

## Writing the difference. Gender, diagnosis, and language in school documents: a transformative perspective in special education teacher training

## Scrivere la differenza. Genere, diagnosi e linguaggio nei documenti scolastici: prospettiva trasformativa nella formazione dei docenti di sostegno

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### Abstract

The growing centrality of individualized planning in inclusive school contexts requires a critical reflection on the role that language plays in the construction of differences. This study investigates the intersection between educational diagnosis and gender, exploring in particular the implicit discursive forms that run through personalized school documents (PEI and PDP). The research is divided into two phases: a qualitative analysis of twenty school documents from lower secondary schools and a training experiment conducted with 124 teachers in training for support, within the Specialization Courses for Educational Support. The workshop, inspired by the vygotskian historical-cultural perspective and the pedagogy of differences, used narrative, reflexive and discursive techniques to activate a transformative process in the participants' representations. The data were collected through a pre-post questionnaire, a logbook and two final focus groups, analyzed according to the model of thematic analysis and the analysis of educational discourse. The results highlighted the systematic presence of gender stereotypes in the documents, with different discursive traits for males and females, and a significant change in the professional postures of the students, who reformulated the diagnosis in a relational, dynamic and non-labeling way. The laboratory proved to be a generative space for the critical deconstruction of educational language, promoting awareness of the performative power of the word and the possibility of a more equitable, plural and responsible school planning. Finally, the study proposes a renewed training model for teachers, capable of combining an inclusive perspective, pedagogical care and discursive competence.

**Keywords:** educational language, PEI/PDP, diagnosis, gender, teacher training.

### Riassunto

La crescente centralità della progettazione individualizzata nei contesti scolastici inclusivi impone una riflessione critica sul ruolo che il linguaggio gioca nella costruzione delle differenze. Il presente studio indaga l'intersezione tra diagnosi educativa e genere, esplorando in particolare le forme discorsive implicite che attraversano i documenti scolastici personalizzati (PEI e PDP). La ricerca si articola in due fasi: un'analisi qualitativa di venti documenti scolastici della scuola secondaria di primo grado e una sperimentazione formativa condotta con 124 docenti in formazione per il sostegno, nell'ambito dei Corsi di Specializzazione per il Sostegno Didattico. Il laboratorio, ispirato alla prospettiva storico-culturale vygotskijana e alla pedagogia delle differenze, ha utilizzato tecniche narrative, riflessive e discorsive per attivare un processo trasformativo nelle rappresentazioni dei partecipanti. I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso un questionario pre-post, un diario di bordo e due focus group conclusivi, analizzati secondo il modello della thematic analysis e l'analisi del discorso educativo. I risultati hanno evidenziato la presenza sistematica di stereotipi di genere nei documenti, con tratti discorsivi differenziati per maschi e femmine, e un cambiamento significativo nelle posture professionali dei corsisti, che hanno riformulato la diagnosi in chiave relazionale, dinamica e non etichettante. Il laboratorio si è rivelato uno spazio generativo per la decostruzione critica del linguaggio educativo, promuovendo la consapevolezza del potere performativo della parola e la possibilità di una progettazione scolastica più equa, plurale e responsabile. Lo studio propone infine un rinnovato modello formativo per i docenti, capace di coniugare sguardo inclusivo, cura pedagogica e competenza discorsiva.

**Parole chiave:** linguaggio educativo, PEI/PDP, diagnosi, genere, formazione docenti.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary inclusive schools are confronted daily with a growing plurality of educational needs, cultural, linguistic, and gender differences that profoundly question teaching and evaluation practices. This occurs in a well-structured scenario in which the drafting of specific documents such as the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP, whose Italian acronym is PEI) or the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP; whose Italian acronym is PDP) represents a crucial but also ambivalent practice since, on the one hand, it is oriented towards recognizing students' uniqueness and, on the other, it is still strongly tied to standardized diagnostic models (d'Alonzo & Monauni, 2021; Ianes & Demo, 2021).

The use of diagnostic categories in schools, in particular, continues to reflect a medicalized vision of difference (Gaspari, 2017), in which the identification of special needs often translates into a process of "labeling" which risks obscuring the developmental potential of the individual (Ferri, 2023), adding to this dynamic a further level of complexity rarely addressed in school documents: the variable of gender.

The implicit representations that run through educational writing contribute, in fact, to the construction of differentiated behavioral stereotypes that inevitably reinforce different educational expectations for male and female students (Connell, 2006; Renold et al., 2016).

