



# Encountering transgender and gender-expansive children in school: Exploring parents' and teachers' practices through the lens of cisgenderism and adultism

Michela Mariotto<sup>a,1</sup>, Cinzia Albanesi<sup>b,2</sup>, Maric Martin Lorusso<sup>b,3,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Education, Roma Tre University, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology "Renzo Canestrari", University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Transgender children  
Vulnerability  
School  
Adultism  
Cisnormativity

## ABSTRACT

Transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) children struggle to express their identities freely, particularly within schools, where they face oppression across interconnected levels of gender and age, alongside cisnormativity and adultism. This study examines how parents advocate for the recognition and well-being of TGE children in Italian primary schools (ages 6–11). Seventeen parents of TGE children participated in this research. Employing a comprehensive thematic analysis using a codebook approach, insights are derived from data obtained through two distinct research collections. Findings reveal parental practices spanning from supportive to containment and unaffirming, impacting children's freedom of expression. Parents' containment practices aim to protect their children, perceiving the school context as hostile, due to a systemic lack of knowledge and a normative view of TGE experiences. School practices affect TGE students' well-being and academic progress, suggesting the need for improved regulations in schools and teacher training to effectively address gender diversity, while recognizing and validating TGE children's experiences. The paper calls for inclusive policies and practices to support TGE children by centering children's needs and desires while dismantling cisnormative and adultistic approaches.

## 1. Introduction

Research on transgender and gender expansive<sup>4</sup> (TGE) children has predominantly emerged from the field of clinical psychology, with a primary emphasis on their mental well-being and the best clinical practices recommended for psychologists and psychotherapists (Mariotto, 2020; Platero, 2014). In recent years, there has been a growing focus on investigating the experiences of families with TGE children. Specifically, attention has been paid to the emotional experience of parents, their moral journey (Mariotto, 2022; Dierckx & Platero, 2018), and the strategies they employ in navigating this unique familial

situation (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021; Sharek et al., 2018). Within the realm of familial studies (Riggs & Bartholomeus, 2018; Neary, 2019), schools emerge as a central context for TGE children, where they often experience bullying, and harassment, as well as pervasive feelings of invisibility, invalidation, and exclusion both in primary and secondary school (Garcia et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2016). In this article, our objective is to investigate how parents of TGE children attending primary school in Italy actively negotiate for the recognition and well-being of their children through their communicative interactions with school personnel. Drawing upon interviews conducted with parents of TGE children in Italy, we analyze the various ways in

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [maricmartin.lorusso2@unibo.it](mailto:maricmartin.lorusso2@unibo.it) (M.M. Lorusso).

<sup>1</sup> [orcid.org/0000-0002-0500-468X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0500-468X).

<sup>2</sup> [orcid.org/0000-0001-8240-6159](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8240-6159).

<sup>3</sup> [orcid.org/0000-0002-9290-7747](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9290-7747).

<sup>4</sup> In this article, we opted to use "trans and gender expansive" because it acknowledges the diversity and complexity of gender experiences beyond the binary framework. The terminology allows for the description of gender identification experiences that differ from those assigned at birth, extending to individuals whose understanding, and expression of gender exceed traditional norms and categories. It emphasizes that gender can be fluid, nonbinary, or exist beyond conventional male and female identities, underscoring the diverse and complex nature of gender experiences outside of the binary framework, openly to the possibility of also including children's experiences.

which adults within the school environment, parents and teachers, conceptualize and address those identities and expressions that break the social expectations of gender. In doing so, we intend to highlight that the vulnerability faced by TGE children is the result of cisnormativity and adultism. If cisnormativity, the societal belief according to which identifying with one's assigned gender at birth is the "normal standard" experience, pushes the marginalization and minoritizing of transgender and nonbinary identifications (Ansara & Berger, 2016), then adultism limits the possibility of children and young people to self-determination.

In this paper, we will make visible how cisnormativity and adultism lead to the marginalization and invalidation of TGE children, resulting in double systemic discrimination: one due to their divergence from traditional cisnormative norms (Butler, 1990), and the other because, from an adultism perspective, they are viewed as unfinished, immature, and "in the making". We will also examine how these school structures and practices, despite being portrayed as supportive, restrict TGE children's opportunities for expression and self-determination.

