First steps toward equity: gender and intercultural education in early childhood contexts
Primi passi verso l'equità: genere ed educazione interculturale nei contesti della prima infanzia

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ABSTRACT
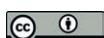
This paper, drawing from the perspectives of gender pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy, and intersectional pedagogy, presents a case study conducted at an intercultural center[1] in the city of Rome. The objective is to explore whether and how intercultural education can also promote gender education through everyday educational and didactic practices. A qualitative research approach was adopted, combining various tools: analysis of institutional documents, semi-structured interviews with educators, and classroom observations involving both girls and boys. The findings reveal several noteworthy aspects, including implicit connections between intercultural and gender-focused educational approaches. Nevertheless, certain critical issues persist, particularly in addressing cultural and relational models that children tend to internalize from an early age.

KEYWORDS
Gender education; Intercultural education; Intersectionality; Early childhood; Case study.
Educazione di genere; Educazione interculturale; Intersezionalità; Prima infanzia; Studio di caso.

Questo articolo, partendo dalle prospettive della pedagogia di genere, della pedagogia interculturale e della pedagogia intersezionale, presenta uno studio di caso condotto in un centro interculturale[2] della città di Roma. L'obiettivo è esplorare se e come l'educazione interculturale possa promuovere anche l'educazione di genere attraverso pratiche educative e didattiche quotidiane. È stato adottato un approccio di ricerca qualitativa, combinando diversi strumenti: l'analisi di documenti istituzionali, interviste semi-strutturate con educatori e osservazioni in classe che hanno coinvolto sia ragazze che ragazzi. I risultati rivelano diversi aspetti rilevanti, tra cui connessioni implicite tra approcci educativi interculturali e focalizzati sul genere. Tuttavia, permangono alcune criticità, in particolare nel trattamento di modelli culturali e relazionali che i bambini tendono a interiorizzare fin dalla tenera età.

1   Intercultural Centers were established in a pioneering and informal way around 20 years ago, with the aim of creating spaces for encounter and support for coexistence and the recognition of pluralities. A significant and important aspect is their work in raising awareness in the local community on intercultural issues, through initiatives open to both the citizenry and the wider social fabric, as well as through exchanges and collaborations with public and private organizations operating in the city. These are places where inclusion, participation, and encounter are promoted, guided by pluralism and the appreciation of diversity.

2   I Centri Interculturali nascono in maniera pioneristica e informale circa 20 anni fa con l'obiettivo di creare spazi di incontro e supporto alla convivenza e al riconoscimento delle pluralità. Grande e importa è il lavoro di sensibilizzazione del territorio sulle tematiche interculturali attraverso iniziative aperte al tessuto sociale, cittadino e non, e attraverso scambi e collaborazioni con enti pubblici e privati che operano nella città. Si tratta di luoghi in cui promuovere inclusione, partecipazione e incontro all'insegna del pluralismo e della valorizzazione della diversità.

1. Interculturality, Gender Education, and Intersectionality: A Perspective of Interconnection

The development of attention to differences within pedagogical reflection and educational practice has a rich and complex history (Anzaldùa, 1987; hooks, 1994; Trifonas, 2003; Ulivieri, 2015; Lopez, 2018). It unfolds through a continuous engagement with the many forms of exclusion and marginalization—both explicit and implicit— that characterize educational and social processes. In this context, gender-related issues in Italy, particularly concerning how lived experiences, the recognition of gender roles, and gender stereotypes influence or permeate educational processes, have for the past forty years challenged educational professionals and the broader integrated educational system, involving families and civil society as well (Gianini Belotti, 1973; Leonelli, 2011; Biemmi, Mapelli, 2017; Ghigi, 2019). The ongoing and dynamic debate on gender education and gender pedagogy highlights the urgent need for a continuous critical engagement with the construction of identities and intersubjective relationships, grounded in the respect for individual specificities and the free expression of self. What is required is a critical and transformative approach to education, capable of analyzing, deconstructing, and reimagining educational processes in light of inequalities, stereotypes, and gender norms, with the goal of promoting equity, inclusion, and democratic citizenship (Musi, 2008; Gamberi, 2014). Such aims can only be achieved by adopting complex and interconnected perspectives, necessary for understanding and acting upon social phenomena in a multidimensional manner. In this regard, the lens of intersectionality, alongside intercultural approaches, provides multi-focal spaces for critical reflection, allowing for dialogue, theoretical elaboration, and practice in the name of social inclusion and an education free from the subordination of specific groups and subjectivities. Intersectionality, in particular, draws attention to the ways in which race, class, gender, and other systems of power are interdependent and mutually reinforcing (hooks, 1981; Hill Collins, 2003). It explores how the intersections among these dimensions generate complex forms of social inequality and calls for the critical unveiling of the often implicit mechanisms of exclusion (Nash, 2008; Marchetti, 2013). At the same time, intercultural pedagogy aims, on one hand, to value diversity in all its forms -starting from cultural and linguistic dimensions - and, on the other, to deconstruct power relations between individuals and groups. It interrogates the ethnocentric modes through which we think and act, working to counteract stereotypes and prejudice. Ultimately, despite their specific focuses, both gender education and intercultural education operate within the paradigm of difference (Marone, 2015; Lopez, 2018), seeking to dismantle processes of exclusion and marginalization and to support transformative pathways that foster inclusion and equity (Ulivieri, 2017). This aligns closely with the aforementioned need to approach human and social complexity through an intersectional lens—one that promotes an understanding of difference as a foundational value for the emergence of new identities through interrelated and dialogic perspectives. In this sense, gender pedagogy, when combined with intercultural pedagogy, offers significant insights for addressing gender in relation to ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences. It contributes to shaping the complex and multicultural fabric of contemporary society, where each individual's uniqueness becomes a site of possibility, encounter, and mutual enrichment. This perspective is particularly crucial within educational contexts, starting from early childhood, where the processes of identity and relational construction begin to form the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral foundations of future adolescents and adults. Thus, adopting a critical and attentive stance toward gender issues—framed within an intercultural and intersectional perspective—emerges as a key strategy for supporting developmental pathways that are aligned with the challenges of both the present and the near future.