Recent pedagogical literature underlines how gender identity cannot be reduced to a simple biological or statistical category, but must necessarily be read as a social and relational construction, in continuous interaction with the context and with language (Butler & Trouble, 1990; Davies, 2003), and in this direction the processes of "diagnostic labelling", if not consciously deconstructed, risk operating as performative devices, which consolidate normative roles rather than opening up authentically inclusive spaces for development (Bruner, 1996; Bruzzone et al., 2021).

Lev Vygotskij's thought fits into the analysis of these critical issues by offering extraordinarily relevant theoretical tools for rethinking the very concept of deficit which, in its defectology, is not conceived as a static lack, but as a transformative possibility, activated through symbolic mediation and social interaction (Vygotskij, 1999; Kozulin, 2003), in a perspective in which language precedes the diagnosis and subverts its classificatory function, shifting the focus onto the potential and historicity of the subject.

This paper aims to explore the intersection between gender and diagnosis through a dual approach. It begins with a discursive analysis of key school documents relating to the inclusion process, highlights the traces of gender stereotypes in educational formulations, and presents, through a training experience conducted with teachers in training in the field of educational support, a critical and reflexive reading of diagnosis as a situated pedagogical practice. These two perspectives are rooted in the historical-cultural paradigm and synergistically promote the belief that only through conscious work on language and mediation can we achieve a pedagogy authentically capable of embracing and valorizing differences.

## 2. Theoretical background

The historical-cultural perspective developed by Lev Vygotsky proposes a radically relational and transformative conception of human development. Indeed, in his writings on defectology, which have now been rediscovered for their epistemological and pedagogical value, deficits are never understood as an intrinsic and definitive condition, but rather as the outcome of the interaction between the individual and the cultural context in which they are embedded (Vygotsky, 1999). It is precisely thanks to the symbolic mediation of cooperation and language that each individual can construct developmental paths that go beyond mere functional compensation, activating new potentialities in meaningful contexts (Kozulin, 2003).

In this view, diagnosis is not a point of arrival, but a space to be problematized and which must allow room for educational planning as a social and dynamic construction, grounded in the zone of proximal development and the interaction between peers, adults, and cultural tools (Daniels, 2002). Schools, then, are not called upon to "respond to needs" but to generate opportunities for shared meaning for all learners.

Alongside the dimension of development, gender difference represents a crucial axis for the analysis of educational practices, and gender, understood as a symbolic and performative construction (Butler and Trouble, 1990), is structured in the discourses, gestures, and implicit expectations that regulate school in-

teractions (Connell, 2001). School, as a privileged environment for developing primary and secondary socialization, contributes to the reiteration of identity models that often appear normative and binary (Davies, 1993).

Feminist and queer pedagogies have shown how the apparent neutrality of school practices actually conceals a profound symbolic inequality from a perspective that places reflection on gender not as an accessory, but as a constitutive element of educational planning, especially in contexts where difference is thematized, exactly as it happens in the processes of diagnosis and personalization.

Both diagnosis and gender are articulated through language, and educational vocabulary, whether technical, bureaucratic, or pedagogical, not only describes pre-existing realities, but contributes to constructing them. Paraphrasing Bruner (1996), every educational process is inevitably narrative, and the words we choose shape the reality we intend to transform. This is why the pedagogy of educational discourse invites us to reread, in this direction, school texts (PEI, PDP, reports) as discursive devices that perform identities, possibilities, and expectations (Bruzzone et al., 2021).

This perspective entails a dual effort, fostering, on the one hand, a critical deconstruction of normative and classificatory language, and, on the other, promoting reflexive practices that enable educational writing centered on subjectivity, potential, and relationships. The intersection between diagnosis and gender, according to this pedagogical approach, should be interpreted as a site of tension between norms and possibilities, between categories and histories, between classifications and transformations (Ferri, 2023).

### 3. The study: objectives, methodology, tools and data analysis

In order to deeply and authentically understand the discursive processes and implicit representations that run through individualized planning in schools, this study adopted a qualitative methodology with a critical-transformative orientation (De Maria, 2022), setting the research on an exploratory qualitative framework.

Oriented in this direction and inspired by the Vygotskian historical-cultural perspective, the investigation was structured to respond to a dual need which, on the one hand, analyses the presence and discursive forms through which gender representations are manifested in school documents such as PEI and PDP, and on the other, explores the transformative possibilities offered by a reflective training path aimed at teachers in training for support (Vygotskij, 1999; Kozulin, 2003).