### 1.1. *Ontological possibilities at the intersection of gender and age*

In the literature, TGE youth are recognized as one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups in school environments, with their experiences often shaped by consistently hostile climates (Ioverno & Russell, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022). While there is a growing body of research that focuses on the experiences of TGE youth in secondary school settings (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Neary, 2021; Paechter et al., 2021; Ullman, 2022), there is a notable dearth of research specifically on TGE children in primary education. We may speculate that it depends on a twofold resistance: on the one hand to recognize the ontological possibility and validity of TGE identities in childhood (Dyer, 2017; Stockton, 2009; Rosky, 2013) as they challenge the traditional perception of childhood as inherently cisgender and heterosexual, with non-normative identities seen as deviations from societal, biological, and legal norms (Ammaturo, 2019). On the other hand, the lack of research on TGE students in primary education reflects resistance in certain environments, such as schools and academia, to engage with topics that connect childhood with gender and sexuality concepts (Dyer, 2017; Robinson, 2008). Studies are therefore necessary to explore how adults, including parents and teachers in primary school, perceive and handle instances where young individuals deviate from traditional gender norms, and how these perceptions affect the establishment of inclusive spaces and policies.

#### 1.1.1. *Understanding cisnormativity as a mechanism of gender oppression*

School plays a pivotal role in sustaining cisnormativity by reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes through various means such as gender-segregated spaces, activities, and uniforms that unequivocally establish the correct way to be male or female and to relate to each other (Barquín, 2015; Ingrey, 2018; Martin & Ruble, 2010). From an early stage at school, children are often urged to conform to prevailing gender norms by educators, and TGE children may feel compelled by circumstances to conceal their authentic selves from the world and may even opt to abandon their schooling (Horton, 2023; McGuire et al., 2010). Research highlights the importance of supportive primary school environments, with significant roles played by parents (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Rahilly, 2015; Riggs & Bartholomeus, 2018), peers, and educators in the well-being and school engagement of TGE children (Davy & Cordoba 2020; Mangin 2020; Payne & Smith, 2014). It is important to establish policies to support and protect TGE students at the primary school level (e.g., use of chosen names and pronouns, access to gender-neutral facilities, inclusive dress code regulations, and anti-discrimination norms, see Santambrogio, 2022) and train school employees about gender diversity (Sánchez Torrejón et al., 2023; Bochicchio et al., 2019), addressing adults' fear or anxiety that may arise when a student challenges societal gender norms (Payne & Smith, 2014).

However, it is essential to acknowledge that accommodating TGE

students, while a necessary reparative measure, may not suffice. Fundamentally, addressing the broader cisgender norm is foundational as a preventive measure, as it renders the school system challenging and unsafe for TGE individuals, it is especially challenging for those identifying as nonbinary, to assert their visibility (Paechter et al., 2021). To be inclusive of any identity, either educational or normative interventions should recognize and challenge the pressures of compulsory institutional cisnormativity on all children while creating safe educational environments for TGE pupils (Horton, 2020; 2023; Martino & Cummin-Potvin, 2018; Neary 2021; Omercajic & Martino, 2020). By integrating discussions of gender diversity into the curriculum beyond just an anti-transphobia or anti-bullying approach and recognizing that the roots of oppression and discrimination against non-normative gender and sexual identities are interlaced with cisheteronormativity that are taken for granted, students and educators can learn to question dominant norms, adopt a more inclusive perspective on gender expression and identity, and apply this understanding to various aspects of their lives (Carlile, 2020; Ryan et al., 2013; Schroeder, 2012).

#### 1.1.2. *Exploring age and adultism as forms of oppression*

Recognizing that school contributes to the marginalization of TGE children by normalizing heterosexism and cisgenderism in youth-related contexts is a crucial step toward a more inclusive society. However, this effort remains incomplete without examining the role played by adultocentrism and adultism in these processes. Adultocentrism is a set of ideas and values that places adults at the forefront of all matters, resulting in the constant evaluation of children and young individuals in relation to adulthood (Florio et al., 2020; Goode 1986). Adultocentrism not only functions as an attitude but also as a paradigm, fundamentally shaping our understanding of childhood and significantly influencing how adults engage with and perceive children's needs (Florio et al., 2020). As a result, children are frequently considered immature, and inadequately prepared to articulate their own thoughts, recognize their needs, and make choices. In the case of TGE children, deviations from gender normativity are often perceived as merely exploratory, expected to potentially cease upon reaching adolescence; they are considered too young to affirm their gender identity and expression. Intertwined with the perception of childhood as inherently immature and incapable of complex thoughts, especially in the context of white middle-class children in Western society, is the notion of their vulnerability and innocence (Stockton, 2009, 2016). This perception consistently places children in a position where they are perceived as needing protection and grants adults the authority to make decisions on behalf of children, severely limiting the child's agency and autonomy under the guise of acting in their best interests (Ammaturo & Moscati, 2021). As Stockton puts it: "children are protected by laws that blanket them from harm, to be sure, but also from agency in their own pleasure" (Stockton, 2009, p. 62).

