

# Designing gender-sensitive teaching starting from teacher training

## Progettare una didattica di genere a partire dalla formazione degli insegnanti

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

### ABSTRACT

In a school system geared towards equity and inclusion, initial teacher training is crucial for building a pedagogical culture capable of valuing difference and combating gender stereotypes. This exploratory study, conducted in the Specialisation Courses on Support at the University of Foggia, investigated the attitudes and behaviours of trainee and serving teachers towards sexual orientation and diversity using the ATLG and HCAT scales. The results show general openness, but also latent stereotypes and a lack of awareness of discriminatory language, indicating the need for gender education based on gender content.

#### KEYWORDS

**Gender pedagogy, initial teacher training, sexual orientation, stereotypes and discrimination, school inclusion.**  
**Pedagogia di genere, formazione iniziale degli insegnanti, orientamento sessuale, stereotipi e discriminazioni, inclusione scolastica.**

In un sistema scolastico orientato all'equità e all'inclusione, la formazione iniziale degli insegnanti è decisiva per costruire una cultura pedagogica capace di valorizzare la differenza e contrastare gli stereotipi di genere. Questo studio esplorativo, condotto nei Corsi di Specializzazione sul Sostegno dell'Università di Foggia, ha indagato atteggiamenti e comportamenti di docenti in formazione e in servizio verso l'orientamento sessuale e la diversità tramite le scale ATLG e HCAT. I risultati mostrano apertura generale, ma anche stereotipi latenti e scarsa consapevolezza del linguaggio discriminatorio, indicando la necessità di una didattica di genere fondata su contenuti di genere.

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## 1. Inclusion as a theoretical framework for education on diversity

In the contemporary educational landscape, promoting a culture of inclusion is an ethical and pedagogical priority that deserves special attention. As a place for socialisation and identity building, schools play a central role in transmitting values, norms and relational models, profoundly influencing perceptions of differences<sup>1</sup> and the development of attitudes towards others. One of the most sensitive aspects of this reflection is sexual orientation, which is often the subject of stereotypes and prejudices that are rooted in language, behaviour and educational dynamics (Burgio, 2020a; Burgio, 2020b; Demozzi, Ghigi, 2024).

The most recent scientific literature (Kosciw et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2010; Proulx et al., 2019) has highlighted how the school experience of LGBTQ+ students is still marked by episodes of discrimination, isolation and homophobic bullying, with repercussions on psychological well-being, motivation to learn and sense of belonging (Roberti, Selmi, 2021). In this context, teacher training, and in particular the training of support teachers, takes on strategic importance. Their professionalism, based on listening, empathy and personalisation, can become a lever for transformation in the construction of fair and welcoming learning environments, where every identity is recognised and valued.

The theoretical framework combines contributions from psychology and education, emphasising the dynamic interaction between biological, socio-cultural and relational factors in the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation (Diamond, 2020; Eagly, Wood, 2012). The perspective adopted is based on an inclusive and constructivist paradigm, in which education about differences is configured as a transformative learning process aimed at overcoming implicit *biases* and promoting mutual respect (Biemmi, Mapelli, 2024; Burgio, 2025; Di Grigoli, 2025). At the same time, the school context is interpreted as a space for educational agency, in which teachers can act consciously to prevent stereotypes and promote democratic citizenship and solidarity (Meyer, 2003; Hatchel et al., 2018).

In this context, measuring the attitudes and behaviours of trainee teachers towards sexual orientation is not merely a psychometric exercise, but a pedagogical one: it allows us to identify implicit beliefs, latent attitudes and training needs that can guide the design of more informed and reflective university courses. To this end, scientific research in this field uses, among other things, two tools that are validated and recognised in international literature for their high educational and training value: the *Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale*, ATLG (Herek, 1988; Herek, McLemore, 1998), which measures cognitive and affective attitudes toward homosexual people, and the *Homophobic Content Agent Target scale*, HCAT (Poteat, Espelage, 2005), which analyses the frequency and nature of discriminatory behaviour by identifying the agent, content and target of the homophobic act. Although both scales originated in the field of psychology, they are now also used as pedagogical research tools, as they allow us to reflect on the educational and relational dimensions of diversity, on language and on school practices that can either promote or hinder the creation of truly inclusive environments.

In light of these premises, this exploratory study aims to analyse the attitudes and behaviours of students enrolled in the Specialisation Courses for Support Activities (TFA sostegno IX ciclo) at the University of Foggia towards LGBTQ+ people, identify the main personal, cultural and educational factors that may affect representations of diversity and, finally, offer pedagogical guidelines for the design of initial and continuing training courses capable of promoting a culture of equality, respect and inclusive citizenship. The decision to use both the ATLG scale and the HCAT scale in this experiment responds to the need to explore the attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of trainee support teachers in a complementary manner, providing a useful interpretative framework for designing targeted training activities and more effective educational strategies. In this way, the research aims to contribute, specifically, to the construction of an educational vision based on reflection and social responsibility on the part of teachers, reaffirming the value of education as a space for emancipation, recognition and justice.

