



SHAPING IDENTITY: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN THE AGE OF GENDER FLUIDITY

Antonio Sacristano¹ⁱ,

Carmine Genovese²,

Domenico Stasio³,

Stefania Di Nicola⁴

¹Pedagogue,

Adjunct Professor of Special Pedagogy,

University of Salerno,

Italy

orcid.org/0009-0007-4280-1622

²MIM Teacher,

Ministry of Education and Merit,

Italy

Expert in Special Pedagogy

³MIM Teacher,

Ministry of Education and Merit,

Italy

Teacher for the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM),

Adjunct Professor of Drawing Laboratory,

Laboratory of General Didactics and Educational Technologies,

University of Salerno,

Italy

⁴MIM Teacher,

Ministry of Education and Merit,

Italy

Abstract:

This paper explores the intersection between gender identity, developmental psychology, and critical pedagogy, with a particular focus on teacher education and the creation of inclusive learning environments. Through a comprehensive theoretical analysis, the text highlights how gender norms—often taken for granted—are socially and culturally constructed, significantly shaping school contexts. The role of the school is examined not only as a site of cognitive learning but also as a space where identities are shaped and where stereotypes and inequalities are either reinforced or challenged. Drawing on psycho-pedagogical and sociological approaches, including the work of Butler, Bourdieu, Connell, and Deleuze, the paper promotes a critical and transformative

ⁱ Correspondence: email asacristano@unisa.it, carminegenovese@hotmail.it,
mimmmostasio@gmail.com, stefaniadinicola2003@yahoo.it

vision of education. The goal is to provide teachers with theoretical and practical tools to recognize and counteract exclusionary dynamics related to gender, thus fostering a more equitable and diversity-respecting school environment. The text ultimately calls for a renewal of teacher training that embraces the complexity of identity and encourages reflective and inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: gender identity, critical pedagogy, teacher education, school inclusion, social construction of gender

1. Introduction

In recent decades, gender identity has emerged as one of the most discussed and renegotiated dimensions of the self, prompting profound theoretical and practical reconsiderations in both psychological and educational fields. The growing visibility of non-binary identities and the progressive deconstruction of traditional gender categories have placed education before new challenges, demanding critical reflection on the implicit and explicit formative mechanisms that contribute to the construction of personal and social identity (Bartholomaeus & Loughnan, 2017; Payne & Smith, 2014).

From a psychological perspective, gender identity development is now understood as a dynamic process influenced by neurobiological factors, relational experiences, and sociocultural contexts (Diamond, 2020). Contemporary theories of gender identity have progressively moved away from the essentialist approach, which conceived gender as a stable, biologically determined, and binary attribute rooted in natural differences between males and females (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). This perspective, now widely questioned, has given way to more complex theoretical models that conceive gender as a dynamic, situated, and relational construction, resulting from the interaction between individual predispositions and social, cultural, and discursive narratives (Zosuls *et al.*, 2011; Hyde *et al.*, 2019).

In the field of developmental psychology, several studies have shown that even in early childhood, children learn gender categories not only through internal self-regulation mechanisms but also through environmental feedback, adult role models, and the symbolic codes conveyed by media and educational institutions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Martin & Ruble, 2004). The very concept of "gender schema" theory, developed by Bem (1981) and later expanded by other authors, highlighted how gender is internalized through cognitive processing of socially available information, giving rise to identity representations that are continuously evolving.

In socio-constructivist and post-structuralist frameworks, scholars such as Judith Butler (2004) have further radicalized this interpretation by introducing the idea of gender performativity: gender is not something one is, but something one does, enacts, and constructs through the repetition of discursive and bodily practices within a normative order that regulates its legitimacy. From this perspective, gender identity is

never fully determined nor entirely free but emerges from the intersection of embodied subjectivities and sociocultural frameworks.

These contributions have also influenced interactionist and contextual theories, which emphasize the importance of individual trajectories, multiple belongings, and situated experiences in identity development. In this sense, gender is now understood as a fluid, multidimensional, and intersectional process, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, ability, and geographic context (Risman, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008).

Moving away from essentialism does not imply a denial of the bodily or biological dimension but rather a critical reworking of it within a broader and more dynamic framework that acknowledges the agency of subjects in the construction of the self. From this perspective, gender identity is not a starting point but an open trajectory to be pedagogically accompanied with care, attention, and awareness.