The aim was to overcome a normative vision of educational diagnosis to promote a dynamic, relational and culturally situated reading of it, considering language not as a neutral descriptive tool, but as a performative device that constructs subjectivities and can profoundly influence educational planning (Gee, 2014; Bruner, 1996; Bruzzone et al., 2021).

The process was structured within a multi-layered methodology, which integrated phases of document analysis, laboratory experimentation and data collection using qualitative and quantitative tools for descriptive purposes. This approach allowed the observation of school documents to be combined with highly reflective training work, focusing on the discursive practices and professional postures of trainee teachers (Romano, 2021).

For the documentary analysis, a corpus of 20 school documents produced by lower secondary schools was created, specifically 10 PEIs referring to students with certified disabilities and 10 PDPs referring to students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), including specific learning disabilities (SLD) and socio-cultural disadvantage.

For the textual analysis of school documents, we used ATLAS.ti software, a qualitative analysis tool that allows for in-depth exploration of textual corpora through annotation, coding, and the construction of conceptual networks. The theoretical approach adopted is based on two main references: the educational discourse analysis model (Pontecorvo, 2005), which considers school textbooks not as simple data records, but as discursive products with social and pedagogical purposes, and the systemic-functional linguistics perspective (Gee, 2014), which allows for the analysis of language as a social practice structured by lexical, syntactic, and semantic choices.

Specifically, the analysis was conducted by selecting three main textual levels within the documents, which examined the behavior and functioning descriptors, the well-constructed formulations of the edu-

cational objectives, and the use of verbs, adjectives, and discourse structures in relation to the student's gender (Melucci & Paccagnella, 2000).

The entire analytical process was guided by an inductive thematic coding, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), where the data were not interpreted on the basis of predefined categories, but analysed in their phenomenological emergence, allowing the progressive identification of recurring discursive patterns, in particular those linked to implicit gender categories, thus identifying polarised narrative structures, for example between oppositional and dependent behaviours, or between manageable and needy pupils, which seemed to differentiate systematically based on the student's gender.

The triangulation between these levels allowed for a layered reading of the documents, showing how even apparently standardized texts can convey non-neutral representations of difference and diversity, and thus contribute to the construction of asymmetric educational trajectories (Pescarmona and Gozzelino, 2024).

The second phase of the research was developed through a training program conceived, designed, and piloted within the Specialization Course for Educational Support (TFA support, IX cycle) at the University of Foggia. The program involved a total of 124 students enrolled in the program for lower secondary schools and was conceived as an integrated laboratory experience, aimed at promoting critical awareness of the diagnostic and discursive practices that characterize daily school work, with particular reference to the implicit role of gender in the processes of "labeling" and individualized planning.

Participants completed an initial, specially developed anamnestic questionnaire, which revealed an average age of 34, with a female predominance of 72%. The most represented subject areas were humanities (46%) and science-mathematics (30%), and 65% of participants had already gained experience in school.

The workshop, part of the "Orientation and Life Planning Workshop" program, was structured into four three-hour in-person training sessions. The intervention was immediately structured according to an active, dialogical, and reflective methodology, inspired by the principles of transformative learning and autobiographical pedagogy (Mezirow, 2003; Clandinin et al., 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants were guided to explore their previous representations of the concept of diagnosis, to engage with real, yet anonymous, school documents, to critically reflect on the language used in PEIs and PDPs, and to rework their planning practices from a relational, rather than labeling, perspective.

The first stage of the process included an individual and collective activation phase, in which participants were asked to produce a short autobiographical narrative based on an evocative stimulus: the memory of a moment when they felt "defined" by a look, a label, or an evaluation (Paternostro, 2009). The narratives produced formed the basis for establishing a climate of trust and openness, essential for approaching the subsequent work on school documents in an authentic and participatory manner.

In the central phase of the workshop, participants were divided into small groups and invited to conduct a guided analysis of a selection of authentic IEPs and PDPs, made available anonymously. The analysis was conducted using a structured grid that identified recurring behavioral descriptors, the formulation of educational objectives, the use of evaluative language, and the presence of discursive indicators with implicit gender connotations (Vannini, 2019). During this activity, the participants were able to compare points of view, clarify their assumptions, and discuss the educational and relational implications of the linguistic choices made in the documents.