2. Celio Azzurro: a study on gender education

Based on these theoretical premises, a study was conducted on the intercultural center Celio Azzurro in Rome, the first in Italy specifically dedicated to both immigrant and Italian children. Since its foundation in 1990, Celio Azzurro has welcomed thousands of children from around 80 different countries. Schooling is Celio Azzurro's main activity. It is open every day from 8 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. and it welcomes around 60 children aged between 3 and 6, divided into three age groups: the Little Ones (3 years old), the Middle Ones (4 years old) and the Big Ones (5 years old).

Each group is mainly supervised by a male and a female educator to support identification processes and value gender differences. Celio Azzurro was founded to realize intercultural education in practice, free from prejudices, emphasizing active listening and respect for all forms of self-expression and identity. The intercultural approach starts with similarities in the childhood experienced by parents. Families are directly involved in the educational process, becoming protagonists of an entire school day in which they share significant elements of their childhood like foods, games, adventures, creating a shared collective memory.

Entering Celio Azzurro feels like being welcomed into a large family home. The center is an educational community in which families and educators collaborate toward collective well-being, creating a support network based on trust and solidarity. This happens naturally, by opening the school to parents, allowing them to stay when dropping off or picking up their children (Casalbore, Meloni, Riccardi, Stillo, 2023). The school also organizes cultural

events and celebrations open to the local community, fostering socialization and sharing. These occasions also allow former children of the center to reconnect, reinforcing a sense of belonging to the Celio Azzurro community (Celio Azzurro, 2019). The relationships formed go beyond the strictly educational path, they are authentic and long-lasting, as shown by the many cases of former students who now bring their own children to the same school.

To explore the center's role in promoting gender equality education, a case study methodology was adopted. This method is particularly useful for exploring a single phenomenon within its natural context, describing its complexity and prioritizing depth over breadth through the analysis of qualitative data (Guasti, 2002; Yin, 2018). The aim of the study was to understand whether and how the center's intercultural education also promotes gender equality education, by identifying which educational actions are carried out in this area. An additional objective was to prompt educators to reflect on their own gender representations and expectations, on stereotypes, and on how these aspects relate to their educational practices.

Based on these objectives, a qualitative research approach was used, combining various tools to capture the complexity of the ongoing processes—both by collecting the perspectives of male and female educators and by observing the interactions between children. The first phase of the study involved the analysis of various materials produced by the center, to identify explicit references to gender issues and to examine the type of language used. This was followed by semi-structured interviews conducted with three male and three female educators, differentiated by gender and age, to collect their thoughts and interpretations of the relevant themes, and to initiate both, reflection and self-reflection[1]. Finally, to address some inherent limitations of qualitative interviews—such as the tendency for responses to be influenced by social expectations or to be inconsistent with actual behaviour, especially regarding sensitive identity dimensions like gender—several observations were carried out[2]. Observation proved to be a valuable tool for identifying unconscious patterns in educators' behaviour, for identifying different play patterns between boys and girls and the hidden curriculum (Amico, 2018). Prior to the observation phase, a grid was developed to define the specific behaviours and aspects to be monitored. The three age groups were then observed: Little Ones (3 years old, 11 boys, 4 girls), Middle Ones (4 years old, 10 boys, 10 girls), and Big Ones (5 years old, 6 boys, 10 girls), for a total of ten observation sessions over a period of approximately one month. It is essential that, during the observation, the researcher remains as inconspicuous as possible to the children (Cassibba, D'Odorico, 2005). For this reason, during the observations, the researcher was careful to remain apart from the group or from the children being observed