In this view, gender fluidity does not represent a deviation from the norm but a possible expression of the evolutionary complexity of the self.

At the same time, pedagogy is called upon to reflect on its role in promoting educational environments capable of recognizing, welcoming, and valuing the plurality of gender identities. School, as a space of both primary and secondary socialization, acts as a powerful agent of normativity but can also become a place of emancipation and transformation, provided it develops inclusive practices and deconstructive curricula (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016). This requires critical and conscious teacher training that can recognize its own biases and promote teaching attentive to affective and identity dimensions.

In an era marked by increasing sensitivity to gender issues, it is urgent to promote an integrated psycho-pedagogical approach capable of accompanying individuals in their identity journey with respect, competence, and openness. This contribution aims to explore the intersections between psychological development and educational practices, offering a critical and interdisciplinary reading of the implications related to the formation of gender identity in contemporary educational contexts.

2. Norms, spaces, and language: the influence of educational contexts in gender subjectivation processes

The formation of gender identity does not occur in a social vacuum but is configured as the result of constant negotiation between the individual and the surrounding context. In particular, educational environments — from early childhood education to higher education institutions — represent crucial spaces for gender socialization, as they convey norms, expectations, and often rigid behavioral models (Allen, 2015; Kehily, 2019).

Daily teaching practices, the language used by educators, the arrangement of school spaces, and the organization of the curriculum itself constitute powerful pedagogical devices in terms of gender identity construction. These elements, although often operating implicitly or unintentionally, actively participate in the transmission of

cultural models, social norms, and role expectations, thereby reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes and binarisms (Francis *et al.*, 2017).

Numerous studies have highlighted how school practices tend to unconsciously reproduce traditional gender norms. For example, observational studies have shown that primary school teachers often interact differently with girls and boys: they more frequently encourage emotional expression and collaboration in the former, while promoting competitiveness and leadership in the latter (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Renold, 2006). These dynamics, even when unintentional, convey deeply normative messages about gender expectations, influencing students' perceptions of themselves and others.

The language adopted in educational contexts also plays a crucial role. The systematic use of binary, heteronormative, or sexist language contributes to the invisibilization of non-conforming identities and the normalization of a rigid, hierarchical gender model. Conversely, the conscious adoption of inclusive language, respectful of subjectivities and attentive to the plurality of identity expressions, can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool for recognition and legitimization (Motschenbacher, 2011; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

The structuring of school spaces — from classroom environments to activity divisions, to the physical arrangement of desks, furniture, and signage — also reflects and reproduces gender models. Rigidly gendered spaces, such as bathrooms or locker rooms, or environments decorated with stereotypical color codes (e.g., pink for girls, blue for boys), may reinforce the male/female dichotomy and hinder the recognition of non-binary subjectivities (Paechter, 2007).

The organization of the curriculum and the selection of teaching materials profoundly influence identity representations. Textbooks portraying traditional gender roles, the marginalization of female figures in history, or the absence of references to non-heteronormative families contribute to perpetuating a limited and stereotyped worldview (Sunderland *et al.*, 2002; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015). Promoting a gender-inclusive curriculum thus means rethinking content and teaching methods from a critical and transformative perspective, capable of welcoming and reflecting the complexity of reality.

In this sense, the school has the potential not only to reproduce the existing symbolic order but also to act as a space of resistance and cultural change. A critical awareness of the implicit mechanisms that sustain gender asymmetries is a necessary condition for activating authentically emancipatory educational processes. An educational approach sensitive to gender issues can foster in individuals greater self-awareness and expressive potential, reducing the risk of marginalization for those who do not identify with dominant normative models (Kosciw *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, school contexts marked by normative rigidity and a lack of tools for the inclusion of non-conforming identities tend to produce phenomena of exclusion, invisibilization, and psychological distress (McGuire *et al.*, 2010).