## 2. The experimental design: methodology, sample and data analysis

This study adopted an exploratory quantitative experimental design for descriptive and comparative purposes and was conducted during the 2023/2024 academic year at the University of Foggia. The sample, consisting of 489 students enrolled in Specialisation Courses for Teaching Support Activities (*TFA Sostegno IX cycle*), participated on a voluntary basis in the *Orientation, Life Project and School-Work Alternation Laboratory*. The survey, aimed at

1 In this study, the term *differences* refers to the broad spectrum of characteristics that define human variability – biological, psychological, socio-cultural, linguistic, affective and experiential differences – which constitute the natural plurality of the human condition. Closely related to this, the term *diversity* will be used to denote how these human differences manifest within social and educational contexts, giving rise to plural and heterogeneous communities. Within this wider anthropological landscape of differences and diversity, the present work focuses specifically on differences related to sexual orientation, which frequently become the target of stereotyping, exclusion or discriminatory practices rooted in language, behaviour and educational dynamics.

exploring the issues of gender identity, sexual orientation and inclusive teaching, was conducted through the online administration of a questionnaire structured in three sections.

The first section collected socio-demographic and professional data (age, gender, educational qualifications, employment status). The second section included the ATLG scale (Herek, 1988; Herek, McLemore, 1998), consisting of 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale, divided into the ATL (attitudes towards lesbians) and ATG (attitudes towards homosexual men). The third section included the HCAT scale (Poteat, Espelage, 2005), consisting of 6 items relating to the role of agent and victim of homophobic verbal content, with responses on a frequency scale from 1 ("never") to 5 ("more than once a week").

Although the study addresses attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and sexual diversity, the empirical investigation focuses specifically on attitudes towards gay men and lesbians. This methodological choice is intrinsically linked to the structure of the ATLG scale, which was originally developed to measure attitudes towards these two groups, and to the HCAT scale, which frames homophobic verbal behaviour primarily in relation to same-sex attracted individuals. Consequently, the analysis does not directly assess perceptions or discriminatory experiences involving bisexual, queer, trans\* or non-binary people. This delimitation represents a conscious choice made to ensure methodological coherence with the selected instruments, while acknowledging its limitations and identifying an area for future research developments.

The sample is heavily skewed towards women (87.7% women, 11.7% men, 0.6% unspecified) and distributed mainly in the 36-45 age group (36.2%) and 46-55 age group (34.4%), followed by 26-35 (23.9%) and over 56 (5.5%). With regard to employment status, 45.4% are non-teachers aspiring to become teachers, 37.4% are temporary teachers and 17.2% are permanent teachers. The majority of participants (54%) attend the TFA for upper secondary school, followed by 43.7% who attend the TFA for lower secondary school and 16.3% who attend courses for nursery and primary school. In terms of education, 58.9% have degrees in humanities or languages, 17.2% in science and technology, 5.5% have an Italian Technical-Vocational Institute (ITP) diploma and 18.4% have other qualifications.

Data analysis was conducted in successive and integrated stages. In an initial descriptive phase, the mean, median, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values of the two scales (ATLG and HCAT) were calculated. Subsequently, inferential tests (t-tests for independent samples, one-way ANOVA<sup>2</sup> and Kruskal-Wallis<sup>3</sup> tests, based on the distribution of variables) explored the differences between groups (gender, age, professional status), confirmed by post-hoc analyses (Mann-Whitney U<sup>4</sup> test). Finally, Spearman correlations<sup>5</sup> investigated the relationships between attitudes (ATLG), homophobic verbal behaviours (HCAT) and socio-demographic variables. All data were processed anonymously and in aggregate form, in compliance with privacy regulations and the ethical principles of educational research.

### 3. Presentation and discussion of the results obtained

Statistical analysis revealed generally positive and open attitudes towards sexual diversity. The average scores on the ATLG scale show inclusive values for both the ATL subscale (34.12; SD = 3.17) and the ATG subscale (34.26; SD = 2.98), with an average total of 68.39 (SD = 5.39) out of 100. This indicates a low incidence of prejudice, while revealing some areas of ambivalence linked to traditional cultural residues.

The HCAT scale, which measures the use of or exposure to homophobic language, returns low average scores: 3.94 (SD = 1.53) for the agent dimension and 2.51 (SD = 1.28) for the target dimension, with a total of 6.45 (SD = 2.59) out of 30. Although the median (5) confirms a low frequency of discriminatory experiences, the wide range (up to 17) reveals the persistence of isolated episodes of verbal microaggression.

