




PROMOTING GENDER AFFIRMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN ITALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF TRANS AND GENDER EXPANSIVE CHILDREN

Promoção da pedagogia afirmativa de gênero nos serviços italianos de educação e cuidado na primeira infância: abordando as necessidades das crianças trans e com gênero expansivo


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ABSTRACT

Increased visibility of trans and gender expansive children challenges Italian early childhood education and care services to provide welcoming and supporting educational environments. Drawing on national and international research, this article explores how cisnormativity and gender stereotypes can affect trans and gender expansive children within early childhood education and care settings. It proposes a framework that acknowledges the complexity of gender identity, and offers strategies for creating gender affirmative environments, drawing on a gender affirmative pedagogical approach. By embracing this approach, early childhood education and care services can empower trans and gender expansive children's developmental journeys, foster more welcoming and equitable educational environments, and promote gender health and social justice within the early childhood education system, and the broader Italian society alike.

KEYWORDS: Trans and gender expansive children. Cisnormativity. Early childhood education and care services. Gender affirmative pedagogy.

RESUMO

O aumento da visibilidade das crianças trans e com gênero expansivo desafia os serviços italianos de educação e cuidado na primeira infância a proporcionar ambientes educativos acolhedores e de apoio. Com base em pesquisas italianas e internacionais, este artigo explora como a cisnormatividade e os estereótipos de gênero podem afetar crianças trans e com gênero expansivo em ambientes de educação e cuidados na primeira infância. O artigo propõe um referencial que reconhece a complexidade da identidade de gênero e oferece estratégias para criar ambientes afirmativos de gênero, fundamentando-se em uma abordagem pedagógica afirmativa de gênero. Ao adotar essa abordagem, os serviços de educação e cuidados na primeira infância podem fortalecer o desenvolvimento de crianças trans e com gênero expansivo, fomentar ambientes educacionais mais acolhedores e equitativos, assim como promover a saúde e a justiça social de gênero no sistema de educação infantil e na sociedade italiana em geral.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Crianças trans e com gênero expansivo. Cisnormatividade. Serviços de educação e cuidado na primeira infância. Pedagogia afirmativa de gênero.

INTRODUCTION

In Italy, the topic of trans and gender expansive¹ children and adolescents has become increasingly prominent in public and political discussions. This growing awareness is due in part to the advocacy efforts of families, parent associations, trans* activists, and organizations like GenderLens². As Mariotto (2020) notes, these parents are the first generation to fully embrace their trans and gender expansive children's identities. However, this new reality is largely unfamiliar and presents challenges for many, including families, educators, healthcare providers, policymakers, and the broader society. The increasing number of trans and gender expansive children and their families is challenging Italian early childhood education and care services, which lack adequate knowledge and policies to support these individuals. In fact, National early childhood education and care guidelines, such as the *“Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni”* (Guidelines for the integrated system 0-6 years) (D. Lgs 65/2017) and the *“Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei”* (Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated 0-6 years system) (DM 334/2021), fail to address the specific needs of trans and gender expansive children (Di Grigoli et al., 2022). Furthermore, Italian degree courses in Preschool and Primary School Teacher Education, and in-service training for early childhood education and care educators lack compulsory training on gender, sexuality, and LGBTQIA+ issues (Bochicchio et al., 2019).

Drawing on current national and international research and best practices, this article explores the theoretical and practical implications of trans and gender expansive identity within early childhood education and care settings. It aims to broaden the discourse in Italian pedagogy regarding trans and gender expansive children and their experiences in educational and care services. This exploration seeks to inform and refine the existing guidelines outlined in the *“Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni”* (D. Lgs 65/2017) and *“Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei”* (DM 334/2021). We employ a transactional approach (Ehrensaft, 2017, 2019) and a theoretical framework that conceptualizes trans and gender expansive identity as multifaceted and complex (Pastel et al., 2019; Steele; Nicholson, 2020). Furthermore, this framework

¹ Trans and gender expansive refer to children and adolescents who defy gender-expected social norms and/or who do not self-identify with the gender assigned at birth (Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018). A detailed account of trans and gender expansive childhoods will be provided in the second paragraph.