In this sense, the intersection between developmental psychology and critical pedagogy becomes strategic: on one hand, it allows for reading students' affective-identity needs from an evolutionary and situated perspective; on the other, it enables the design of transformative educational interventions that go beyond mere "tolerance," aiming instead at the full legitimization of plural subjectivities. This is a process that implies a profound cultural change, in which education assumes the ethical and political responsibility of deconstructing binary structures and promoting an affective citizenship based on respect and the coexistence of differences (Taylor & Peter, 2011; hooks, 2013).

3. Educating for complexity: psycho-pedagogical competences for the promotion of inclusive gender identities

Addressing the issue of gender identity in educational settings cannot be limited to occasional interventions or a mere thematic addition to curricula, but requires the intentional development of psycho-pedagogical skills that enable educators to understand and support identity complexity in a structured and ongoing way.

Initial and in-service training for teaching staff and school personnel represents a crucial point for the construction of inclusive, equitable, and diversity-respecting educational environments. In particular, the ability to recognize gender expressions as plural, fluid, and evolving cannot be confined to a purely cognitive or informational level, but must integrate theoretical knowledge, relational skills, and reflective competencies.

Firstly, research in the field of gender studies in education highlights how a critical understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation categories is fundamental to countering normalizing or discriminatory educational practices (Ryan *et al.*, 2013). Training must therefore promote a deconstruction of stereotypes and a transformative learning process capable of reorienting teaching practices and educational relationships (Mezirow, 1991; hooks, 1994).

Secondly, the school environment can become a space for reproducing discrimination, but also a laboratory for plural citizenship, if supported by educators capable of understanding the complexity of the identity trajectories of children and adolescents. To this end, relational and empathic skills play a central role: knowing how to listen, welcome, and value emerging subjectivities is a prerequisite for ensuring well-being, a sense of belonging, and active participation in school settings (Greytak *et al.*, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2014). The educational relationship is never neutral: it serves as a fundamental device for recognizing the other in their uniqueness and in their right to visibility, especially when it comes to identities that do not conform to dominant gender or orientation norms.

Educational research shows that the presence of teachers able to establish empathic and authentic relationships is associated with an improvement in the school climate and a significant reduction in exclusion and marginalization phenomena (Kosciw *et al.*, 2018). Empathy should not be understood merely as a personal predisposition, but as a professional competence that can be developed through targeted training programs,

based on self-awareness, critical reflection, and the ability to question oneself (Cooper, 2011).

Promoting a pedagogy of relationship means building environments in which every student can feel recognized, not judged, and free to express their identity. This approach aligns with the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2005), which values the voice of students as co-constructors of meaning, and with educational practices oriented towards social justice (Fraser, 2009), which focus on mechanisms of recognition and redistribution of opportunities.

For this reason, both initial and in-service training should include modules focused on the development of relational soft skills and inclusive communication abilities, fostering in future teachers a reflective, non-judgmental, and culturally sensitive attitude.

The reflective dimension must be constantly nurtured throughout a teacher's professional journey: as emphasized by Schön (1983), educational professionalism is built through the ability to reflect on action, in action, and for action. Reflection is not an accessory activity, but a structural element of the practical thinking of the teacher, who is configured as a "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1987), capable of learning from experience and acting in uncertain, ambiguous, or conflictual contexts.

Such a reflective posture implies a willingness to question preconceptions, attitudes, practices, and internalized languages, especially in relation to complex issues such as gender, identity, inclusion, and difference. Reflectivity is not only a cognitive process but also an ethical and transformative one (Brookfield, 1995), requiring critical courage and awareness of one's positioning in relation to knowledge, power, and educational relationships.

Specifically regarding gender issues, it is essential for teachers to recognize the cultural and symbolic devices that produce normalization, exclusion, and invisibilization in everyday school practices (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2012). Reflectivity enables the deconstruction of such automatisms and the questioning of one's educational models, opening up to more inclusive and democratic perspectives based on recognition and justice (Fraser, 2009).

In this sense, initial and continuous training should offer structured spaces for pedagogical reflection—such as workshops, supervisions, and narrative practices—that allow educators to critically explore their professional identity and develop tools to promote non-sexist, non-homotransphobic, and intercultural education (Rinaldi, 2005; Giuffrida & Pinto Minerva, 2021).