Alongside textual analysis, the workshop included role-playing techniques and dialogue simulations, in which participants were asked to alternately assume the roles of teacher, student, and family. Through this type of practical exercise, dramatization enabled exploration of the communicative and relational effects of diagnosis, highlighting the emotions, ambiguities, and responsibilities it entails in building the educational relationship.

The last part of the course was dedicated to the design of a new individualised document (PEI or PDP), drawn up starting from a fictitious case study, constructed by the trainers on the basis of plausible situations.

Data collection in the second phase of the research relied on the integrated use of three qualitative and quantitative tools: a structured questionnaire administered before and after the intervention, an individual logbook completed at the end of each workshop session, and two final focus groups conducted with selected subgroups. These sources were combined with the documentary corpus of PEI and PDP documents analysed in the first phase, thus allowing the study to adopt a triangulated analytical perspective capable

of connecting the language of school documentation with the reflective transformations activated during the training workshop.

Triangulation was understood as an interpretative strategy aimed at comparing and integrating documentary, perceptual, reflective and dialogical evidence. The documentary corpus made it possible to identify recurring linguistic and discursive patterns in the description of students and in the formulation of educational objectives. The pre-post questionnaire provided descriptive evidence of changes in participants' awareness, especially regarding the performative role of language, the recognition of labelling expressions and the understanding of diagnosis as a relational construct. The logbooks documented the progressive emergence of reflective and metacognitive processes during the workshop, while the focus groups allowed participants to collectively elaborate the meanings attributed to the experience.

From an analytical point of view, each source was first examined according to its specific nature: educational discourse analysis and thematic coding were used for the school documents; descriptive percentage analysis was applied to the closed-ended questionnaire items; thematic analysis was used for the open-ended answers, logbooks and focus group transcripts. The results were then compared in order to identify convergences, tensions and complementary perspectives concerning three main areas: the representation of diagnosis, the role of gender in educational writing, and the transformation of professional awareness among trainee teachers.

This procedure made it possible to link the textual evidence emerging from PEI and PDP documents with the changes observed in participants' awareness during the workshop. In this sense, the triangulated analysis strengthened the credibility of the findings, not by seeking statistical generalisation, but by constructing a coherent and situated understanding of the educational phenomenon investigated.

The pre-post questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, drawing inspiration from the model of awareness and attitude scales in inclusive education proposed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and subsequently adapted for initial teacher training contexts (Florian and Spratt, 2013). The questionnaire consisted of six closed-ended items on a five-point Likert scale (from "completely disagree" to "completely agree") and two open-ended questions.

The closed-ended items aimed to capture:

- the perception of gender influence in drafting PEI/PDP (item 1);
- awareness of the performative role of educational language (item 2);
- the ability to recognize discursive stereotypes in school documents (item 3);
- adherence to the idea of diagnosis as a social and relational construction (item 4);
- the level of confidence in designing inclusive, non-labeling objectives (item 5);
- pedagogical intentionality in drafting documents focused on potential (item 6).

The two open-ended questions, asked before and after the program, prompted personal reflection on what it means to "diagnose" in the school setting and what elements should guide an educational document focused on diversity. Responses were analyzed using a qualitative, thematic approach, useful for highlighting any shifts in the representation of diagnosis and the role of the teacher.

Alongside the questionnaire, an individual logbook was used, distributed in paper format and completed at the end of each workshop session. The logbook was divided into three sections: in the first, participants were asked to record their activities ("What did we do today?"); in the second, they were asked to describe the emotions and questions that arose during the experience ("How did I feel?"); and in the third, they were asked to reflect on the relevance of the topics covered in relation to their professional identity ("What do I take away from this experience?"). This tool played a fundamental role in activating metacognitive and reflective processes, providing an evolutionary trace of the transformation of individual representations throughout the workshop. The contents were then systematized through a qualitative categorical analysis, which allowed us to identify recurring conceptual nuclei and key words related to the reformulation of the concept of diagnosis, the relationship with diversity, and the recognition of gender as a relevant educational factor.

Finally, at the end of the program, two focus groups lasting approximately 60 minutes each were organized, conducted with groups of eight and ten participants, respectively. The focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol, which included five guiding questions (Table 1) aimed at stimulating a dialogic

reflection on the lived experience, with particular attention to transformations in discursive practices and pedagogical awareness. The questions explored, among other aspects, the emotional experiences associated with reading school documents, the perception of one's professional role in the diagnosis process, and the possibility of developing PEIs and PDPs in a more equitable and transformative manner. The analysis of the transcripts followed a hermeneutic-interpretative approach, which allowed for the construction of conceptual and narrative maps through the emergence of categories such as "transformed gaze," "diagnosis as relationship", and "invisible gender."