The Kruskal-Wallis test showed no significant differences between professional groups (aspiring, temporary, permanent) in ATLG scores ( $p > 0.05$ ), while significant differences emerged for the HCAT scale: *HCAT-Agent* ( $p \approx 0.0041$ ), *HCAT-Target* ( $p \approx 0.0003$ ) and *HCAT-Total* ( $p \approx 0.0074$ ). This suggests that employment status does not influence stated attitudes, but does condition experiences related to homophobic language.

Post-hoc analyses (Mann-Whitney U) confirm these findings: significant differences in the *target* dimension between aspiring teachers and temporary teachers ( $p = 0.0111$ ) and between temporary teachers and tenured

2 One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) is a parametric test used to compare the means of three or more independent groups, assuming normally distributed data and homogeneity of variances. It assesses whether at least one group mean differs significantly from the others.

3 The Kruskal-Wallis test is a non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, used when data do not meet the assumptions of normality. It compares the distribution of scores across three or more independent groups by analysing differences in rank sums.

4 The Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric post-hoc test used to compare differences between two independent groups when data are not normally distributed. It evaluates whether the distribution of ranks differs significantly between the groups.

5 Spearman's rho is a non-parametric correlation coefficient that measures the strength and direction of the association between two variables based on their ranked values. It is suitable for ordinal data or non-normally distributed variables.

teachers ( $p = 0.0230$ ), with temporary teachers being less exposed. However, no differences emerge in the agent dimension, indicating generally responsible behaviour.

The *item-by-item* analysis of the HCAT shows that direct insults and teasing have low averages (1-2 out of 5), while the item “comments on appearance” has slightly higher values, especially among applicants. In the *target* dimension, tenured teachers are more exposed to teasing and comments on appearance, while temporary teachers report fewer experiences, perhaps due to a different perception of the phenomenon. Micro-expressions of discrimination, rather than direct acts, therefore represent the grey area that needs to be addressed in training courses.

The *item-by-item* analysis of the ATLG scale also confirms a substantial uniformity of scores between the groups (all  $p$  values  $> 0.05$ ). This indicates that attitudes towards homosexual people are generally positive and shared, regardless of professional status. However, the self-reported nature of the instrument may have attenuated the detection of implicit *biases* or more subtle ambivalences, which emerge more clearly in the analysis of the HCAT scale.

Overall, the data paint a favourable picture in terms of diversity, but highlight the need to consolidate specific skills in teacher training in order to recognise and combat latent forms of discrimination and homophobic language, promoting truly inclusive gender education.

The results confirm the importance of systematically investigating teachers' attitudes towards sexual orientation and non-conforming identities, not only to capture the current state of school culture, but also to identify pedagogical levers useful for building truly inclusive environments. The general adherence to open-minded positions, as documented by the ATLG scale, must in fact be interpreted in light of the ambivalence revealed by the HCAT scale, which suggests the persistence of implicit prejudices and subtle forms of exclusion.

The results of the ATLG, which measure stated attitudes, show overall low levels of homophobia. However, as demonstrated by Herek (1988) and Herek and McLemore (1998), this scale is particularly sensitive to conscious attitudes and reflects, in part, the tendency towards social desirability. This could explain the relative uniformity of scores among groups of teachers. In other words, even individuals who express formally inclusive positions may unconsciously maintain heteronormative views or reproduce stereotypical narratives in their daily educational practice.

The data from the HCAT scale (Poteat, Espelage, 2005), which investigates behaviours and experiences related to homophobic language, show more marked differences. In particular, the perception of having been the “target” of discriminatory language is higher among trainees, perhaps because they are more exposed to school dynamics that are still poorly deconstructed, or more sensitive to observing micro-aggressive contexts.

The picture that emerges is consistent with Italian literature on gender pedagogy (Dato, 2014; Lopez, 2014; Ulivieri, 2014; Leonelli, 2003; Guerrini, 2017), according to which the elimination of stereotypes cannot be based solely on declarations of principle, but requires deep-rooted, intentional and transformative training practices. The data clearly show how initial training, if critically oriented, can act as a space for symbolic deconstruction and the assumption of professional responsibility. This is particularly evident in the group of trainee teachers, who show greater openness than those already in service, confirming the generative role of the TFA programme as a reflective laboratory on the role of the teacher (Pinto Minerva, 1977; Lopez, 2017).

The study confirms the relevance of pedagogical reflection on the need to overcome implicit educational conditioning still rooted in textbooks, language and school dynamics (Burgio & Lopez, 2023). As Crivellaro & Nardone (2020) point out, symbolic violence often manifests itself in the form of silence, omissions and invisibility: it is in these folds that the most subtle micro-exclusions lurk, which only conscious teacher training can address.