A pedagogy attentive to gender identity is grounded in empathic listening, reciprocal recognition, and the ability to create safe spaces where every subjectivity can be expressed without fear of judgment or exclusion. In this view, the educational relationship is configured as a privileged space for constructing an authentic self—not bound to adherence to normative and predetermined models, but open to the possibility of emerging in one's uniqueness through a dynamic process of exploration, error, deconstruction, and redefinition (Sands *et al.*, 2020). The school environment can thus

become a generative space, capable of offering relational safety and, at the same time, transformative stimuli that encourage students to experiment with plural forms of subjectivity.

This perspective is consistent with the pedagogy of recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), which attributes value to individual and collective identity as an intersubjective construction, based on dialogue, reciprocity, and symbolic justice. In education oriented towards valuing diversity, the self is not a fixed entity, but a reality in progress, continuously negotiated within relational and cultural contexts (Bruner, 1996).

Recognizing the authenticity of the other—and therefore also their possibilities of exploring non-conforming gender identities or expressive forms—requires the adult's willingness to build a non-judgmental relational space, based on active listening, suspension of prejudice, and care for intersubjectivity (Noddings, 2005). Educational environments that foster authentic expression and freedom to experiment with personal identity are associated with increased psychological well-being, perceived self-efficacy, and school motivation (Sands *et al.*, 2020; Grossman *et al.*, 2021).

The educator thus becomes a figure of accompaniment and facilitation, who recognizes the value of processes of trial and error not as failures, but as essential moments in the formative and identity-building journey. This approach is closely linked to a narrative and transformative pedagogy, which centers lived experience, self-narration, and the possibility of critically reworking one's own story (Bruner, 2002; Mezirow, 1991).

From a psychological perspective, this means promoting the development of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging—three fundamental factors for the psychosocial well-being of young people with non-conforming gender identities (Russell *et al.*, 2011; Singh *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, it is essential that teaching practices adopt an intersectional approach, capable of understanding how gender interacts with other identity axes (ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability), generating complex educational experiences that cannot be interpreted through linear frameworks.

Educating about the complexity of gender identity means training educators who are capable of deconstructing stereotypes, supporting conscious subjectivation processes, and contributing to the construction of truly inclusive environments. A systemic commitment is required—but one that represents an essential condition for a democratic, just, and generative school.

4. From theory to practice: educational strategies for the valorization of gender identities

Translating theoretical reflections into concrete educational actions represents one of the most urgent and complex challenges for actors within the educational system. The valorization of gender identities passes through everyday practices which, if adequately designed, can foster equitable, pluralistic, and transformative learning environments. Among the most effective strategies are the introduction of gender-sensitive curricula,

the use of teaching materials that reflect diversity, the adoption of inclusive language, and the critical review of assessment and disciplinary systems (Snapp *et al.*, 2015; UNESCO, 2021).

Particular significance is attributed to the methodology of the hidden curriculum, namely the set of messages and models implicitly conveyed by the school through relationships, rules, roles, and expectations (Jackson, 2012). An environment that, for instance, tolerates sexist language or systematically ignores trans and non-binary identities contributes to reinforcing exclusionary models and hindering the identity development of many students. Conversely, an educational context that promotes critical thinking, self-narration, and collective reflection on social norms lays the foundation for genuinely emancipatory and transformative pathways (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). Such educational practices challenge transmissive and normalizing logics, fostering the emergence of plural subjectivities and the possibility of deconstructing the dominant cultural codes that, often implicitly, regulate processes of inclusion, exclusion, and recognition within the school (Butler, 2004; Biesta, 2010).

Self-narration, in this framework, represents not only an identity exercise but also an epistemic and political practice that allows individuals to articulate their experiences in relation to power structures and hegemonic social discourses (Bruner, 1996; Cavarero, 2000). Through storytelling, individuals place themselves in the world, give meaning to their trajectories, and recognize themselves (and are recognized) as subjects of value. The school can thus constitute a space in which narration and active listening allow for the renegotiation of the boundaries of normality, redefining the categories of gender, belonging, success, and participation (hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2002).

Critical thinking, far from being a mere cognitive skill, involves the ability to question the ideological structures underpinning the implicit curriculum and school culture, and to imagine more just and inclusive alternatives (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). In particular, education oriented toward social justice does not merely raise student awareness, but engages them in dialogic and reflective processes that challenge systemic inequalities, promoting agency and collective responsibility.