	Guiding questions
1	What struck you most, or made you question it, during the analysis of the real PEIs and PDPs?
2	Have you changed your mind about the role of diagnosis in the educational relationship? In what way?
3	What are your thoughts on how gender can influence the writing of school papers?
4	At what moments during the workshop did you feel most engaged or challenged?
5	What skills do you think you have developed that you could bring into your future teaching role?

Tab.1: Semi-structured outline for focus groups (guided session)

The choice of combining tools with different natures and reflective intensities proved to be particularly effective in capturing not only the changes declared by the participants, but also the discursive, emotional and symbolic nuances through which these changes manifested themselves.

#### 4. Results and discussion

The results are presented according to the same triangulated logic adopted in the methodological design. Rather than considering the different sources as independent sets of data, the analysis sought to identify how the evidence emerging from the documents, questionnaires, logbooks and focus groups contributed to the construction of a coherent interpretative framework. Three main areas were identified: the presence of gendered and diagnostic discursive patterns in school documents; the transformation of participants' awareness after the workshop; and the emergence of new professional postures oriented towards more reflective, relational and non-labelling educational writing.

The first area concerns the analysis of the PEI and PDP documents. This level provided evidence of the implicit discursive mechanisms through which students were described differently according to gender. The second area concerns the pre-post questionnaire, which showed a clear increase in participants' awareness of the performative function of educational language and of the risks associated with labelling formulations. The third area emerged from the logbooks and focus groups, where participants progressively reformulated diagnosis as a relational and situated process rather than as a fixed classification.

Taken together, these three levels show that the workshop did not simply transmit theoretical knowledge about inclusive language, but activated a process of critical re-positioning. The participants moved from an initial understanding of diagnosis as a technical and classificatory act towards a more complex representation of diagnosis as an educational, relational and discursive practice. This transformation appears particularly relevant because it connects the analysis of institutional documents with the development of professional awareness in future special education teachers.

The analysis of the PEI and PDP highlighted a marked discursive differentiation in the representation of students, attributable to implicit stereotypes linked to gender. In the documents referring to male students, behavioral adjectives such as "impulsive" (14/20), "does not respect the rules" (16/20), "difficult to manage" (12/20) frequently recur. In the female cases, emotional-relational descriptors such as "insecure" (12/20), "fragile" (10/20), "in need of reassurance" (14/20) dominate. These formulations orient educational planning according to asymmetric trajectories, that is, more prescriptive and normative for males, more caring for females.

Regarding the pre-post questionnaire data, we first performed a descriptive analysis of the collected values, calculating the relative frequencies and percentage changes between the initial and final surveys. Although the limited number of items and the ordinal scale used did not allow for inferential statistical inferences, it was possible to observe significant trends in the changes in participants' perceptions and representations (Table 2).

	Items	pre (%)	post (%)	$\Delta$ (%)
1	Gender influences the drafting of PEI/PDP.	22	83	61
2	Language can reinforce implicit stereotypes.	39	89	50
3	I recognize labeling formulations in documents.	18	76	58
4	Diagnosis is a social and relational construct.	46	91	45
5	I can formulate goals that focus on potential.	27	81	54
6	I use language consciously in documents.	33	84	51

Tab.2: Results of the pre-post questionnaire administered during the training workshop, with details for each item. Initial (pre) value, final (post) value, and percentage difference ( $\Delta$ ).

The analysis of the open-ended responses to the pre- and post-intervention questionnaire (“What does diagnosing in a school setting mean to you?”, “What elements do you consider fundamental for writing a truly inclusive educational document?”) followed a qualitative thematic approach, based on the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, which involved a linear reading of the texts, the generation of initial codes, and the subsequent synthesis into recurring themes. Particular attention was paid to the lexical and conceptual transformation of the key words used by the trainees before and after the training experience, with the aim of intercepting semantic shifts indicative of greater critical awareness.

The analysis revealed a substantial shift in the conception of diagnosis. In the pre-study phase, diagnosis was predominantly perceived as a static label, functional to classifying students and defining standardized interventions. After the training program, participants demonstrated a more dynamic and relational vision of diagnosis, understood as a dialogical and situated process, which considers the multiple dimensions of the student's identity and the educational context in which they are inserted. This shift reflects the adoption of a constructivist and critical perspective, in line with the theories of Vygotskij (1986) and Bruner (1990), who emphasize the importance of social and cultural mediation in learning and development processes.