In this regard, the adultcentric paradigm not only leads to inadequate and distorted attention being given to children's realities (Florio et al., 2020; Furiioso, 2000), but also results in concrete practices of adultism. Adultism is a power dynamic systematically wielded by adults over children (Flasher, 1978), characterized by "the systematic subordination of younger people as a targeted group" (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 490). It functions as a systemic form of oppression, granting unchecked authority to adults over young individuals, denying their consent, and excluding them from decision-making roles. In the context of this article, this pervasive power imbalance, often perceived as necessary and justified for societal order, hinders TGE children from freely embracing non-normative identities and expressions, as well as from enjoying rights and recognition in institutional settings. Consequently, this delay limits their ability to fully exist until adulthood, which is conventionally defined as the period after adolescence, characterized by physical and intellectual maturity, as well as societal and legal recognition as independent individuals (Castañeda, 2015). At a macro level, intertwined with adultcentrism, adultism profoundly impacts socialization,

education, perceptions of childhood, research approaches, and childcare policies (Bell, 1988; Langarita et al., 2023; Lesko, 2001; Petr, 1992; Sinclair, 2004).

### 1.2. Italian school context: Confronting the void for TGE students

Research regarding the perspectives of TGE youth and their parents in Italy is gradually emerging (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021; Frigerio et al., 2021). Existing Italian studies primarily focus on secondary schools and universities (Bourelly, 2023; Bourelly et al., 2024; Briatore & Mariotto, 2023; Lorusso et al., 2024a). These studies reveal students' reluctance to disclose their identities due to fear of bullying and lack of institutional backing. They also highlight the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes among educators (Bochicchio et al., 2019; Scandurra et al., 2017), pointing to the urgent need for increased support for TGE students in Italian schools. This happens in a context where government regulations for students exploring gender diversity are absent, as well as legal protections aimed at supporting younger TGE individuals within educational settings. Trans experiences and the possibility of recognizing a gender affirmation pathway are regulated in Italy by Law 164/1982, which despite being considered at the time one of the most advanced in Europe, today seems inadequate. It still dismisses the concept of self-determination for transgender individuals, even if the Court of Cassation eliminated the obligation of a surgical procedure as a requirement for changing gender markers and names on documents in July 2015. The law still relies on the idea that being transgender is a pathological biomedical condition that links the rights of trans individuals to gender recognition in the presence of certified gender dysphoria involving psychologists, doctors, and judges (Lorusso et al., 2023; Lorusso et al., 2024b; Voli, 2018). Regarding minors, while Law 164/1982 does not explicitly specify an age limit for accessing the rights it guarantees, in practice this requirement is often implicitly interpreted as applicable only upon reaching the age of majority, which effectively denies young TGE individuals any protection and recognition. The main consequence of this legal void is that the process of obtaining recognition for minors can be so long and laborious, that some young people, along with their families, choose to wait until they come of age to avoid it.

As far as schools are concerned, there are still no unified national guidelines for TGE students issued by the Ministry of Education. TGE youth and their families often must rely on the sensitivity of the individual school principal or teacher, hoping that they accommodate young student's requests (Bourelly et al., 2024) by applying the "Alias Career" – a specific procedure indicating the possibility for a TGE student to be recognized on internal school documents with a different gender than the one assigned at birth, and their chosen name. This procedure has been implemented, mostly upon the presentation of a medical certificate, in some Italian universities, and a few high schools (Bourelly, 2023; Bourelly et al., 2024; Briatore & Mariotto, 2023). To the best of our knowledge, the use of the "Alias Career" is only officially recognized in three primary schools in Italy.<sup>5</sup> While it marks a significant cultural shift in the Italian school landscape, it is crucial to emphasize that its implementation is currently dependent on individual initiatives. There is no discernible contribution from the government institutions involved, which persist in overlooking the importance of extending the protective measures for TGE students. Additionally, conservative catholic religious groups, under the guise of moral order and moral panic (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017; Prearo, 2020; 2024), use their political influence to curtail trans people's rights, especially children's. At the end of 2022, Pro Vita e Famiglia, a conservative Catholic group, discovered that certain schools in Italy had implemented internal measures to assist in the recognition of TGE students. In response, they issued legal warnings to every school principal across the country,

<sup>5</sup> This data was provided by the GenderLens Association. For further details see GenderLens (2023).

demanding the immediate repeal of these protocols under the threat of severe legal consequences. Amidst this social and political landscape, families confront hurdles in securing rights commonly accepted in other countries (Santos et al., 2023).