² GenderLens is an association of parents, trans* activists, and their allies, which plays a pivotal role in information, formation, and advocacy for the rights of trans and gender expansive children and adolescents in Italy (<https://www.genderlens.org/>).

acknowledges the active role children play in shaping their own gender experience and identity. This signifies that gender identity, including trans and gender expansive identities, is not inherent or fixed, but rather a product of complex interactions between psychological, anatomical, educational, cultural, and social influences, encompassing gender norms, expectations, and practices (Ehrensaft, 2014; 2017; Pastel et al., 2019; Steele; Nicholson, 2020).

By exploring how early childhood education and care services can reproduce gender stereotypes and cisnormativity (Santambrogio, 2024), we further propose concrete strategies to improve the positive role early childhood education and care services can play in welcoming, supporting, and guiding trans and gender expansive young people. We argue that early childhood education and care professionals can empower trans and gender expansive children's development and create a more welcoming and equitable early childhood education system, by adopting a pedagogical gender affirmative approach (Burgio; Santambrogio, 2024; Santambrogio, 2024). In doing so, educational settings have the potential to promote gender health (Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018; Steele; Nicholson, 2020) and social justice (Francis; Monakali, 2021). This article offers theoretical tools and practical guidance to create such environments, safeguarding and promoting trans and gender expansive children's right to self-determination, agency, and personal and bodily autonomy (Burgio; Santambrogio, 2024).

TRANS AND GENDER EXPANSIVE CHILDREN: COMPLEX INTERSECTIONAL CONSTELLATIONS

This section delves into the complexities of understanding the expressions and gender identities of children whose behaviours deviate from traditional gender norms. We must first critically examine the categories we use to describe these experiences (Mariotto, 2020). How, then, should we categorize a child assigned male at birth who prefers wearing skirts, desires long hair for braiding, and expresses a fondness for nail polish? What terminology is most appropriate to describe a child assigned female at birth who asks about the development of a penis, or desires a beard, resembling their uncle's? How do we best describe the experiences of a young person who confidently asserts a dual identity of both male and female?

The performative nature of categories and gender (Butler, 2017) has significant educational implications (Roberti; Selmi, 2021). The language we choose to describe

children's gender explorations and identifications can either replicate normalizing mechanisms (Mariotto, 2020; Stryker, 2006) or, conversely, contribute to expanding the realm of possibilities for being and expressing gender (Persico, 2024). Hence, in this article we adopt the term "trans and gender expansive" as proposed by Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018). This choice is motivated by the conscious rejection of clinic-derived categories (Mariotto, 2020; Meadow, 2018) such as "gender variant" (Giordano, 2019; Robinson, 2013; Simons et al., 2014), "gender nonconforming" (Bochicchio et al., 2019), and "gender diverse" (Austin et al., 2020). Indeed, these terms have the potential to reinforce the rigid binary distinction between "normal" and "deviant" gender experiences and identities (Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018). Additionally, they risk perpetuating an interpretation that individualizes (Coates; Person, 1985), infantilizes, pathologizes, and normalizes the gendered experiences of young people who do not conform to social gender norms and expectations (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meadow, 2014). These interpretations stem from the diagnostic and normalizing practices of early 20th-century Western medicine, which were (and to some extents still are) influenced by cisnormative and adultist power dynamics (Hall, 2021) that constructed childhood in a way that limited children's agency. As Gill-Peterson (2018, p. vii) asserts "[...] trans children's consistent experience in this country is to be excluded from having a voice, from having a say in the public battle over whether they should find themselves allowed to be".

