules that allowed them to play football together with their peers, but their scope for action within the activity was small. At the same time, several investigations (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Fagrell et al., 2012; Paechter & Clark, 2007) have shown that girls who play football are insecure and fearful during the game and try to prevent boys from passing them the ball.

On the other hand, Messner (1990) points out that violent sports are a practice that helps to build a model of masculinity that serves both to unite men in the domain of women, and to subordinate other non-hegemonic masculinities. In this way, various studies have shown that a clear hierarchical system of masculinities is produced at school, in which boys are classified according to their sporting abilities. The non-participation of men in football can be equated with femininity or immaturity. For this reason, boys who choose not to play football and who show traits attributable to femininity have sometimes been the object of ridicule and homophobic comments (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 1999; Silva, Botelho-Gomes, & Goellner, 2012). As Messner (1990) points out, these

homophobic discourses are often found in sports environments where adult athletes participate. At the same time, in magazines or other media such as television, hegemonic masculinity is also linked to this image of a heterosexual sportsman. By acting as a reference model for children, this adult sport masculinity, author 1 and author 2 (2019) observed that some non-football children were exposed to homophobic comments within the classroom, which forced their participation in the game of football. With this in mind, several investigations (Barnes, 2012; Martino, 1999) also point to the existence of a masculine vigilance within the school that sanctions non-normative behaviours through the use of humour and ridicule in public.

However, as pointed out by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity can also be questioned, giving rise to tensions in the process of identity construction. In this way, it is necessary to explore the complexities and contradictions in the process of construction of masculinities. Pringle and Hickey (2010) found that some adult athletes rejected hypermasculinity behaviours and thus built themselves as cooperative and affectionate. In the same direction, Anderson (2008) discovered that some adult athletes supported an "inclusive masculinity" that was characterized by respect for women, acceptance of homosexuality and the search for intimacy. Similarly, some research has shown that, within the school context, some children also reject hypermasculinity behaviours and choose to build their masculinities outside sport. Furthermore, Swain (2000, 2006) found a new model of masculinity that she called "personalized masculinity" for being embodied by children who had no interest in participating in high status sports and enjoyed other sports such as swimming. In the same way, Renold (2004) found in her ethnographic study that some children configured their identities outside the hegemonic discourse when they prioritized fantasy games instead of football. Therefore, we must bear in mind that hegemonic masculinity is negotiated in school and is open to possible changes as a result of the tensions between the various masculinities and also in the relationship with femininity.

Method and participants

The research we present takes an ethnographic approach and for it a total of 380 hours of participant observation has been carried out in four schools with children between three and five years of age. For the first stage of data collection we conducted 300 hours of participant observation in three schools located in the north of Spain. The second stage of

data collection was carried out in a school located in Oporto (Portugal). The data collected in the first phase of research have already been presented in another document (author 1 & author 2, 2019). This document presents the data collected in the last school we visited which we have called "Emilia Pardo". The school "Emilia Pardo" was located in the centre of the city of Oporto and had started the academic year of 2018-2019 with a total of 235 students. The observations were made in the playground when 11 boys and 12 five-year-old girls played freely. The funding of the school was mixed, so it received public funds and also an economic contribution from the families. The socioeconomic level of these families was medium low and had a high number of unemployed fathers and mothers, therefore many of them received financial support from the state. For this reason, the school offered free meals to students. In addition, various extracurricular activities were offered for children; such as dance, swimming, karate, guitar or choir. However, football played an important role and there was a high demand from families for its start-up at the school.

Field work and data analysis

Our stay in the field of study was divided into two phases. First, we conducted 80 hours of participant observation in the playground, to observe the way five-year-old boys negotiated their masculinity from football. During these observations the researcher tried to approach the participants, distancing themselves from the role of "teacher". To do this, she talked with the children and participated in some of the teacher's games. At the beginning it was difficult to talk with the football children during recess due to their great involvement in the game of football, so the observer remained behind the fence that separated the football field from the rest of the playground, taking field notes. However, as the observations progressed, the football children began to show interest in the presence of the observer and often approached her, which resulted in several spontaneous conversations. On the other hand, the non-football boys and some girls normally approached the observer, claiming their participation in some games such as "the little houses" or "the slides". The observations were collected in detail in the field notes and, subsequently, in the field diary. Ethnographic data was completed with four semi-structured group interviews in order to establish dialogue with the boys and girls about their experiences with football. A total of 7 boys and 7 girls were invited to participate in the group interviews. The observer explained that the meetings were aimed to reveal their

perception of the games that were taking place in the playground. All the children were excited to conduct the interviews and agreed to participate.