### 1.3. The present study

This article presents a case for integrating a focus on cisgenderism and adulthood into TGE children's anti-oppressive scholarship and practice, as one of its major premises is that the rights of an oppressed group—the trans community—are contingent on the rights of its younger members. In this study, the experiences of TGE children at primary school level are explored through the narratives provided by their parents. We recognize this methodological approach (the absence of TGE children's voices) as a limitation, particularly in a work that aims to reveal the oppression endured by TGE children because of age. Barriers that research with children can present were considered during the implementation of the two studies from which the data presented in this article were derived (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021; Mariotto, 2022). These barriers include the risk considered around the power dynamic inherent to research with children (Suess Schwend, 2023) and a reluctance to subject young individuals who are already highly scrutinized by society for their gender diversity to further examination. Despite the assured sensitivity and care, the need for parental and child consent in a context such as the Italian, where families' fear of being exposed and anxiety about the safety of the child is experienced, represented another important barrier to include the children's perspective in this research. However, we feel we can make a relevant contribution by exposing the adult-centred bias of parents and other supporting adults who, in the very act of defending TGE minors, can paradoxically deprive them, albeit unconsciously, of certain rights, in particular self-determination.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure and participants

This article presents the outcomes of two separate investigations led respectively by the first author and by the second and last authors, collectively delving into the shared research inquiry: What is the experience of TGE children in primary education in Italy, as recounted by their parents? The focus centers on elucidating the practices employed by parents and investigates the practices implemented by schools in navigating the educational experiences of these children. Both studies used individual interviews and obtained ethical approval from University of Bologna and adhere to the ethical guidelines and standards established by the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona for Social Science Research. Participants were recruited through outreach to formal and informal associations of parents with trans children. One such informal association involved in the research was GenderLens<sup>6</sup>, a network of parents of TGE children. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, involving initial participants. A total of seventeen parents participated. All parents identified as cisgender individuals, with six men (35 %) and eleven women (65 %). The sample included 7 parental couples, comprising 14 participants who are parents of 7 children; 3 parents were not interviewed with their partners. Six parental couples were composed of individuals of different genders, while one was made up of two women. All interviewed parents were white Italians. Educationally, the group exhibited diversity, with individuals having mandatory or secondary education, as well as higher education. Regarding socio-economic status, there was also

<sup>6</sup> In 2021, GenderLens Association, with the collaboration of Agedo, and the Metafora Institute in Rome and the Lazio Region – promoted the implementation of the protocol Guidelines, intervention strategies and promotion of the well-being of gender variant children and adolescents (Agedo et al., 2021).

heterogeneity, with participants having both moderately high and medium incomes. Concerning their children ( $n = 10$ ), they ranged in age from 6 to 12 years, with the majority ( $n = 8$ ; 80 %) assigned male at birth. This data aligns with previous studies (Steensma & Cohen-Kettenis, 2018; Wood et al., 2013), indicating that parents seeking information on gender diversity often have a child assigned male at birth, particularly before the age of ten. This trend may be associated with the notion that gender diversity among children assigned female at birth is less frequently perceived as a fixed identity and more commonly embraced as a trajectory of gender exploration, at least until they approach adolescence (Kane, 2006; Thorne, 1994). Interviews lasted an average of 90 min and were transcribed verbatim by the first and last authors.