Trans and gender expansive offer a more affirmative and empowering alternative. It views young people as experts on their own gender identity (Ehrensaft, 2019), and refers to "all children who challenge and explore gender identity and gender expressions" (Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018, p. 8). Trans and gender expansive acknowledge the distinction between gender identity and expression, emphasizing that they are not synonymous. This definition encompasses individuals who explore, express, or identify their gender in ways that diverge from the prevailing social norms on masculinity and femininity (Pastel et al., 2019). For example, a child assigned male at birth who exhibits a preference for dolls, princesses, long hair, and glitter, or a young person assigned female at birth who expresses a consistent desire to be a boy through their words, behaviours, clothing choices, and activities, would fall under this category. Trans and gender expansive thus indicate

[...] the experience of children who do not identify with the gender assigned at birth, on the basis of genitalia, or who do not conform with the social rules that such assignment presupposes. These are young people who experience gender

differently from the social norm, mainly by adopting behaviours considered appropriate for the opposite gender (Mariotto, 2024, p. 33)³.

Trans and gender expansive serves as an umbrella category encompassing children who identify (or will identify) as trans* or non-binary⁴. It further extends to include cisgender children whose preferences and inclinations in clothing, hairstyles, activities, emotional expressions, and mannerism deviate from the roles and behaviours traditionally associated with their sex/gender assigned at birth (Ehrensaft, 2019; Pastel et al., 2019).

The theoretical framework underlying the conceptualization of trans and gender expansive childhoods, which draws on the Gender Affirmative Model⁵ (Hidalgo et al., 2013; Ehrensaft, 2014; 2017; 2019), allows for a paradigm shift in understanding gender identity. Among the interpretative models consistent with the theoretical framework outlined so far⁶, the one we find most convincing is the "Intersectional Gender Constellation" proposed by Pastel et al. (2019) and by Steele and Nicholson (2020). This perspective considers gender identity not as an individual factor or an ontological attribute, but as a constellation — a multifactorial and dynamic construction encompassing psychology, anatomy, education, culture, and society. Each person, whether a child or an adult, plays an active role in defining their own gender experience and identification (Pastel et al., 2019). This model adopts a multiple, non-binary, situated, and intersectional perspective. It highlights how

[...] gender expression, identity, and other components might vary by race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, immigrant/migrant status, and more. These multiple identities and characteristics are shown as spokes intersecting through the child (Pastel et al., 2019, pp. 59-60).

³ The translations of Italian references are provided by the author.

⁴ The term "trans*" (Halberstam, 2018) encompasses people whose gender identity and/or gender expression diverge from the sex and gender assigned to them at birth. "Non-binary" refers to individuals who do not identify with a cisgender identity (where sex assigned at birth and gender identity align) and simultaneously do not self-identify as trans*.

⁵ The Gender Affirmative Model adopts a non-pathologizing approach, considering every gender identity and expression as a healthy expression of human creativity and variability. This model is informed by cultural sensitivity, recognizing that gender presentations are diverse and varied across cultures. Furthermore, it does not reproduce binary assumptions that deny fluid and non-binary gender identities and experiences. Additionally, in cases of psychological distress, the causes are sought in the social context (e.g., transphobia, transnegativity, homophobia, sexism) and in negative reactions from adults, rather than within the trans and gender expansive child. This model encourages mental health professionals to listen to trans and gender expansive children, to believe what they say, and to act as mediators between them, their families, and their communities to promote gender health: "a child's opportunity to live in the gender that feels most real or comfortable to that child and to express that gender with freedom from restriction, aspersions, or rejection" (Hidalgo et al., 2013, p. 286).

⁶ Among these models, which use visual metaphors to explain gender identity in non-linear and non-binary ways, stand out the gender web proposed by Ehrensaft (2019) and Vade's gender galaxy (2005).

Gender identity can thus be understood as uniquely interconnected with other identity components of the child, who is not seen as isolated from the interpersonal, community, socio-cultural, and political context in which they live (Pastel et al., 2019; Steele, Nicholson, 2020). The "Intersectional Gender Constellation" model further emphasizes that social identities are not all placed on the same level of equity but are embedded in "systems of power and oppression that influence how these identities are developed, expressed, marginalized and privileged in different contexts and times across the lifespan" (Steele; Nicholson, 2020, p. 76).