In the first group interview, the children who normally played football in the playground (Joao, André, Mateus and Danilo) participated; in the second interview three non-football children participated (Lidio, Luís, Justino) and in the last two interviews Seven girls participated (Amaral, Renata, Filipa, Telma, Catrina, Izabel and Briatiz). These three groups of boys and girls were chosen to be interviewed separately in order to avoid silencing possible alternative masculinities and to facilitate the sincere intervention of the girls when they talked about football. In this sense, Carlman and Hjalmarsson (2018) found that groups composed of only girls expressed their views better than those groups composed of boys and girls; this was probably due to the fact that girls had little experience in sports. The football children were intentionally selected because they were the children who played football daily at recess time. The choice of the rest of the participants was a spontaneous process, based on the relationships established with the children during the game times.

The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted in a classroom dedicated to leisure activities so that the children did not relate them to an academic activity. To carry out the interviews, we used our own semi-structured interview script. The script was made based on some previous research (Renold, 1997; Swain, 2000; Mayeza, 2017) and questions were also introduced that were based on observations made in the playground. The script introduced four large blocks: distribution of spaces, influence of professional football, participation in the game of football and skills necessary for the game of football. Each topic included a series of open questions to guide the discussion. For example, in the “participation in the game of football” block we asked: “Can all boys and girls participate in football in the playground?”, “Why do girls not participate?”, “Why do only a few children play?”, “If other children wanted to play, could they?” Based on the children's responses, the observer asked additional questions and rephrased some of the questions. To complete the information, an interview was conducted with Telma, the teacher responsible for the classroom, and also with some of the parents. All interviews were recorded in audio and transcribed in their entirety.

We verified that we had high quality data from the group interviews with the children and with the field notes collected during the observations in the playground. We decided that

this sum of data were of a high enough quality and complex enough to proceed directly to its analysis to explore the discourse of boys and girls when they discuss football, which was our main objective. Although, at specific times we will rely on the discourse of some parents and the teacher to strengthen our arguments. To perform the data analysis, we read the group interviews several times and two researchers coded the material separately to identify common categories. Then the two researchers met and debated the highlighted issues. A coding tree was made based on the initial script and introducing emerging categories based on the information collected in the interviews.

In this way, the code tree is made up of the following categories and subcategories: Space distribution (exclusion of girls from the football field, exclusion of some children, female resistance to male's domination of space), elements taken from professional football (pain simulation, scoring and celebration of goals, comparison with professional football players), girls' role in football (participate or having participated, lack of sports skills, lack of interest in football, asking permission to play, preventing participation), and classification of masculinities (hegemonic/dominant, subordinate, personalized/alternative, flexible). The analysis of the data was carried out from a poststructuralist lens to explore the complexities and possible contradictions in the football discourse of boys and girls. In the results section we use illustrative discursive fragments of each of the categories. All names used are pseudonyms.

Results

Space distribution: hierarchy of gender and age in accessing the football field

Previous research has shown that playgrounds are strongly segregated by gender (Mayeza, 2017; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Renold, 1997; Swain, 2000). Spatial relationships within the school are important because masculine and feminine identities are constructed in terms of how bodies are placed within certain spaces. In "Emilia Pardo" there was a huge playground with a football field where the football boys spent about two hours throughout the morning. Five-year-old girls and non-football boys played in the garden separated by a large net from the football field. When the football boys were asked why girls never played football, Joao said it was because "*girls always prefer to play house and hide-and-peek,*" reinforcing the traditional dichotomy of boy's games/girl's games. Joao also pointed out the scarce interest that girls had in football, as the main cause of female non-participation in the activity. However, some non-football girls and

boys claimed that the game of football was dominated by boys, which restricted girls' participation:

Amaral: Boys do not let us play football because they tell us girls that we do not know how to play.

Briatiz: Sometimes we play "house" on the football field but the football boys come and we have to go so that they can play football, and we have to play off the field.

Amaral: Yes. We enter and when they come we have to go, for them to enter. We used to play sometimes, but a long time ago.

Lidio: Before the girls played football, but now they don't because they are not used to it anymore.

