



Building an equitable future to be free to Be: strategies to break down stereotypes and counteract gender difference in primary schools

Costruire un futuro equo per essere liberi di Essere: strategie per abbattere gli stereotipi e contrastare la differenza di genere nella scuola primaria

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Educating primary school pupils to break down stereotypes and counteract gender difference is crucial for the formation of a fair and inclusive society. Fairy tales and fables are an effective tool for introducing concepts of gender equality and equality. By reading and constructing digital storytelling, pupils can reflect on and create narratives that challenge traditional gender roles, promoting a greater awareness of diversity by consolidating inclusive values. This approach allows them to develop empathy, break down prejudices and build a deeper understanding of gender dynamics, promoting a culture of respect and equality from a young age, making pupils active participants in the process of cultural change.

KEYWORDS

Stereotypes, gender equality, digital storytelling, primary school, inclusive teaching. Stereotipi, parità di genere, storytelling digitale, scuola primaria, didattica inclusiva.

Educare gli alunni di scuola primaria ad abbattere gli stereotipi e contrastare la differenza di genere è fondamentale per la formazione di una società equa e inclusiva. Favole e fiabe rappresentano uno strumento efficace per introdurre concetti di parità di genere e uguaglianza. Attraverso la lettura e la costruzione di storytelling digitali, gli alunni possono riflettere e creare narrazioni che sfidano i tradizionali ruoli di genere, promuovendo una maggiore consapevolezza delle diversità consolidando i valori inclusivi. Questo approccio permette di sviluppare empatia, abbattere pregiudizi e costruire una comprensione più profonda delle dinamiche di genere, promuovendo una cultura del rispetto e della parità fin dalla giovane età, rendendo gli alunni protagonisti attivi nel processo di cambiamento culturale.

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1. Introduction

While talking about gender stereotypes and prejudices may seem anachronistic and superfluous today, given that the principle of equality and equal dignity between the sexes has been recognized and affirmed for many years now, it is clear that the issue is by no means a foregone conclusion.

Gender stereotypes are like 'cultural cages' in which boys and girls are forced to shape their identity by conforming to a certain model according to social expectations (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2016). Walter Lippmann himself defined them as the 'mental depiction' an individual has of a particular group or category of people, emphasizing how stereotypes have the power to distort our perception of individuals, and in this way can contribute to the emergence of prejudice. Following the cultural stereotype that women are less competent than men in performing certain tasks, much research shows that both men and women are more likely to attribute success in a given task to luck if a woman performs it, and skill if it is performed by a man (Barca, 2023). Indeed, as Margaret Mead states, almost nothing that connotes the genders, male and female, is biologically innate and universal, but mostly socially and culturally conditioned (Bourdieu, 2009).

In our complex and multifaceted society, many agencies, both non-formal and informal, bombard us with information about what is expected 'of him or her' based on identification as male or female. Toy advertisements themselves are very often gender-biased, without considering the aspirations and interests of the boy or girl. Clothes, bows, dolls, and small electrical appliances, perhaps pink in color, are only seen for little girls, while toy cars, war games, and sports equipment are only intended for boys (Lopez, 2017). As Elena Gianini Belotti has argued, boys are offered 'physical' games that cage them in constant and exhausting competition; girls are offered the 'like and please' version (Gianini Belotti, 2018). In cartoons, TV series, comics, and storybooks, superhero teams are only commanded by muscular and powerful men; Prince Charming always rescues helpless princesses, heroes in battle are brave and intelligent men, fathers work and when they come home they are in their armchairs reading the newspaper waiting for their wives to prepare dinner, while women are only wives, mothers or otherwise helpless and submissive women waiting to be rescued and supported, or at best evil stepmothers and envious witches (Barca, 2023).

2. The need to educate for gender equality

Gender equality education is crucial at a time when children are exposed from an early age to social and cultural models that can perpetuate gender stereotypes. Numerous studies have shown that already from childhood, children internalize roles and expectations that reflect the traditional division of labor between men and women (Connell, 2009). As also reported in Bian, Leslie and Cimpian's (2017) research, stereotypes absorbed by boys and girls during the first six years of life lead to shaping their perceptions of their attitudes and abilities.

The task, therefore, of educational agencies is to dismantle gender stereotypes to make children aware of the plurality of differences because if not addressed critically, they can perpetuate forms of discrimination and inequality over time, negatively affecting their personal and social development.

Gender stereotypes become deeply rooted in children's thinking, generating long-term effects on their self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and career choices. For example, girls, as early as school age, may internalize the idea that certain subjects such as mathematics or science are 'male domains', leading to a decline in performance and motivation in these areas (Eccles, 1987). Similarly, boys may be led to believe that emotional expression is a sign of weakness, limiting the development of their social-emotional skills.