Through this model, the gender identity of trans and gender expansive childhoods can be understood by abandoning binary and polarizing grammars, in favour of a more nuanced, complex and transactional (Ehrensaft, 2017, 2019) understanding of gender. Gender identity is thus conceptualized as both a subjective and intersubjective attribute of any person. As Meadow states

We all carry a gendered subjectivity, but we live that subjectivity intersubjectively. Gender is not merely something we do. It is something done to us, with us. It does and undoes us, constrains us and constitutes us. It is some of the most basic material of social life (Meadow, 2018, p. 226).

Attention to the tension between individual and intersubjective dimensions, contextually situated, is an important interpretative key to understanding the complex social processes of gender assignment, recognition, regulation, and normalization (Meadow, 2018) that are mediated and reproduced in relationships between adults and children, and that become particularly visible in the case of trans and gender expansive childhoods. In interacting with family, educators, peers, and media, young people learn that (a) there are "correct," and therefore rewarded, ways of doing and being male or female; b) masculinity and femininity coincide with, respectively, penis and vulva; (c) adults worry, judge, correct, if one deviates from (a) and (b) (Ehrensaft, 2019; Robinson, 2013); (d) adults know the gender of children, who, on the contrary, are too immature to understand (Pastel et al., 2019).

Consequently, children who deviate from prescribed notions of masculinity ("strong boys") or femininity ("pretty girls") often elicit negative responses from adults, including fear and anxiety (Bochicchio et al., 2019). These responses can manifest as corrective actions and pressures to conform to gender scripts (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019). Such interventions can compromise children's psycho-emotional well-being (Ehrensaft, 2019) and expose them to increased risk factors for anxiety, depression, anger, stress, distress, and pain (Ehrensaft, 2012; Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018).

Notably, transgressions from gender norms are often more intensely policed in children assigned male at birth compared to those assigned female at birth (Mariotto, 2024; Meadow, 2018).

Adult reactions to trans and gender expansive children's gender nonconformity serve as a stark indicator of a gender system built upon the hierarchical power dynamics between masculinity and femininity (Hirdman, 1990) and overvalued masculinity (Meadow, 2018). This system is underpinned by cisgenderism, the social ideology that posits a binary gender system and the alignment of sex and gender assigned at birth (Lennon; Mistler, 2014). Cisgenderism is not merely descriptive; it is a productive and normative force. It defines and reinforces a social hierarchy known as cisnormativity (Simons; White, 2014), which privileges cisgender individuals by positioning them as the norm, while simultaneously stigmatizing trans and gender expansive individuals as deviant and inferior (Serano, 2016). This marginalization can manifest as denial, denigration, attempts to "correct" perceived non normative behaviours, and even pathologization.

This system also operates by what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2006; 2019; 2023), a

[...] grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. [...] a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 2006, p. 208).

Therefore, the heterosexual matrix is inextricably linked to a cisgendered matrix characterized by a high degree of cisheteronormative power. In the case of trans and gender expansive children, this confluence of normative forces – gender binarism, cisgenderism, cisnormativity, and the heterosexual matrix – intersects with adultist dynamics (Hall, 2021). These adultist dynamics construct childhood as a period of innocence, immaturity, and physical malleability, positioning children as “becomings” or “not-yet-beings” incapable of knowing their gender identity. Childhood functions as a performative category, thus expelling concrete, flesh-and-blood children from what makes a subject: agency, self-knowledge, and desire (Owen, 2016). Thus,

For a child to claim a transgender status (or for an adult to claim transgender status for a child) is difficult because the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender (Castañeda, 2014, p. 59).

This theoretical framework offers valuable tools for educators working with trans and gender expansive children in early childhood education and care services. It emphasizes a systemic approach that considers both interpersonal and socio-cultural aspects (Mariotto, 2024). It is crucial to support gender exploration in childhood, and it is equally essential to understand how cisnormative and adultist power structures educational contexts in their relational, cultural, spatial, and material components.