Luís: Yes, because before they played more but now they never play. The boys always want to play alone.

Thus, as Paechter and Clark (2007) suggest, girls seem less likely to participate in football as they grow up and their games become less dynamic. However, far from adopting a passive position, the girls developed strategies to resist this spatial marginality. In this sense, they often ran into the football field, ran between the boys and marched into the goal until one of the football boys managed to get rid of them. This event was described by Renata in the interview when she said that "*sometimes girls enter the field, hit the ball and run away*", so it was evident that some of the girls tried to resist the male space dominance even if they did not manage to challenge the hegemonic dominance of football. Similarly, Paechter and Clark (2007) found that the girls in their study adopted an active challenge when they entered the playing field only to interrupt the boy's game and to make their presence felt in a male territory. Hence, football participation in "Emila Pardo" was never equal; moreover, the girls did not accept the marginal position that the boys assigned them and they challenged the spatial gender limits. On the other hand, as in previous investigations (author 1 & author 2, 2019; Paechter & Clark, 2007), there was not only a hierarchy of gender in the access to the playing field but also of age. In this sense, André said that in the playground "*young boys cannot play because they always*

want to pick up the ball with their hands and do not know how to play". Therefore, football was a powerful collective practice of male domination where boy football players decided who could be part of the game, often judging the sporting skills of girls and other boys (Renold, 1997).

"The others": alternative masculinities in the playground

LM: *I have seen that in the playground you do not make football teams, there is not one team that plays against another.*

Joao: *Because the important thing is to play and score goals. Score goals also when there are fouls*

LM: *If you do not score goals, is football less fun?*

Joao: *I'm the best because I score a lot of goals*

André: *No. I'm the best because I score more goals!*

LM: *Better than whom?*

Joao: *Better than the others*

LM: *What others?*

Joao: *We play better than the others. Mateus does not like football*

In this way, children who did not play football and who, therefore, did not adapt to the behaviour understood as masculine, were described by Joao as *"the others"*, subordinates within the male hegemonic matrix. Connell (1995) suggests that this is so because the hegemonic form of masculinity is relational, in which it has the need to refer to other subordinate forms on which it can exercise its power. Hence, in the fragment of discourse shown above, we see how masculine hegemony was compared with other forms of masculinity, and how football boys constructed their masculinities in opposition to the group of children who were outside the normative gender framework. This requires, therefore, vigilance over "other masculinities" less desirable because they "do not measure up" to the hegemonic ideal represented by football. Moreover, in the same line of thought Bhana and Mayeza (2016) recently verified that children who played sports

built their masculinity by subordinating other children, whom they considered unable to play the game of football.

Due to this reason, from the social and cultural conceptions that revolve around football, a clear hierarchical system was created between the different masculinities. André and Joao, considered as the most capable boys referring to the game of football, competed against one another during the interview to maintain their status in front of the peer group. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity gave rise to disputes showing that there are no multiple niches in the upper part of the pyramid (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This power struggle was also evident in the playing field where Mateus and Danilo were positioned as goalkeepers; while André and Joao competed with each other to score as many goals as possible. In this sense, both André and Joao said that the most important thing during the game was "scoring goals" (see previous discursive fragment). Thus, showing that both boys had a conception of the game which was focused on victory. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity was defended daily on the playing field where children competed with each other to score as many goals as possible. However, Walters, Payne, Schluter and Thomson (2015) found that children between 9 and 11 years old disagreed with competitive discourses, positioning themselves in favor of discourses that related sport to fun. In this way, the authors found that, although children were influenced by competitive discourse, they could also resist and question normative practices.

On the other hand, Mayeza (2017) pointed out that the position of goalkeeper can be rejected by many children because it places them out of the game. However, Mateus defended his position as goalkeeper during the group interview saying that for him it was more important to "*stop the goals*". At the same time, non-football boys made no obvious effort to participate in football on a daily basis and during the group interview defended an alternative masculinity against the peer group:

Lidio: I do not like playing football because I'm not used to it. I like to play "house" with the girls.

Justino: I do not like football because I'm not used to it. I like to play ball with my hands

Luís: I prefer playing house and hide-n-seek.