As a place where collective imagination is constructed, schools have the task of making all identities visible, moving beyond the logic of “tolerance” in favour of that of “recognition”.

In this sense, teachers are called upon to perform a deeply political task: not only to educate students to respect others, but also to defuse invisible power dynamics and cultural privileges on a daily basis.

The research results suggest the need to:

- include structured modules on diversity education in initial and in-service training courses;
- adopt gender-based teaching methods based on gender-related content;
- promoting spaces for reflection and action research in TFA support courses and/or teaching qualification courses;
- defining shared school protocols for dealing with incidents of discrimination;
- monitoring changes in school climates using sensitive (including qualitative) tools.

An education system that aspires to combat the reproduction of male chauvinist models and sexist stereotypes cannot fail to equip itself with theoretical, methodological and relational tools capable of operating on multiple levels: individual, institutional and curricular.



#### 4. Reflections on the educational role of teachers: inclusion, gender and future challenges

The research highlights the urgent need to critically and generatively redefine the role of teachers, who should no longer be seen as mere transmitters of knowledge, but as agents of cultural change and promoters of inclusion. Education on equality, difference and the recognition of identities requires an ethical and pedagogical stance that involves the initial and in-service training of teachers. In the absence of specific courses on gender and sexual orientation issues, there remains a risk of reinforcing implicit prejudices and exclusionary practices. As indicated in the pedagogical literature (Ulivieri, 2014; Lopez, 2017; Crivellaro, Nardone, 2020), gender education is an essential condition for building truly equitable and welcoming educational environments.

Teachers, and support teachers in particular, are called upon to recognise discriminatory language and behaviour, promote identity pluralism, support the most vulnerable pupils and introduce content capable of deconstructing stereotypes and one-sided narratives. This implies a reflective and conscious approach, based on intentional planning and shared protocols, which make inclusion a systematic rather than an episodic practice. From this perspective, the school becomes a laboratory for coexistence and empathy education, a place for building new educational alliances based on symmetrical and authentic relationships (Kallio et al., 2021).

The educational value of this research also lies in its transformative nature. Developed within courses linked to the *TFA sostegno* (special needs teaching qualification), it represented an action research experience capable of combining theory and practice, promoting critical awareness, methodological rigour and pedagogical skills among participants. The workshop experience offered future teachers an opportunity for personal reflection, professional development and the construction of a culture of democratic citizenship (Bru et al., 2021).

Future challenges concern four priority areas:

- recognising and deconstructing implicit attitudes;
- systematically integrating gender content into training courses and school curricula;
- developing shared educational protocols to combat discriminatory language;
- supporting teachers through opportunities for discussion, supervision and continuous professional development.

Moving beyond simple tolerance to embrace legitimacy and plurality is now essential for a truly democratic and transformative school system. In this scenario, educational research plays a decisive role in guiding practices, providing evidence and supporting the evolution of an education system capable of generating equity, respect and well-being for all (Priyo et al., 2024).

#### 5. Concluding Remarks

This research confirms that schools today represent a crucial arena for building a more just, equitable and aware society. In a context in which issues related to identity, sexual orientation and the legitimisation of differences are becoming increasingly central, the role of the teacher is increasingly taking on an ethical responsibility as well as an educational one.

The results paint an encouraging picture: trainee teachers show a general openness towards diversity and a growing sensitivity towards LGBTQ+ issues. However, the presence of implicit stereotypes and the difficulty in recognising and naming microaggressions reveal how much work still needs to be done on the path towards full awareness. Simply adhering to values is not enough: it is necessary to cultivate complex educational and relational skills that enable principles to be translated into intentional and transformative everyday teaching practices.

The value of this study also lies in its integration into the training programme for future support teachers, where research becomes an integral part of the educational experience. The TFA thus acts as a space for critical reflection and innovation, where theory and practice intertwine to give rise to educational models geared towards inclusion and social justice.

Making schools truly inclusive environments requires much more than regulations or declarations of principle: it involves building a professional culture capable of embracing complexity, recognising differences as resources and promoting, through gender education, an educational citizenship based on respect and reciprocity.

The road to a school free of stereotypes is certainly long, but this research suggests that the conditions for genuine change are already in place. Future research could explore the impact of specific training programmes on teachers' social representations, investigate the connections between emotional training and inclusive skills, and assess how educational technologies and virtual worlds can become spaces for discussion and reflection on gender and diversity.

Perhaps, then, "it is not a question of concluding", but of continuing to seek, question and educate, because every step towards inclusion does not mark a point of arrival, but a new beginning on the path of educational research.

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