THE PERSISTENCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AND CISNORMATIVITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

Italian early childhood education and care services encompass a critical stage of growth where gender awareness begins to develop (Pastel et al., 2019). From birth to age 5/6, children construct knowledge and beliefs about their own and others' genders, integrating messages from their environment (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019; Pastel et al., 2019). Early childhood education and care services, therefore, play a pivotal role in either welcoming and supporting trans and gender expansive children's needs and developmental journeys, or conversely, in denying, misrecognizing, and normalizing them.

In Italy, the "Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni" (Guidelines for the integrated system 0-6 years) (D. Lgs 65/2017) conceptualizes early childhood education and care settings as environments that nurture holistic development, including social interaction, identity formation, and gender identity. These guidelines position the promotion of citizenship, defined as fostering dialogue, respect for others, and appreciation of gender diversity, as a core objective for early childhood education and care services. Notably, Part IV, dedicated to curriculum and educational planning, explicitly emphasizes the importance of supporting a free-from-stereotypes gender identity development, underscoring the centrality of gender awareness in these settings. Further strengthening this commitment, the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito) issued Ministerial Decree No. 334 on November 22, 2021, establishing the "Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zero-sei" (Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated 0-6 years system). These subsequent guidelines elaborate the cultural, pedagogical, and institutional framework for the integrated educational system outlined in the "Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni". The pedagogical guidelines put the child at the heart of the educational process, emphasizing core values like acceptance, participation, and respect

for individual singularity. These unique qualities encompass individual differences, which the guidelines strongly affirm to be recognized, valued, and integrated within both the 0-6 years system and broader society. This approach manifests a pedagogical intentionality that prioritizes and empowers children's unique identities and agency throughout their developmental journeys, both within educational settings and the wider social context. While the guidelines explicitly reference gender identity, stereotypes, and gender equality as crucial components of educational practices and planning in Italian early childhood education and care settings, they lack concrete examples or detailed instructions for implementation. Consequently, educators may struggle to find clear guidance on structuring activities that are inclusive of trans and gender expansive children and their caregivers. Furthermore, the documents fail to address the critical issue of the hidden curriculum (Di Grigoli et al., 2022), defined by Hernández et al. (2013, p. 90) as “[...] an “internalized”, “not-visible”, and “hidden” set made out of the construction of thoughts, values, meanings and beliefs that structure, construct and determine the relationships and social practices among genders”.

The absence of an explicit definition of gender identity within these guidelines overlooks the potential role of educational and care services in either reinforcing or dismantling the prevalent binary cisnormative culture, entrenched in rigid and stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Robinson, 2013; Santambrogio, 2022, 2024). This omission consequently undermines the capacity of educational settings to fully embrace, support, and cultivate the agency, identity, and gender expression of all children, especially trans and gender expansive young people. The guidelines appear to imply that

Early childhood educators are ethically obligated to create environments where all children are visible and responsively cared for. Although child agency and child self-determination are tenets of high-quality early childhood pedagogy, they are rarely extended beyond activities and behaviours to enter the realm of identity (Steele; Nicholson, 2020, pp. 3-4).

Compounding this issue, current Preschool and Primary School Teacher Education degree programs and in-service training for early childhood education and care educators in Italy lack mandatory coursework on gender, sexuality, and LGBTQIA+ issues (Bochicchio et al., 2019). This absence relies on educators' individual initiative, potentially creating a gap between those already receptive to these topics — who are more likely to recognize the existence of trans and gender expansive children — and those who are not, or may even hold resistant or corrective views (Bochicchio et al., 2019; Kutassy et al., 2023).