In this way, as Swain (2006) suggests, although the dominant masculinity within the school is represented by sport, not all the boys aspired to achieve this masculine ideal. It is important to bear in mind that only four boys played football daily, while the rest played other games in the school garden with the girls. This situation caused a union among the non-football boys who, often, openly recognized their disinterest in football. However, Lidio said that football was *"more difficult than other games"* and Justino described football as *"a very serious and important game because some children fight when they play"*. Therefore, despite the fact that Lidio and Justino embodied a "personalized masculinity" (Swain, 2006) that was characterized by defining a masculinity far from football, they recognized that this sport enjoyed greater status than the rest of the games.

Harming yourself "like professional football players"

During the group interview Joao gets up to interpret how he plays and scores goals. He simulates scoring a goal and then throws himself to the ground. As if he had hurt himself he grabs his knee and squeezes it hard against his stomach.

LM: Have you hurt yourself?

Joao: No. It's a lie

LM: You mean you were pretending that you were hurt?

Joao: Yes

LM: and why were you doing that?

Joao: Because we play like professional players, and we celebrate goals like professional football players.

André: Yes, because we like to be like the professional football players.

As Connell (1995) points out, hegemonic masculinity has referents that are imitated and perceived as heroes. On the playing field, the boys imagined themselves to be professional footballers and imitated the actions of adult players. The corporal representation that is reflected in the previous discursive fragment was often interpreted on the playing field by all the football boys. Thus, it was common to observe how they pretended to fall to the ground while simulating pain or an injury in some part of their body. Occasionally, they would remain on the floor for several seconds shouting, and it was complicated to know

if the foul had been real. In this way, physicality and physical strength was an important requirement for the game of football and the interview was used by some boys like Joao to demonstrate their football skills making use of these "corporal demonstrations" in public, in front of the rest of the children. Numerous studies (Burgess, Edwards & Skinner, 2003; Campbell et al., 2018; Messner, 1990; Pringle & Markula, 2005) indicate that the experience of physical pain is linked to sporting masculinity since it helps in the construction of an acceptable virility compared to their peers. More specifically, Gard and Meyenn (2000) noted that the risk of injury and physical threat motivates children to choose contact sports. Thus, injuries, risk, and pain are accepted as normal components in sports participation and are perceived as attractive masculinizing practices. Hence, boys of five years of age take as a reference the actions of adult male athletes and try these types of masculinizing actions during the game. However, despite embodying these tough behaviours, they often left the field with tears in their eyes when there were conflicts and/or when they got hurt. This inevitable contradiction was described by the teacher during the interview:

Telma: They imitate the professional football players. On the field they seem older than in the classroom; they swear, they shout, they insult themselves but then ... they are children and there are conflicts that they cannot solve alone and they are always yelling: "Telma!, Telma ! ... he took the ball from me", "he hit me", "I hurt myself" and ... they are always like that, every day.

LM: Would you say that football is the most conflictive of the games?

Telma: Yes, of course. It is always the boys who play football who have to resort to me to solve the conflicts of football, those who come crying ... Football is a problem.

In this way, the football field offered a space on which to practice properly hegemonic behaviours, such as competitiveness, resistance or insult; but, at the same time, it was a hostile terrain where children were often defenceless. These types of conflict were quickly resolved by the teacher and the boys returned to the field to recover the dynamics of the game. On other occasions, Telma scolded the boys and punished them without being able to join the game, which led to the boy crying until the teacher allowed access to the football field again. With this, the masculinity embodied by the football boys was

changing and, often, they were forced to resort to non-hegemonic behaviours, such as crying, in order to recover their status and access the field. In this way, we see reflected the fragile nature of hegemonic masculinity in young boys.

Girls: ask permission to play football "only sometimes"

André and Joao said that the non-participation of girls in the game was due to their lack of interest in football and also to their lack of sports skills. These masculine considerations legitimized the power of boys to take control of football and prevent girls' from accessing the field. The dominant form of masculinity through football is constructed in opposition to femininity, which is relegated to a lower position in the male hierarchy because it is considered less apt for the performance of this activity. In this direction Paechter and Clark (2007) found that the notion of asking permission to play football was established among the group of girls who understood that the football field was male property. However, despite the evidence, the girls who participated in our research did not readily admit that the boys did not want to play with them nor that they had to ask permission to participate in the game. In this sense, they rejected the fragile and defenceless femininity and remained in a contradictory discourse during the group interviews:

LM: To play football, do you ask the boys for permission?

They all say no

Catrina: We do not play because we do not feel like it

Izabel: Because I prefer to train at home

Renata: Izabel sometimes plays at recess.