As Meyer and Keenan (2018) emphasize, inclusive school policies and pedagogical practices that are aware of power dynamics are essential to creating educational environments that affirm gender diversity and counter microaggressions and discrimination. The collective dimension of reflection also allows for the construction of a shared ethic of coexistence, grounded in mutual recognition, listening, and equity.

The opportunity for students to question knowledge, narrate themselves in the first person, and critically analyze the cultural structures that regulate belonging, roles, and expectations—especially those related to gender and identity—enables them to develop a greater awareness of themselves and the world, as well as to imagine possible alternatives to dominant models.

This approach is inspired by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), which views education not as a neutral act but as a deeply political process, capable of deconstructing internalized forms of oppression through dialogue, conscientização (conscientization),

and transformative praxis. Freire criticizes the “banking” model of education, in which knowledge is deposited into students by the teacher, and instead proposes a dialogical model in which students and teachers become co-constructors of knowledge through critical engagement with reality (Freire, 1970/2002).

Conscientização, a central concept in Freirean pedagogy, is the process through which individuals become aware of the social reality and power structures that shape them, developing a critical consciousness that allows not only for understanding the world but also for acting to transform it (Freire, 1970; Darder, 2017). Education, from this perspective, is never mere content transmission but always relationship, action, reflection, and mutual transformation.

This paradigm is particularly fertile in the field of education on differences and the recognition of gender identities: it invites the unmasking of oppressive logics embedded in language, curricula, and institutional practices, and promotes an educational alliance founded on respect, listening, and social justice (Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994). The teacher, in the role of transformative intellectual, is tasked with accompanying students on a journey of liberation from cultural and structural conditioning, fostering processes of personal and collective empowerment.

In this sense, narrative and reflective activity serves not only an expressive function but becomes an epistemic and political tool for resisting homogenization and generating new shared meanings (Bruner, 1996; hooks, 1994).

Self-narration also supports the construction of a dialogical and relational identity, shaped through engagement with others and a plurality of perspectives. In the school setting, this translates into the creation of authentic spaces for dialogue, where students can discuss ethical, cultural, and social issues, moving beyond a performance-based evaluative logic to achieve forms of deeply meaningful learning (Bamberg, 2011).

Emancipatory education, therefore, does not coincide with the unidirectional delivery of content, but is realized in a dialogical and relational process that centers the student’s subjectivity and their ability to critically participate in the construction of knowledge (Biesta, 2010). In this perspective, knowledge is not transmitted as a neutral and closed object but emerges as a shared and negotiated construction, the result of discursive and reflective practices that actively involve students in the reworking of meanings.

Biesta (2010) identifies three fundamental functions of education: qualification (the transmission of knowledge and skills), socialization (integration into shared norms and values), and subjectification, that is, the formation of individuals capable of thinking, acting, and speaking autonomously and responsibly in the world. It is this third dimension that constitutes the heart of emancipatory education, as it is oriented toward freedom, autonomy, and the capacity to critically question the social and cultural context. Subjectification does not occur without conflict, resistance, or discontinuity: to educate also means to offer a space where the voice of the other can emerge in its difference, without being assimilated or silenced (Rancière, 1991). This implies a radical rethinking

of the role of education: no longer as a tool for normalization, but as an ethical and political space where dissent, heterogeneity, and multiplicity are recognized.

Jacques Rancière, in his work *Disagreement*, argues that every act of subjectification is a political act, as it introduces a rupture in the given order, affirming the presence of those who have been excluded from the right to speak and be recognized (Rancière, 1995). Education, in this perspective, is not a neutral process but the site of a possible redistribution of the sensible, where subjects are constituted through practices of visibility and enunciation that break the silence imposed by the dominant order (Rancière, 2004).

Bringing forth the voice of the other thus means recognizing its legitimacy—not as a tolerated exception but as a constitutive part of the educational discourse. As Todd (2015) affirms, authentic recognition implies the willingness to welcome the unexpected and the unassimilable, preserving the other's alterity without reducing it to what is already known or understandable. In this sense, education becomes a space where it is possible to resist homogenizing logics and cultivate forms of critical and plural citizenship (Biesta, 2006).