Consistent with national and international research, the lack of knowledge and training among Italian educators leads to the perpetuation of prevalent societal gender codes (Abbatecola; Stagi, 2017) and reinforces essentialism and cisnormativity within early childhood education and care settings (Emilson et al., 2016; Gansen, 2019). Consequently, these contexts can function as mechanisms for the reproduction of gender norms (Burgio, 2015), relying on stereotypical and cisnormative beliefs that influence adult-child interactions, spatial organization, and the selection of toys and activities. On an interpersonal level, cisnormative attitudes and a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity manifest in the ways educators attribute gender through language and educational practices. Cisgenderism and gender normativity lead to the common assumption that all children can be categorized as either boys or girls based solely on their genitalia, with corresponding expected behaviours (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019). Practices such as using binary gender labels, dividing children by gender for activities, employing gendered colour schemes (pink for girls, blue for boys), and praising girls for appearance and boys for physical strength all contribute to this normalization process (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019; Gansen, 2019). By rewarding behaviours seen as aligned with gender norms and sanctioning those perceived as non-conforming, educators inadvertently communicate to the entire class what constitutes acceptable and expected gender performances (Gansen, 2019). This approach ultimately restricts young people's opportunities for growth and risks rendering the experiences of trans and gender expansive individuals invisible. Indeed: "Raising children around statements such as 'good boys/girls' acknowledges their progress in binary gendered terms, rather than giving them the option to grow into individual people" (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019, p. 708).

Furthermore, traditional gender expectations and values underlie the direction of play activities (Chapman, 2016) and the organization of play spaces and materials (Lyttelton-Smith, 2019). Research on educators' facilitation of free play demonstrates a tendency towards gendered activity choices (Granger et al., 2017). Boys are more likely to be offered materials that encourage movement or ingenuity, such as building blocks, while girls are presented with caregiving toys, such as dolls or kitchen sets. Additionally, the physical organization of early childhood education and care spaces and the distribution of materials and toys within them influence children's gender experiences (Lyttelton-Smith, 2019), shaping which genders are seen as intelligible and which are not (Butler, 2017). As Børve and Børve (2017, pp. 1074-1075) argue, "[...] the norms and rules of play practices are defined in relation to the construction of

rooms, while at the same time play practices are developed in relation to space and the availability of toys and materials”.

The physical and symbolic space of early childhood education and care settings functions as a pedagogical agent, shaping understandings of gender through material-discursive practices (Barad, 2017). Indeed, the division of space into designated "masculine" zones (e.g., construction corner) and "feminine" zones (e.g., kitchen area) (Lyttelton-Smith, 2019), alongside the promotion of gender-typical play activities (Chapman, 2016; Savio, 2019), is not a neutral act. These practices reinforce boundaries between masculine and feminine and a binary, complementary and cisnormative view of genders. Consequently, they offer limited space for gender experiences that fall outside of gender norms and expectations, such as those of trans and gender expansive children.

While acknowledging that these observations may not be universally applicable to all educational contexts (Callahan; Nicholas, 2019; Chapman, 2016), and that children actively reinterpret and challenge gender norms through their activities and behaviours (Di Grigoli, 2013; Savio, 2019), we can nonetheless argue that early childhood education and care services function as device (Burgio, 2015) for transmitting educational styles rooted in implicit binary, stereotypical, and cisgender expectations, even when educators believe they are acting impartially (Emilson et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial for education professionals to recognize their role in potentially perpetuating restrictive norms that limit children's gender identity development. Conversely, they have the power to create educational environments that acknowledge and support children's agency, individuality, personal and bodily autonomy, and right to self-determination (Burgio; Santambrogio, 2024).

A GENDER AFFIRMATIVE APPROACH FOR ITALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

The theoretical framework presented here challenges the notion of trans and gender expansive identities as private matters, implying an individual "problem" residing within the child (Ehrensaft, 2019) and requiring interventions directed solely at the child (Mariotto, 2020). In contrast, a pedagogical perspective attentive to the existence of trans and gender expansive children necessitates a systemic and situated approach. This approach emphasizes the development of new language (Di Grigoli, 2023) and interpretive tools (Mariotto, 2020) to reshape educational practices within

early childhood education and care settings from a gender-aware perspective (Heikkilä, 2020). This perspective incorporates the contributions of queer and trans pedagogy.