The recognition of these negative effects has led to the need to develop educational strategies to counter gender stereotypes as early as primary school. Indeed, several empirical studies have highlighted the importance of introducing educational practices to counter gender stereotypes as early as primary school. For example, a study by Bigler and Liben (2007) showed that children exposed to educational interventions that challenge traditional gender norms tend to develop more flexible and inclusive attitudes toward gender roles. Today, more than ever, the importance of gender equality education not only prepares children for more egalitarian relationships but also promotes their psychological and social well-being by stimulating the free expression of their potential, is evident.

As early as 1975, the international community emphasized the need, also in the field of education, to implement interventions against gender stereotypes, subsequently, new steps have been taken, such as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence adopted in Istanbul in May 2011 and the European Parliament Resolution of 12 March 2013 entitled 'Eliminating Gender Stereotypes in the EU'.

The Istanbul Convention recognizes how traditional gender models, based on the inferiority of women, can perpetuate gender-based violence and calls on member states to take necessary action regarding, in terms of education, the revision of curricula and teaching materials on gender equality and non-stereotypical gender roles.

In the same vein, the European Parliament Resolution emphasizes how gender stereotypes tend to perpetuate the status quo of economic and social inequalities and limit women's professional and personal development. The text denounces how education and training continue to convey gender stereotypes even concerning the educational and professional opportunities available to women. The resolution also points out how from an early age it is possible to

conveying the notion of equality for girls and boys through education based on the recognition of equality and the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Inviting institutions to set up specific courses that can counter gender stereotypes and promote equality between men and women and respect for each other.

Over the last decade, national, European, and international legislation has prepared a series of initiatives for schools aimed at countering sexist discrimination and promoting a culture that values gender differences as a resource for individuals of both sexes.

In Italy, such initiatives are recognized and advocated by Law no. 119/2013 and its Extraordinary Action Plan against sexual and gender-based violence (also referred to in Law no. 107/2015) in which it is emphasized that the goals identified in the Istanbul Convention can be achieved - in terms of education - through teacher training, awareness-raising, information and training of pupils and students and the adoption of school texts that educate on respect between genders. Schools are invited to prepare educational-didactic paths aimed at developing these issues. Therefore, teachers have a crucial role in preparing disciplinary and curricular planning appropriate to the needs of learners and in choosing methodologies and strategies capable of involving them cognitively and emotionally. They have the task of countering stereotypes and prejudices based on gender diversity and, at the same time, raising awareness, informing and training students, teachers, and parents on the prevention of physical and psychological violence (Guerrini, 2019). Undoubtedly, a careful and constant study of gender differences in all school orders and grades can and must contribute to sustaining a true pluralism of difference and thus reduce the gap between the two poles (Ghigi, 2019). But primary school represents one of the first places of institutional socialization, and it is therefore crucial that teachers have the appropriate tools to counter gender stereotypes and promote an inclusive culture. Educating for gender equality at this age can have a lasting impact, shaping children's values and beliefs, and influencing not only their relationship with their gender but also how they interact with others (Martin, Ruble, 2004).

3. The importance of fairy tales in gender equality education

Fairy tales and fables have always played an important role in the education of children, serving as vehicles for the transmission of cultural and moral values. However, many traditional fairy tales perpetuate stereotypical gender models, presenting female and male characters in rigid and limited roles. Princesses are often depicted as passive, waiting to be rescued by a male hero, while male characters are portrayed as strong, brave, and dominant heroes (Zipes, 1997).

With a view to fair and inclusive education, it is therefore necessary, especially in primary schools, to re-read these stories and use them critically, to question such representations and promote new narratives that value gender equality. Fairy tales can become a powerful tool for raising children's awareness of issues such as equality and respect for differences, enabling them to reflect on power dynamics and how these influence gender relations.

Through the pedagogical-didactic approach of deconstructing traditional fairy tales, children can be guided towards a deeper understanding of gender dynamics, developing empathy and respect for others. Many classic fairy tales reinforce traditional gender roles, associating women with virtues such as passivity and beauty, and men with strength and resourcefulness. These tales, while having symbolic and moral value, often reflect patriarchal power structures that limit the possibilities of critical interpretation of gender dynamics (Bacchilega, 1997; Barsotti, 2023). For instance, a critical analysis of 'Cinderella' might highlight the passivity of the protagonist and her dependence on outside help to achieve a happy ending, challenging the idea that women have to wait for someone to rescue them or lead them to happiness; or 'Sleeping Beauty' where Prince Charming is the fearless savior of the princess who has come to resolve the situation without having to show any emotional fragility or vulnerability.