Within an emancipatory pedagogy, conflict is not something to avoid but an opportunity to generate awareness, build meaningful relationships, and transform practices. Resistance, discontinuity, and disagreement are constitutive dimensions of authentic learning, as they prompt the renegotiation of identities and social meanings (Butler, 2004; Ellsworth, 1989).

Taking the floor, in this framework, assumes a political as well as pedagogical significance: it means recognizing oneself as a subject entitled to speak and to transform, through speech, one's conditions of existence.

In this sense, the school can become a "place of possibility" (hooks, 1994), where critical participation, self-narration, and dialogue have not only formative but also liberatory value. This is a conception of education as a transformative practice, inspired both by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and by an ethic of care and recognition (Noddings, 2005; Fraser, 2009), capable of promoting equity, active citizenship, and social justice.

Such a perspective is particularly relevant in practices of education for citizenship, diversity, and gender, where the goal is not so much to transmit norms as to build awareness, agency, and transformative capacity.

However, inclusive practices must be embedded within a systemic framework: it is essential that school leaders, teachers, educators, families, and institutions collaborate in building a culture of welcome and shared responsibility. In this sense, the school can become not only a place for the transmission of knowledge but also an ethical-political space of social construction, where citizens are formed who are aware of their own identities and respectful of those of others (Biesta, 2010; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020).

Investing in gender-aware educational practices thus does not mean adhering to ideological fashions but responding to a fundamental pedagogical and democratic need:

that of building a school capable of reflecting and accompanying the transformations of contemporary society.

5. Obstacles and resistance in gender education: ideological, institutional, and cultural tensions

Despite the urgency and pedagogical relevance of education attentive to gender identity, the introduction of inclusive practices and approaches in school contexts continues to encounter numerous forms of resistance, which manifest at various levels: individual, institutional, and socio-political.

On an individual level, many teachers and educational professionals report a lack of specific training on gender and diversity issues, which often results in professional insecurity, fear of "making mistakes," and difficulty in addressing complex situations related to non-conforming identities.

This training gap, as noted by Ferfolja and Ullman (2020), can generate defensive attitudes, avoidance of the topic, or worse, the unconscious reproduction of stereotypes and exclusionary practices.

Research conducted by Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) highlighted that many Australian educators and teachers struggle to promote inclusive school environments for LGBTQ+ students, primarily due to the lack of specific competencies in this area. This training deficit often leads to a sense of vulnerability and professional uncertainty, especially when no clear institutional guidelines or targeted pedagogical tools are available to address issues of gender identity and sexual orientation in everyday teaching practice. The sense of inadequacy is further exacerbated in educational settings where school policies are ambiguous, contradictory, or insufficiently explicit in supporting sexual and gender diversity (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020).

In such situations, teachers may experience a conflict between the desire to act inclusively and the fear of negative reactions from colleagues, school leaders, families, or the broader school community. Furthermore, as Smith *et al.* (2016) emphasize, the persistence of heteronormative narratives in curricula and teaching practices reinforces the invisibility of LGBTQ+ subjectivities, relegating them to a symbolic marginality that translates into concrete exclusion. In this sense, the school becomes a space where dominant normative logics shape educational relationships and teaching content, making it difficult to recognize and valorize the plurality of gender identities and sexual orientations.

Only a systemic approach, which takes into account the complexity of school and social dynamics, can truly transform the educational environment into a safe and welcoming place for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In the absence of critical, systematic, and continuous training on issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation, teachers often tend to adopt conservative practices aimed at maintaining the status quo. This tendency does not necessarily stem from explicitly ideological positions against inclusion but rather from a climate of professional

uncertainty, in which the fear of generating conflicts with families, school administrators, or other institutional actors leads many educators to openly avoid topics perceived as "sensitive" or controversial (Robinson, Smith, & Davies, 2014). Teaching practices thus become implicitly governed by logics of self-censorship or an "apparent neutrality" that, far from being neutral, contributes to reinforcing the hegemony of heteronormative norms.