Trans pedagogy, as Malatino (2015, p. 408) describes, disrupts “[...] hegemonic certitudes about corporeal stability, sex determination, gender dimorphism, and naturalized linkages between gender enactment and sexuality”. It also focuses on the interplay between disciplinary and biopolitical power structures, and, conversely, on the enactment of self-determination and autonomy (Ivi). On the other hand, the application of queer theory in education, as argued by Di Grigoli (2023), can contribute to revising educational theories and practices. This revision aims not to reproduce, perform, or normalize forms of knowledge confined within binary categories of masculinity/femininity. Instead, it seeks to guide towards the acceptance of differences, thereby performing a liberating and emancipatory function.

This pedagogical proposal aligns with a multifaceted understanding of gender (Steele; Nicholson, 2020), and fosters an open, flexible, critical, and transformative educational relationship (Di Grigoli, 2023). Embracing this multifaceted perspective acknowledges the inherent complexity of gender identity. By recognizing the intricate interplay between education, cisnormativity, gender expectations, and prevailing gender norms, the proposal paves the way for a critical examination of societal constructs surrounding gender and childhood. This critical approach facilitates the development of a pedagogical framework that is genuinely attentive and responsive to the diverse gender experiences of children. The societal meanings ascribed to childhood, bodies, genders, and sexualities exert a profound influence on educational processes, shaping the ways in which educators interact with children and respond to expressions that deviate from established gender norms and expectations. Consequently, cultivating an awareness of the surrounding “gender culture”, critically scrutinizing its cisnormative and binary underpinnings, and translating this awareness into practical educational actions emerge as essential competencies for all educators, particularly those working in early childhood education and care settings. Indeed,

[...] early childhood educators are in a unique position to encourage learning and exploration and challenging stereotypes without limiting children based on their play choices and gender expression. Doing so would help to advance equity and foster inclusion of a wide range of gender diversity and expression (McCabe, 2022, p. 52).

This section outlines a gender affirmative pedagogical framework centred on children's agency and their right to explore their gender identity (Ward, 2013). This framework aims to expand the conversation within Italian pedagogy regarding trans

and gender expansive children and their experiences in educational and care settings. Specifically, it seeks to inform and refine the existing guidelines outlined in the “Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni” (D. Lgs 65/2017) and “Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zero-sei” (DM 334/2021). Therefore, we propose concrete strategies to enhance the positive role that Italian early childhood education and care services can play in welcoming, supporting, and guiding trans and gender expansive young people.

A crucial element of this pedagogical approach is the training of early childhood education and care personnel. As McCabe (2022, p. 68) emphasizes: “Teacher training and continued education that encourages a broad range of gender diverse play behaviors in development is recommended to facilitate developmental exploration and avoid stigmatizing or criticizing play behaviors”. However, the effectiveness of training extends beyond the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. On the contrary, it should actively involve educators and challenge their existing gender assumptions and biases (Gamberi et al., 2010; Ghigi, 2019; Savio, 2019). This type of training fosters the development of educators who are gender-aware (Heikkilä, 2020), self-reflective (Bochicchio et al., 2019), and competent in supporting the autonomy, agency, and gender self-determination of growing individuals (Kutassy et al., 2023) through concrete attitudes and actions (Savio, 2019).

The gender affirmative pedagogical perspective presented here advocates for multidimensional action within early childhood education and care services. This action encompasses the material, spatial, symbolic, and relational dimensions, with the aim of creating educational environments that are truly supportive of trans and gender expansive childhoods.

On a material level, it is crucial to provide a range of books that promote the exploration and plurality of gender identities (Li, 2023). These cultural resources should include stories, models, and inclusive language that acknowledge the complexity of reality (Gamberi et al., 2010) and validate the existence of diverse gender identities. Such resources serve as vital interpretive tools for all young children, particularly trans and gender expansive, and contribute to fostering understanding among their peers (Steele; Nicholson, 2020). Similarly, gender affirmative educators actively promote and support the free exploration of toys and activities without imposing gender segregation (Sullivan; Urraro, 2017) or directing children towards activities deemed gender-appropriate (Li, 2023). Equally important is the focus on the physical and symbolic organization of space within early childhood education and care settings. By reorganizing play and learning areas with a critical lens towards established gender

norms and expectations, education professionals can create spaces that allow children to access and explore a wider range of subjective experiences considered valid (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019).