The logbooks were also analyzed using the same thematic approach, adopting a hermeneutic-interpretative perspective that highlighted the participants' subjectivity and the reflective dimension of the data. The presence of linguistic indicators such as “I noticed that...”, “I had never thought that...”, “I was struck by the way in which...” were taken as evidence of the activation of a transformative process, consistent with the theoretical framework of reflective learning and autobiographical pedagogy (Mezirow, 2003; Clandinin et al., 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2007). The analysis of the logbooks allowed for the qualitative documentation of the awareness journey, highlighting initial resistance, turning points, and emerging new postures.

Finally, the transcripts of the two focus groups were subjected to an intensive textual analysis, also conducted using thematic analysis methodology (Clarke and Braun, 2017), with particular emphasis on identifying emerging discursive categories that could narratively convey the transformation of perspectives. Central themes thus emerged, such as the transformed gaze, which refers to the acquired ability to critically read the language of school documents; the diagnosis as a relationship, which shifts attention from labels to the dialogic construction of educational identity; and the invisible gender, understood as an implicitly present but rarely thematized factor in planning processes. The interpretation of these data followed an inductive yet theoretically informed approach, which recognizes narrative as a form of situated and generative knowledge (Bruner, 1996; Ricoeur, 1991).

Focus groups revealed a growing awareness among participants regarding the influence of gender on educational practices and the drafting of school documents. Participants recognized the presence of implicit

gender stereotypes in students' descriptions and the definition of educational goals. For example, a tendency emerged to describe girls as "shy" or "reserved" and boys as "agitated" or "impulsive," reflecting predefined social and cultural expectations. Through critical reflection and discussion during the workshop, participants began to question these stereotypes and consider gender as a social construction that can influence educational perceptions and interactions. This process of deconstructing gender stereotypes was facilitated by adopting a discursive approach to language analysis, which allows us to highlight how linguistic practices contribute to the construction of gender identities (Butler & Trouble, 1990; Gee, 2014).

During the document remodeling phase, the trainees, individually or in small groups, reformulated the objectives and strategies of the educational plan, applying the criteria shared throughout the course. During this phase, a progressive shift in language was evident, moving from prescriptive and standardized formulations to expressions more focused on potential, relationships, and context. Some papers included meta-reflective sections, in which trainees articulated their awareness of the risks of labeling and the transformative role of diagnosis, understood not as a static label but as an opportunity for mutual understanding and development.

The integration of diverse sources allowed us to construct a coherent and comprehensive framework, capable of conveying not only the effectiveness of the workshop as a training tool, but also the ways in which it brought about a change in the languages, professional gestures, and representations of the trainee teachers. The combined use of descriptive and interpretative techniques ensured internal triangulation of the data, strengthening the validity of the analysis and its pedagogical relevance.

Analysis of the collected data highlighted significant changes in the representations, discursive practices, and design skills of the training workshop participants. The results were organized into three macro-areas: the evolution of diagnosis representations, linguistic changes in school documents, and awareness of the role of gender in educational processes.

Overall, the workshop was an educational space intentionally designed to engage participants in a process of deconstruction and re-signification of diagnostic practices, in line with the principles of the pedagogy of differences and the Vygotskian perspective of symbolic mediation. The co-presence of narrative, analytical, and design activities allowed for a comprehensive and profound exploration of the issues of diagnosis and gender, fostering the emergence of new professional postures characterized by care, responsibility, and reflexivity.

Overall, the results highlighted how the training workshop had a significant impact on the participants' representations and practices (Fabbri et al., 2014), promoting greater critical awareness and a transformation of educational practices towards a more inclusive approach that is attentive to individual and cultural differences.

## 5. Pedagogical reflections: towards future perspectives

The findings of this study not only provide a descriptive analysis of the participants' transformations, but also prompt a broader pedagogical reflection on how schools, and particularly the training of special education teachers, can become spaces for the critical production of educational knowledge (Camedda & Santi, 2016; Ciraci and Isidori, 2017). Reinterpreting the concept of diagnosis, as well as increasing awareness of gender stereotypes conveyed in school documents, represent only the first step in a broader process of epistemological and professional reassessment.