3. Research Analysis and Results

For the document analysis various materials were examined: the center' educational project; the presentation of an intercultural workshop program for teachers; projects for participation in funding programs concerning family policies, educational equality and prevention of violence against women; communication addressed to families. The analysis reveals a clear focus on gender issues, particularly highlighted in the sections that present Celio Azzurro's educational approach. The center's intercultural approach embodies an inclusive perspective, attentive to differences, the overcoming of stereotypes, and the valorization of various gender identities. Most of the texts examined are written using inclusive language that includes the feminine gender in addition to the generalized masculine. An observable evolution towards this inclusive language is present in the communications directed to families. Only the oldest document stands out for its use of an extended masculine form and for the absence of gender references that are present in the other texts.

Interviews with educators provided an opportunity for reflection on life experiences related to gender and allowed educators to express their views on topics such as masculinity and femininity, gender stereotypes, language, and gender education. After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed and a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then carried out on the text. Using color-coded highlighting, the various thematic categories emerging from the interviews were identified and subsequently grouped into specific themes, divided as follows:

– Reflective practice in education.
– Gender-Inclusive language.
– Link between gender and intercultural education.
– Toys and Gendered play.

A recurring theme that emerged from the interviews, in fact, is the necessity and significance of reflective practice in education, particularly to increase awareness of gender biases we experience, and therefore also to rec-

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1 Refer to Attachments 1 and 2 for the coding grid of the interviewees and the interview outline and themes.
2 For the observation grid, refer to Attachment 3.

ognize what is unconsciously brought into the educational relationship. One interviewee stated: "I am in a position of doubt and deconstruction. I feel that it is necessary for me and for us to reflect on ourselves" (Int. 1).

Regarding toys, all the educators agree that there are no toys more suited to boys or girls. However, they observe differences in play between the genders, even though boys and girls often play together at the center. The educators attribute these differences to social, cultural, and familial influences. For example, one interviewee highlights the clear gender division in the world of toys, through which society shapes boys and girls to conform to binary expectations and roles (Abbatecola, Stagi, 2017; Jones, 2020; Borrelli, 2024).

"We have the pink packages, the blue ones, dolls in the pink package, and cars in the blue one. These are the messages of society; a boy and a girl know where they belong, and they feel wrong if they go to the opposite shelf" (Int. 5).

With regard to the topic of language, for some interviewees, the debate over a male-dominated and non-inclusive language that excludes the feminine one is perceived as an imposition, while for others it is essential. "Terminology is important. We need to get used to saying 'the president,' 'female lawyer,' and placing the feminine article before a term. And we're still not accustomed to that" (Int. 4).

Only one of the interviews consistently focused on the use of language that includes the feminine form.

Another significant theme that emerged was the connection between gender education and intercultural education. According to the interviewees, both cannot be taught in an abstract or ideological way, but must serve as an integrating background, a way of relating, of looking at differences, and of being attentive to others. "I don't see gender education as a subject to be taught, just as intercultural education is not. I see them as deeply interconnected. In this sense, I think that at Celio, this work has always been done, even through intercultural work that opens doors to a thousand different realities, a thousand foods, a thousand stories, and a thousand different forms of protagonism" (Int. 5).

For educators, gender education means educating children to express their identity freely and offering a mode of relating that transcends the male/female binary. One educator emphasizes that this perspective also provides an opportunity for adults to defend themselves and reconsider those gender structures that shape everybody's daily lives.

Two interviewees participated in gender training courses. The others (all from the same generation) attribute their gender education to the historical and social context of feminist claims.

The observation tool allowed the verification of whether the perceptions and representations expressed by the interviewees align with what was observed. Aspects such as children's clothing choices, the management of space, play, and language were observed. The children were observed at different times of the day, including arrival, circle time and snack time, free play and lunch.