The quality of relationships within early childhood education and care services is another cornerstone of a gender affirmative pedagogical approach. This quality is primarily conveyed through the language educators adopt when interacting with children (Persico, 2024). Reflection on language use is particularly critical in Italian, a gendered language lacking built-in gender-neutral options (Sulis; Gheno, 2022). Consequently, educators are called upon to employ inclusive language (Manera, 2021). This includes avoiding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes through the use of gendered adjectives and attributes (e.g., "pretty", "beautiful" for girls vs. "strong", "impulsive" for boys) (Li, 2023). Furthermore, educators should seek creative solutions to challenge the reproduction of a binary and gendered view of bodies and identities (e.g., instead of "boys have a penis," one could say "some people have a penis"; instead of "ciao a tutti"⁷ ("hello everyone"), an alternative greeting, chosen with the whole class to represent it, could be used). It is primarily through these relationships with educators that children experience acceptance, the ability to be seen and recognized for who they are, and the feeling of validation and support. Therefore, alongside providing diverse gendered activities and spaces, promoting and supporting children's agency in exploring their self and gender identity through a supportive attitude is crucial (Pastel et al., 2019; Sullivan; Urraro, 2017). Being a supportive educator necessitates, first and foremost, acknowledging that adults' interpretations of reality may not always align with those of children (Kutassy et al., 2023). In practice, this translates to welcoming children's choices and preferences towards specific gender signifiers "[...] without making assumptions about whether colors, objects, moods, feelings, or skills have gendered meaning for the child" (Ward, 2013, p. 59), avoiding the imposition of "gender diagnoses" (Ivi), and challenging cisnormative assumptions.

Supportive and affirmative early childhood education and care services benefit all young people, not just trans and gender expansive children. These settings foster and protect gender self-determination by equipping children with cultural, social, and relational tools (Ward, 2013) that expand the possibilities of being (Persico, 2024) beyond the limitations of binary gender categories. As Green (2013, p. 19) aptly states:

⁷ "Tutti" in Italian language is a masculine plural word, which, however, is also used as a universal and generic term to address a mixed group.

Regardless of gender identity, all children explore what makes them feel both comfortable and uncomfortable in relation to their gender. Through trial and error, they learn what makes them feel good about themselves. All kids are more able to practice self-determination in environments that are supportive, validating and affirming.

Therefore, the proposed gender affirmative pedagogical approach seeks to promote gender justice (Steele; Nicholson, 2020). It calls upon early childhood education and care services to actively dismantle the normative power of gender stereotypes and cisgenderism, fostering educational environments where all individuals, particularly trans and gender expansive children, feel listened to and understood. Finally, this approach aligns with Gill-Peterson's (2018, p. 33) call for

[...] an ethical relation that calls upon adults to stop questioning the being of trans children and affirm instead that there are trans children, that trans childhood is a happy and desired form—not a new form of life and experience but one richly, beautifully historical and multiple.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework and concrete strategies underpinning the gender affirmative pedagogical approach presented here hold the potential to enhance the operationalization of the “Linee guida per il sistema integrato 0-6 anni” (D. Lgs 65/2017) and “Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei” (DM 334/2021), proving to be a valuable tool for Italian early childhood education and care services. By embracing this approach, educational and care services can empower trans and gender expansive children's developmental journeys, foster more welcoming and equitable educational environments, and promote gender health (Keo-Meier; Ehrensaft, 2018; Steele; Nicholson, 2020) and social justice (Francis; Monakali, 2021) within the early childhood education system and the broader Italian society alike.

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NOTAS

TÍTULO DA OBRA

PROMOTING GENDER AFFIRMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN ITALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF TRANS AND GENDER EXPANSIVE CHILDREN

Promoção da pedagogia afirmativa de gênero nos serviços italianos de educação e cuidado na primeira infância: abordando as necessidades das crianças trans e com gênero expansivo

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