Within the pedagogy of differences (Lopez, 2018), diagnosis can no longer be thought of as a neutral tool for observation and classification, but as a relational and discursive practice that produces real effects on students' existential and academic journeys. It is precisely in this gap between the apparent diagnostic objectivity and its cultural and situated nature that the possibility of a more just school system is at stake, one capable of questioning the categories it uses, the languages it adopts, and the normalities it presupposes. In this sense, Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective still offers a solid framework for thinking about inclusion not as adaptation to a norm, but as a transformative tension toward the valorization of the multiplicity of cognitive styles, biographies, and affiliations (Cornoldi & De Beni, 2020).

The evidence emerging from this study also suggests the urgent need for initial and in-service training that combines disciplinary content, critical awareness, and careful attention to language. Inclusive educa-

tion, in fact, is not achieved solely through operational strategies, but necessarily requires in-depth work on representations, professional narratives, and the recognition of the power relations that permeate even the most routine pedagogical acts. To paraphrase Davies (2003) and Butler and Trouble (1990), every educational discourse is already positioning, and therefore every school practice carries with it a vision of the subject, of difference, and of the future.

From an applicative point of view, this implies the need to introduce, within teacher education programmes, specific training modules devoted to the critical analysis and rewriting of individualized school documents. Such modules should guide future teachers not only in understanding the formal structure of PEI and PDP documents, but also in recognizing the implicit effects produced by adjectives, verbs, behavioural descriptors and formulations of educational objectives. Activities based on the analysis of anonymised documents, the identification of labelling or gendered expressions, and the collaborative reformulation of objectives may help trainee teachers move from a bureaucratic use of individualized planning to a more intentional and reflective practice. In this sense, the educational document becomes not only an administrative tool, but also a pedagogical device through which expectations, relationships and possibilities of development are constructed.

Starting from these applicative implications, a still largely unexplored field of research and action opens up, inviting us to systematically interrogate the gender dimension in school documents, assessments, and educational relationships. It is necessary to develop pedagogical tools capable not only of making the implicit visible, but also of offering discursive, narrative, and symbolic alternatives that defuse the tendency to reproduce stereotypes through the language of inclusion (Palmieri, 2020). In this sense, educational planning should be rethought as an open, collective, and dialogic space, where subjectivities can be recognized not on the basis of what is missing, but on the basis of what they bring, embody, and express.

Future prospects therefore move toward a pedagogy that not only denounces the invisibility of gender and inequalities in educational contexts, but works to transform it through informed discursive practices, situated learning projects, and school spaces capable of embracing the complexity of the individual. In this scenario, the work of the special education teacher takes on a crucial role, emerging not only as a figure of educational mediation, but as a reflective intellectual and agent of change, capable of rewriting the threads of difference with others and for others.

## 6. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore, through a critical and transformative approach, the role of language in constructing educational diagnoses and the implicit influence of gender in individualized school documents. The qualitative analysis of IEPs and PDPs, combined with laboratory experiments conducted with TFA support students, highlighted the pervasiveness of stereotyped discourse forms and the concrete possibility of activating professional awareness processes capable of transforming such practices.

The findings highlight how training, when grounded in reflective practices, dialogic analysis, and narrative methodologies, can profoundly impact the implicit representations of trainee teachers. Specifically, the workshop triggered a redefinition of the concept of diagnosis, no longer understood as a “static labeling” but as a dialogic, relational, and cultural process, consistent with the perspectives of historical-cultural pedagogy. At the same time, the emergence of the gender dimension as a silent yet crucial factor in the writing of school documents has opened a critical space for rethinking inclusive planning from a deconstructive and generative perspective.

In light of these findings, the paper proposes a renewed responsibility for initial and ongoing teacher training: combining technical and didactic expertise with critical awareness and discursive capacity. Only through this convergence can schools become spaces of educational justice, capable of not merely “including” individuals already defined as “others,” but of challenging the very criteria through which difference is produced, recognized, or denied.

The pedagogical and political implications of this research are therefore at the heart of the contemporary debate on inclusion: a debate that cannot ignore the performative power of language, the discursive construction of the subject, and the need for an educational perspective that is attentive to the plurality of identities. As Vygotsky reminds us, every authentic educational process is born in relationships and develops

in the proximity between what is and what could be. In this area lies the responsibility of the teacher, who, through the words they choose and the documents they draft, can contribute to building a school capable not only of welcoming, but of recognizing.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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