These defensive strategies, although understandable in the context of institutional and cultural constraints, produce significant side effects. In particular, they silence experiences and identities that are fundamental to a portion of students, especially those who do not conform to gender norms, contributing to their invisibilization and marginalization. This institutional silence has tangible consequences for the psychological, social, and academic well-being of LGBTQ+ students, as demonstrated by Kosciw *et al.* (2015), who highlight how educational environments perceived as hostile or indifferent increase the risk of isolation, anxiety, depression, and early school dropout. The absence of positive role models and inclusive curricular references also compromises the possibility of developing a serene personal identity and meaningful relationships with peers and reference adults.

For these reasons, it is essential that educational institutions make an explicit commitment to the continuous training of teachers, so they can develop critical, reflective, and transformative skills capable of addressing the complexity of differences in an ethical and pedagogically grounded manner (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Only through a cultural and educational shift involving the entire school system is it possible to overcome the logic of silence and build truly inclusive and just practices.

It is therefore necessary to invest in both pre-service and in-service teacher training, through programs that go beyond the mere transmission of informational content and foster the development of critical, reflective, and empathetic skills, necessary to act consciously in complex and culturally plural educational contexts (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Added to this is the presence of deep-rooted personal and cultural beliefs that hinder the recognition of the legitimacy of identities that do not conform to heteronormative and binary models.

At the institutional level, school policies on gender issues are often ambiguous, fragmented, or absent, leaving room for local decisions heavily influenced by the dominant cultural climate or pressure from groups ideologically opposed to the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ issues in the school curriculum (Formby, 2015; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2021). In many contexts, openly discussing gender identity is still perceived as a controversial political act rather than as an educational necessity related to students' well-being and development.

Tensions are further heightened in the presence of media or political attacks that portray gender education as a "threat" to traditional values or as an attempt at indoctrination. These narratives distort the deeper meaning of inclusive education by

reducing it to a presumed "ideologization" of the school, and contribute to creating and spreading forms of social alarm based more on emotional and symbolic foundations than on empirical data. This phenomenon falls within the framework of the so-called "moral panic" described by Stanley Cohen (2011), which occurs when a specific group or behavior is portrayed by the media, politicians, or other public actors as a threat to dominant moral values, prompting a disproportionate reaction from public opinion. In the school setting, moral panic is often triggered in relation to the introduction of topics related to gender identity, sexual orientation, or affective-relational education, represented as dangerous for children or as forms of ideological "propaganda."

This discursive distortion creates a cultural and institutional climate characterized by suspicion, reticence, and control, which significantly hinders pedagogical innovation and open dialogue among educators, families, and students. Instead of encouraging critical and dialogic reflection on the values of democratic coexistence, dignity, and social justice, moral panic tends to inhibit every attempt at inclusive reform, fueling a culture of fear and self-censorship within schools (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). Furthermore, the media and political pressures that convey such panic end up further marginalizing LGBTQ+ students, reinforcing their sense of exclusion and the risk of institutional discrimination (Kosciw *et al.*, 2022).

It is therefore essential to counter these reactive narratives through a clear public redefinition of the concept of inclusive education, understood not as ideological imposition but as a democratic foundation of educational action, oriented toward the recognition of differences, the promotion of everyone's well-being, and the construction of critical and plural knowledge.

Addressing these resistances requires systemic work of cultural deconstruction and critical training. It is necessary to promote an educational discourse centered not on ideology but on rights, scientific evidence, and the fundamental pedagogical principle of welcoming the person in their entirety. Only in this way will it be possible to transform the school into a democratic laboratory where diversity is not merely tolerated, but recognized as an educational resource.

6. Towards a transformative education: psychopedagogical perspectives on gender identity

Recognizing, supporting, and valuing gender identities within educational contexts is not an accessory or marginal concern, but a fundamental pedagogical responsibility, deeply connected to the principles of democratic education and human rights. Schools, as social institutions responsible for the formation of citizens, are called not only to transmit knowledge but also to promote educational relationships based on respect, equity, and the recognition of the plurality of subjectivities. In this sense, the inclusion of gender identities and the adoption of teaching practices that challenge forms of marginalization and exclusion are essential conditions for building just and welcoming school environments (UNESCO, 2016; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

As highlighted by Fraser (2003) and Nussbaum (2011), a genuinely democratic conception of educational justice requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the mere redistribution of material resources or formal equality in access to education. Nancy Fraser, in particular, proposes a three-dimensional theory of justice — redistribution, recognition, and representation — arguing that a just society must ensure not only socioeconomic equity but also the respect and valorization of cultural identities, especially those that are systematically minoritized or oppressed. In the school context, this implies the need to address the dynamics of symbolic exclusion affecting groups such as LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women, and other marginalized subjectivities, often unacknowledged in the knowledge transmitted and in everyday educational practices.