Izabel: I only play when I want, when I do not play it's because I do not want to. André does not let us, but he is the only boy that doesn't. Joao and Gustavo do let us

Briatiz: He does not let us play, I do not like André. That is not right

Izabel: And Mateus sometimes does not let us play either...

Catrina: One day I asked Mateus and Gustavo to play and they did not let me

LM: mmm but then, you have asked for permission, Catrina

Catrina: Well, we need to ask permission to some boys. Only sometimes

LM: OK. Only sometimes.

As in the study by author 1 and author 2 (2019) some girls claimed that they did not participate in the game of football due solely to their disinterest in the activity (see previous discursive fragment). Thus, at the beginning of the interview all the girls agreed that they should not ask the boys for permission to play football; however, as the conversation developed it seemed difficult for them to maintain that argument and not admit the unfair behaviour of some boys on the field. For this reason, they admitted that Mateus and André did not want them to play with them and that they should ask for permission to play. The girls' discourse left evidence of the fluid, complex and contradictory nature of the genre (see previous discursive fragment). Regarding this issue, the headmaster of the centre pointed out that "*girls are too proud to recognize that boys do not want them to play with them or they do not let them*" and Telma assured that "*although the girls do not always admit it, the boys do not want to play football with them*". In this way, some of the girls built a particular form of femininity that was characterized by sometimes being powerful and sometimes defenceless:

LM: So you mean you play football in the playground with the boys?

Izabel: Yes. We sometimes play football with the boys

LM: Well, I'm very surprised because I've never seen you play football with the boys

Briatiz: That's because we play when you're not there

LM: That is possible.

Izabel: Yes. Today we will play football

LM: Then I'll be able to see you play football

Catrina: Well, today only the girls will play

LM: Didn't you say you were going to play with the boys?

Briatiz: They are very fast and strong and very quick and they take the ball away. Girls have a hard time getting the ball.

Catrina: Yes. Boys are very fast and quick

Briatiz: Catrina! We cannot say that. Girls can also be fast

At the same time, although most of the girls said that "all games are equally important", all the girls agreed that football was the most difficult game. In this sense, Renata said it was "*complicated to kick the ball at the goal*" and Amaral said that "*boys can kick the ball because they are faster and run more.*" Therefore, football boys were often defined in relation to the capacity of their bodies for sport (skillful, fast and strong) and some girls like Amaral understood that they, because of their gender, did not have these sports skills. Hence, the social and cultural conceptions that revolve around football within the school served to reinforce the dichotomous notions about bodies where boys experience themselves as active and strong and girls as weak; and therefore, as obstacles in the playing field. This idea of female annoyance during the game was explained by Amaral's father during the group interview when he said that "*boys possibly do not want to play with girls because they are like a stone in the boys' shoes*". For the most part, Briatiz, although having supported the traditional discourse on the physical superiority of boys over girls, also made persistent attempts to counteract the hegemonic discourse of masculinity (see previous discursive fragment). In this way, some girls held an ambivalent position throughout the group interview.

Towards a flexible masculinity: "they could be good players if they trained"

Joao: They prefer to play "house"

LM: And if they wanted to play football, would you let them?

All boys say yes

LM: Well, and could they play football as well as you?

André: No, they couldn't

LM: why do you think that?

Joao: I think that they could be good players if they trained

André: No. They would not be good players

LM: well I've seen a girl want to play football and it seemed that you boys did not want her to play

Joao: Well, they have to ask us for permission and otherwise they cannot play

In this way, Joao reinforced the conception of football as a game of difficult execution that required training and could only be practiced by boys with greater sports skills. However, he was also affectionate with some girls and encouraged them to train in order to be able to become sportingly skilled girls (see previous discursive fragment). Briatiz's father, in the interview said that his daughter had arrived very excited at home the day before "*because Joao told her that she could be a good football player and that she had to train a lot for it*", something that the same boy confirmed during the interview (see previous discursive fragment). In addition, he was described by the teacher as "*a kind and affectionate boy with the girls*" and as "*a group leader*" by the headmaster of the centre. Furthermore, we found that in the classroom he spent part of his time playing with some of the girls in different activities. In contrast, in the playground we observed that Joao threw the girls out of the football field when they tried to play and in the interview he assured that girls had to ask the boys for permission to participate in football. In this way, Joao embodied a "flexible masculinity" that allowed him to combine hegemonic and non-hegemonic elements of masculinity, while enjoying a high status among the peer group. In this sense, Filipa, Amaral and Briatiz said that Joao was her boyfriend and that's why they liked to watch him play football and score goals. In this way, the conception of the game of football focused on victory, also became an attractive practice for these girls who defined Joao as "*the best football player at scoring goals*". Moreover, some girls resorted to the narrative boyfriend-girlfriend (Renold, 1997) that allowed them to establish emotional ties with Joao who they considered the best footballer and also an affectionate child.