During the observations it was found that male children consistently wear darker clothes (red, blue, black) compared to female children, who have more colourful clothing (pink, purple, red, blue, yellow). Among them, one male child in the Middle Ones (5 years old) consistently wears a skirt and some accessories typically considered feminine. During the morning snack time, when the three groups gather separately in a circle, it was observed that children tend to sit near their friends, but there are also moments of clear separation between boys and girls. Generally, children mixed but often maintained pairs or small groups of the same gender. For example, during one observation, the Middle Group was arranged as follows (Fig.1):
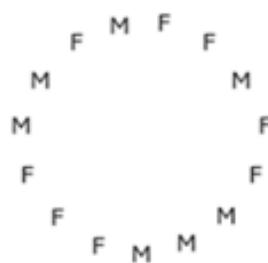
Figure 1. Circle arrangement of Middle group.

The children were also observed during playtime, when they freely choose what to play with, and during various moments of free play when they move between the indoor space and the large school garden. The environment features gender-neutral toys; in each room there are different types of toys, including building blocks, trains, animal figures, kitchen sets, puzzles and dolls. It was noted that when the environment is organized into interest corners and activity points with materials and games, boys and girls tend to play together, divided by interest. The differences in play between boys and girls are more evident when the environment is less structured, such as during free play.

In this regard, it is interesting to refer to an observation made in Farnè's text (1999), who asserts that boys primarily play *with* something, while girls play *at* something; for boys, the game is about personal or group gratification, while for girls, the game serves other purposes, such as socialization, the search for dialogue, or identification with an adult figure. This is also evident in the observations; boys, more than girls, tend to play with objects like cars, animals, trains, and building blocks, usually in pairs or small groups, sometimes even with girls. Among these, building blocks are the most frequently used. In the garden, boys tend to organize more physical games than girls; they run, play basketball, or, especially, soccer. Occasionally, girls also participate in these games. During one observation, the children divided into teams of boys and girls, and one boy said: "Now it's the boys' turn, then the girls' turn." Soccer is the only game where children autonomously and explicitly divide into boys and girls.

Girls, on the other hand, prefer to engage in imaginative play. They enjoy symbolic play, often identifying with adult figures and recreating everyday life situations. The most common games involve caring for dolls, playing "mom, dad, and daughter," sometimes with boys, playing with building blocks, puzzles, trains, and spending time drawing (as do the boys). A noteworthy observation was made when some girls were seen playing at applying makeup in the garden.

Finally, gender stereotypes emerged in the children's language. Some relate to roles and professions assigned to a gender. A girl, while playing, says: "I'm the gentleman flying the plane" using masculine term. Others reflect characteristics already associated by children with boys and girls: one girl addressed a group of boys, saying, "But this isn't fair, you are boys, you are stronger, we are girls," implying that strength is primarily attributed to boys, while girls are seen as weaker. Even from as early as twenty months, children already have gender-specific preferences for objects and, by the age of two or three, they possess substantial knowledge of the activities, professions, behaviours, and expectations stereotypically attributed to each gender (Atzara, Cabras, Mosca, Muggianu, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The brief overview of the findings from the case study – centered on gender education within a context already deeply engaged in intercultural education – offers several key observations. The first, more general point highlights a persistent difficulty in adopting deliberate, structured, and collectively shared approaches to gender education. While the issue is increasingly gaining traction in the center's educational discourse and practice, it remains somewhat peripheral. There is a risk that gender-related educational initiatives may be improvised or lack critical awareness, often left to the initiative of individuals who are either particularly sensitive to the topic or possess specific training. In this regard, it becomes evident that gender education cannot simply be derived from intercultural sensitivity or from a well-developed ability to "practice interculturality". While such a framework can indeed support discussions and actions related to gender, it still necessitates targeted training and sustained critical reflection (Dello Preite, 2024). At the core of Celio Azzurro's educational vision lies active listening, respect for all forms of self-expression, and the recognition of diverse identities. In this way, the findings reinforce theoretical claims about the role of early childhood education (0-6 years) as a crucial period for shaping inclusive attitudes and dismantling biases (Connell, 2009). In this sense, the center's approach represents a valuable foundation for the prevention of all forms of gender-based or identity-based marginalization. A second aspect worth discussing is Celio Azzurro's - and its educators' – capacity to fully embody an educational environment that fosters freedom of expression and affirms pluralism as a core value. This is a space in which every child can see themselves reflected, learning through an ongoing process of discovery. Of course, this effort stands in contrast to the highly stereotyped social norms and expectations to which children are exposed from an early age (Biemmi, Lionelli, 2017), and these dynamics are also evident in this case. Nonetheless, it also reflects the persistent commitment of spaces like Celio, which - despite present but surmountable limitations – "become advocates for gender equality and for a form of socialization where relationship itself is the core value, regardless" (Interview 2). This underscores the importance of early intervention in the 0-6 age group, where education can actively challenge and reshape gendered social norms before they become entrenched.