Martha Nussbaum, for her part, emphasizes the paradigm of *capabilities*, which shifts the focus from merely formal equality to what individuals are actually able to be and do in a social context that respects their autonomy and integrity. According to Nussbaum (2011), a just education system must provide every person with the conditions to develop their fundamental human potential, including the expression of their identity, a sense of belonging, and the possibility to participate meaningfully in collective life. In this view, the symbolic recognition of gender and sexual identities is not only a matter of social equity but a prerequisite for human development.

Applying these principles to schools therefore means not only ensuring equal opportunities for access and academic success, but also creating educational environments where the plurality of identities is valued through inclusive curricula, participatory practices, and teacher training attentive to the ethical and relational dimensions of teaching (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015). Cultural and symbolic recognition of differences is not an optional addition, but an essential component of an education that seeks to be genuinely democratic, emancipatory, and transformative.

From this perspective, education must undertake the task of deconstructing normative hierarchies that define what is considered “normal” or “acceptable,” instead promoting a pedagogy attentive to the experiences, lives, and narratives of LGBTQ+ people. This requires a critical reconsideration of school curricula, the languages used, and the cultural representations conveyed within educational environments, as these are never neutral but reflect and reproduce power structures and dominant social norms. Numerous studies show how national and local curricula continue to be structured around an implicitly heteronormative worldview, in which the identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ people are absent, marginalized, or represented in stereotypical ways (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015). This structural invisibility is not without consequences: it conveys an implicit message of non-belonging or “deviance” from an alleged normative standard, undermining the sense of legitimacy and well-being of students who do not identify with these models.

Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) point out that this pervasive heteronormativity is expressed not only in explicit content, but also in communication styles, school texts, the

selection of literary and historical narratives, the construction of school relationships, and even in assessment practices. The school, as both a discursive and material space, thus contributes to the production of “intelligible” and “unintelligible” subjectivities, according to binary gender and sexuality logics that exclude the complexity of human experiences. In this context, an inclusive and transformative pedagogy must begin with a critical examination of the hidden curriculum — that is, the set of implicit norms, values, and expectations — and with a systematic commitment to deconstructing and reconstructing educational practices in a queer and intersectional sense (Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2002).

A critical reformulation of the curriculum therefore does not merely involve adding LGBTQ+ content, but requires an epistemological shift, challenging the naturalization of identity categories, promoting reflexivity in educators, and opening spaces for a multiplicity of narratives and life experiences. Only in this way is it possible to build plural, dialogic knowledge that respects the subjective complexity of each student.

Actively including gender diversity in educational settings is not only a protective measure for vulnerable individuals, but a pedagogical opportunity for the entire school community: it contributes to the construction of a more aware, empathetic, and critical citizenry, capable of engaging with the world in a reflective and solidaristic manner. A school that recognizes and values gender identities is, ultimately, a school that fully fulfills its educational mission in a democratic key.

The intersection between developmental psychology and critical pedagogy allows us to understand the complexity of identity processes, highlighting how they are the result of intertwined subjective, relational, and cultural dynamics. Within this framework, the school assumes a strategic role: not only as a place for transmitting knowledge, but as a generative space for subjectivity, recognition, and affective citizenship.

The pathways analyzed clearly show that the promotion of gender identity cannot be left to the goodwill of individuals, but requires a systemic educational project based on training, awareness, and ethical commitment. If not critically addressed, cultural and institutional resistances risk perpetuating deep inequalities and denying many students the possibility of building a fully recognized and lived identity.

Viewing gender education as a transformative process ultimately means rethinking the role of the educational adult: no longer merely a transmitter of norms, but a facilitator of pathways toward authenticity, dialogue, and emancipation. In an increasingly interconnected, fluid, and intersectional world, the task of education is not to offer definitive answers, but to create the conditions for each individual to ask questions, explore possibilities, and inhabit their complexity with dignity.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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