Conclusions

As in previous studies (Keddie, 2005; Martino, 1999; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Renold, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Swain, 2000), the sociocultural conceptions that revolve around football in Portugal, making it the most popular sport, served to reinforce a model of hegemonic masculinity in the Emilia Pardo School. As claimed by Swain (2000), "football is full of aggressive intent, it is about winners and losers, and it is territorial, and full of space-occupying domination, where loyalty and commitment to the team are prized

values". In Emilia Pardo we observed how some children imitated these masculine practices daily. The children made an effort to resemble sports stars while they pretended to play on a professional team, celebrated goals, dominated the space, shouted and competed on the playing field. This research is relevant because it shows that, by the age of five, some students had already normalized hegemonic elements of masculinity associated with professional football such as risk of injury, violence, competitiveness or pain. Although football children were a minority, they occupied a privileged position and built their masculinities by marginalizing femininities and subordinating non-football "other children", who were relegated to a lower position within the hierarchical gender model described by Connell.

Furthermore, this research found the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" and "subordinate masculinity" useful to explore the hierarchy and classification that occurs among the various masculinities from football within the school. However, it is important to note that there were some limitations when applying Connell's theory to our ethnographic study. André and Joao were the boys considered most capable of playing football by the rest of the boys and girls and by the teacher. However, André and Joao's relationship with football did not result in only one pattern of masculinity. André was the child who approached the hegemonic pattern the most, doing so through violent behaviours during the game and also with his interactions with the girls. On the contrary, Joao distanced himself from this hegemonic masculinity when he showed closeness and kindness to some girls. However, at the same time, he defined himself as the best footballer in the class and maintained a conception of football which focused on competitiveness and victory. In this way, he embodied a "flexible masculinity" that was characterized by combining hegemonic and non-hegemonic elements.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that this flexible masculinity was embodied by all football boys to a greater or lesser extent. This is so, because the football field was a scenario in which boys practiced hegemonic skills such as competitiveness and domination, but it was also a hostile space where conflicts arose, which caused boys to be vulnerable and helpless through childish behaviour like crying. At the same time, we must bear in mind that this research has been carried out in a specific school context. Therefore, the results cannot be extrapolated to all schools. Thus, it is likely that the spatial disposition of the school favored the configuration of this dominant model of masculinity associated with football, since football children had a large football field that

they enjoyed exclusively and without restrictions. In turn, both André's and Joao's family were strongly involved in their children's sports training. In this sense, it is important to note that both boys, unlike the rest of their classmates, regularly went to the football stadium near the city with their parents and also attended football practice several days a week. In addition, André's father was part of the most important hockey team in Portugal and Joao's father played football on a regular basis. Therefore, the school and the family acted as complementary institutions to reinforce this hegemonic model of masculinity based on sport.

In this sense, we must bear in mind that, although the research, which has been carried out up until now to study the construction of masculinities from football in the school context, have been done mostly with students from primary school (see for example Kediie, 2005; Mayeza, 2017; Renold, 1997; Swain, 2000) this study has been developed with even younger students. For this reason, we conclude that the age of the students has been able to influence the development of this flexible masculinity that, in a very probable way, becomes more static/hegemonic over time. With all this in mind, a possible line of research would be to study the behavior of a group of children from their first years of life until adolescence; thus, be able confirm or refute whether young children begin by practicing a “flexible masculinity” and that with the passage of Time this masculinity becomes hegemonic. Hence, we must not forget that the cultural values that go together with football create a series of gender expectations that encourage children in the configuration of a dominant masculinity model that takes hold as time passes. In this way, the coeducational intervention from the first years of life is essential in order to avoid the encapsulation of the hegemonic forms of masculinity. With this in mind, it is important to promote other practices and sports and to facilitate the participation in the game of football for both boys and girls who do not comply with the characteristics associated with the hegemonic model.

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