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Attachment 1

Interview no.	Gender	Age	Years of experience in Celio Azzurro	Educational background	Role
Int. 1	Woman	30	5	Bachelor's degree in educational sciences and master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences	Educator
Int. 2	Man	66	35	Celio Azzurro founder and director Studies on educational sciences Counsellor specialized in the maieutic approach and educational biographies	School director Family counsellor Teacher educator
Int. 3	Woman	59	33	Studies in Academy of Fine Art Studies in Educational Sciences	Educator Celio Azzurro president
Int. 4	Woman	36	18	Professional course in Psycho-Pedagogical educator	Educator
Int. 5	Man	58	34	Studies in Cultural Mediation Studies in intercultural pedagogy and educational sciences	Educator Educational coordinator Teacher educator
Int. 6	Man	60	32	Bachelor's degree in educational sciences	Educator Teacher educator

Attachment 2

Theme	Sub-theme	Questions
Personal Information	Tell me about yourself	Where are you from, how old are you, how long have you been working at Celio Azzurro, and what is your educational background?
Starting from the Self	Personal Gender Awareness	I would like to begin by reflecting with you on your life experiences as a man/woman. Can you recall the first time you thought about or became aware of being male/female? In what ways did you learn what it means to be male or female? Are there things you do that you consider to be more feminine or more masculine? Why do you perceive them as such? In your view, do these perceptions influence your way of educating? Do you think gender education is important in early childhood? Have you ever developed specific projects on this topic?
Knowledge and Perceptions	Gender Education and Terminology	Have you ever participated in projects on gender education? Is gender education a topic that is discussed within the educational team? What meaning do you attribute to the concept of gender education? What, in your opinion, is sexism? And patriarchy? How would you distinguish between sex and gender?
	Stereotypes	What are the first three words that come to mind when I say *gender stereotypes*?
	Masculinity	In your opinion, why are there fewer male educators than female educators working with children aged 0–6? How do you feel as a man working in a field generally considered to be a female profession? What do you think about the presence of male educators at Celio Azzurro?
Working in ECEC service: Areas of Action and Behaviour	Language	I will now propose some situations and statements. Please tell me what message they convey to boys and girls, and whether you think they should be reformulated — and, if so, how **Situation 1**: An educator needs to move something heavy and says, "I need four strong boys!" What message does this convey? Would you rephrase it? **Situation 2**: "Tell your mother to bring something nice to eat for the party." What message does this convey? Should it be changed, in your opinion? **Situation 3**: "Who wants to put on nail polish?" (addressed to everyone) What message does this convey? Would you rephrase it? **Situation 4**: After changing a child, the educator says, "Remind your mother to put a spare outfit in your school bag." What message does this convey? Would you modify it?
	Environment	How are play areas organised at school? In your view, does the Celio Azzurro environment promote the development of each child's potential? In what ways?
	Play	What kinds of play activities are proposed at Celio Azzurro? Do you think there are games more suitable for boys or for girls? Now I will show you some images.
		 What do you think about these images? What feelings or reflections do they evoke in you?
Education for Boys and Girls	Behaviours or attitudes	Do you notice any differences in the behaviours or attitudes of boys and girls? If so, why?
	Choice of games	What about in their choice of games? Why
Other	Final Question	In what ways does the educational and intercultural approach of Celio Azzurro, in your opinion, promote gender equality education?

Attachment 3

Dimension	How to observe
RELATIONAL DYNAMICS AMONG CHILDREN	Who do boys interact with during free play
	Who do the girls interact with during free play
CLOTHING	Clothing boys (colors, type of clothing)
	Clothing girls (colors, type of clothing)
PLAY	How do boys mostly play? (type of play, active/movement play, role play, symbolic play, solitary or group play)
	How do girls mostly play? (type of play, active/movement play, role play, symbolic play, solitary or group play)
USE SPACE	Space occupied by boys during play
	Space occupied by girls during play
RELATIONAL DYNAMICS ADULT/CHILD	Speaking time given to boys during circle time
	Speaking time given to girls during circle time
	Type of play activities proposed to boys and girls (are there any differences?)
EDUCATOR' LANGUAGE	(Is the language inclusive? Are there gender stereotypes? Is language differentiated by gender? Observations on nonverbal communication)
BOOK SELECTION	(presence of female protagonists, representation and roles of mothers and fathers, roles assigned to boys and girls, plural representations of gender identities, presence or absence of gender stereotypes)
SPECIFIC SITUATIONS WHERE GENDER THEMES EMERGE	Notes and observation on moments when gender-related issues become evident