Through educational activities such as rewriting fairy tales, pupils can create new endings or reinterpret the roles of characters, overturning traditional dynamics. This activity, which stimulates creativity and critical thinking, allows the female characters to be portrayed as active figures, capable of solving their problems and contributing to their community. Similarly, male characters can be portrayed in ways that challenge toxic masculinity, demonstrating how they can be vulnerable, empathetic, and collaborative (Tatar, 1987; Marshall, 2004).

4. Digital storytelling as a tool for gender equality education

The advent of digital technologies has expanded educational possibilities, offering new tools to stimulate the active participation of pupils. Digital storytelling is one of the most innovative and inclusive methodologies in this respect, as it allows for the combination of different expressive formats - text, images, video, and sound - to build multimedia and cross-media narratives. In an educational context that aims to promote gender equality, digital storytelling is indeed an invaluable resource.

This practice encourages the creation of personalized, multimedia, and interactive stories that offer pupils the opportunity to rework educational content creatively and engagingly. Using software and online platforms, children can produce stories that challenge gender stereotypes, presenting complex characters and situations that promote inclusion and respect for diversity. From a pedagogical perspective, digital storytelling not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters the development of transversal skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creative problem-solving. Moreover, the interactive and participatory nature of the process stimulates greater involvement of the pupils, who become active agents of their learning journey (Ohler, 2013). In another contribution, I have already reported on the fruitful experience I had with the students of the CdL in Scienze della Formazione Primaria and Scienze dell'Educazione e della Formazione of Reggio Calabria with whom, after analyzing traditional and other fairy tales and fables, we reinvented new stories through digital storytelling (Barca, 2023). Other activities could consist in having pupils create digital stories where traditional gender roles are subverted: a girl can be the courageous leader of a community, while a boy can be portrayed as an individual who freely expresses his emotions or create stories where the main characters are not defined by their gender, but by their qualities, abilities, and personality (Robin, 2008). Creating these narratives helps children understand that gender neither determines nor limits their value or abilities (Miller, 2013). The use of narratives, both traditional and digital, to educate about gender equality has enormous potential to develop empathy and raise awareness of differences. Stories allow children to 'step into the shoes' of others, exploring emotions and perspectives different from their own. This process is crucial for the development of an empathic understanding of gender dynamics and the experiences of the other (Nussbaum, 2010). Another important dimension of this process is the consolidation of inclusive values through critical reflection. Through confronting stories with unconventional gender dynamics, children learn that differences do not have to be a reason for discrimination but can be an asset to the community (Bettelheim, 1976). A further central aspect of the educational approach based on narratives and digital storytelling is the activation of pupils as agents of change. It is not just a matter of imparting knowledge and values, but of making children active participants in their learning and in the process of cultural transformation. In a context where pupils are involved in creating narratives that challenge gender stereotypes, they become aware of the social dynamics that perpetuate inequalities and learn to imagine and build alternatives.

The creative process not only strengthens self-esteem and confidence in one's abilities but also stimulates critical thinking, which is fundamental for analyzing and understanding the social and cultural structures that influence everyday life. Through the creation of stories that promote inclusion, children learn to see themselves as actors capable of positively influencing their social environment, contributing to the construction of a fairer society that respects differences (Freire, 2005). The interactive approach of digital storytelling also allows pupils to be more deeply involved, making them active participants in their own learning process. They not only learn theoretical concepts but apply them in creative contexts, contributing to the construction of a culture of respect and inclusion (Maia, 2023).

Effectively addressing gender bias in primary school also requires close collaboration between teachers, families, and the community. Parents' beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role in how children perceive gender roles. Therefore, schools need to work in synergy with families to promote a common vision of equality and inclusion (Santoni, 2018).

Numerous studies have shown that educational programs for parents, aimed at raising awareness of gender equality issues and providing them with tools to deal with stereotypes, can have a positive impact on children's development (Dixon et al., 2013). Schools can organize training sessions for parents, offering insights to avoid stereotypical behavior in everyday interactions and promote more inclusive education at home. Furthermore, involving parents in school activities related to gender equality, such as shared story reading or participation in digital storytelling projects, can strengthen the impact of educational initiatives. Collaboration like this creates a coherent and supportive learning environment that fosters children's harmonious growth while respecting differences (Epstein, 2010).

5. Conclusions

Gender equality education in primary schools is a challenge but also an opportunity to build a fairer and more inclusive society. The use of fairy tales and digital storytelling proves to be a very effective approach to promote greater awareness of gender dynamics and to develop empathy and respect for differences.

Through these educational practices, children can not only understand and deconstruct gender stereotypes but also develop the skills necessary to act as agents of change in their community. The integration of technology and creative storytelling offers a powerful tool to educate new generations on values of inclusion and respect, ensuring that gender equality becomes a concrete reality from the earliest stages of education.

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