## 2.2. Positionality statement and analytical approach

This paper relies on two in-depth qualitative studies (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021; Mariotto, 2022) rooted in queer epistemology (Mayo, 2017). This framework challenges binary thinking and limited dualistic categorizations while acknowledging the complexity and instability of subjectivities and their relational meaning (Mayo 2017). In referring to this framework, we will highlight how TGE experiences unfold within spaces influenced by two significant forms of subjectivity regulation: cisnormativity and adultism. These intersecting factors complicate the lives of TGE children while simultaneously normalizing their marginalization (Horton, 2020; 2023). Our study is further informed by a reflexive lens (Lumsden, 2019), positioning the researchers not as external, objective observers, but as integral participants in the research context. Emphasizing this perspective, the biographies and embodied positionalities of the three authors play a pivotal role in shaping the research. The research team consists of three individuals with diverse backgrounds and advocacy roles. One member, a cisgender woman and parent of two cisgender adolescents is also an advocate for TGE children and a co-founder of GenderLens Association. Another team member, a cisgender woman and parent of two teenagers identifying as queer and trans, works as a university professor focusing on promoting social justice and participatory processes for youth. The third team member, a trans nonbinary person, bringing expertise in working with children and minors, is a staunch advocate for trans rights, and aspires to parenthood. The authors analyzed the interview transcripts using Codebook Thematic Analysis, specifically employing Template Analysis (King, 2012). This approach combines coding reliability with the principles of reflexive Thematic Analysis, acknowledging researcher subjectivity as a valuable resource in data coding and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis unfolded through several steps. Initially, the first and last authors independently generated a series of codes using a selection of five common transcripts. Codes, represented by words or short phrases, aimed to encapsulate the essence or attributes of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Throughout this stage, the authors integrated their embodied positionality as nonbinary individual or parents, and activists into the analysis. Furthermore, the coding phase was enriched by considering theories on adultism (Flasher, 1978; Furioso, 2000; Florio, 2020) and cisnormativity violence in schools (Horton 2023, McBride & Neary, 2021). In the subsequent step, the three authors engaged in discussions to refine the initial codes, forming the basis for a shared codebook employed to analyze all the transcripts. Themes were generated as topic summaries in a third step, involving the collaboration of all research team members in the (re)definition of themes and sub-themes to conceptualize the final structure. Finally, the first and last authors divided the participants into two groups, independently re-coding extracts using the finalized thematic structure. The final theme structure comprises two major themes: one focusing on parental practices, encompassing supportive and unaffirming behaviors regarding their children's experiences related to school, and another addressing educational context practices, also including supportive and unaffirming aspects.

## 3. Results

This study examines practices and dynamics within primary school environments concerning TGE children in Italy. The primary focus is on parents, who share their experiences with their TGE children and their interactions within the school context. Additionally, insights into the behaviours of teachers and schools' practices are gathered from parental narratives. The findings are structured to encompass both parental and school practices. Within this framework, parental practices are delineated, ranging from affirmative approaches that support the authenticity and autonomy of TGE children to negative and unaffirming behaviours that restrict their freedom of expression. Similarly, school practices are categorized into affirming and supportive measures, aimed at contributing to the well-being of TGE students, alongside unsupportive practices that may potentially hinder their well-being and academic progress.

The quotations feature parents' and children's nicknames, along with the child's age, their gender identity shared by parents, and assigned gender at birth. Identity labels and pronouns mentioned during the interviews are those provided by parents. These labels may or may not align with the child's self-perception: in some cases, they result from conversations between the child and parent, accurately reflecting the young person's feelings; in other cases, the labels might not align with the child's self-perception representing an imposition from above shaping the child's subjectivity. Additionally, in the quotes, we utilize the acronyms AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth) and AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) because it was the only way for us to clearly illustrate certain unsupportive strategies towards TGE children, especially concerning containment or gender-denying. We believe, in general, that these labels should be used critically and in a safer manner, as not all TGE individuals wish to disclose their assigned gender at birth.

### 3.1. Reaching out beyond the family, from the private realm to the social

As TGE children enter primary school, their existence transcends the confines of the familial unit, emerging as a subject of societal discourse. This transition propels families beyond the realm of personal negotiations, prompting contemplation of broader inquiries regarding the social positioning of individual children. Within this pivotal period, a child's gender identity and/or expression may become a problem for some adults and a multifaceted enigma necessitating comprehension and resolution. The approaches adopted by families in navigating the problematization of gender diversity beyond the domestic sphere vary considerably, as do the responses of educational personnel within school environments. These approaches yield outcomes ranging from the implementation of supportive measures to the perpetuation of unaffirming practices.

#### 3.1.1. Affirming and supportive parents' practices

Affirmative and supportive behaviours involve actively validating the identity expressed by the child, listening to their needs, and assisting them in recognizing their identity within school settings. Parents often are the ones who take the initial steps in engaging with the educational environment and implementing supportive measures for their children. Our analysis has shown that supportive behaviour, at times, involves practices that not only encourage a child's gender affirmation but also recognizes their capability to actively participate in decisions that affect them.

And then there was a turning point. The turning point was when we said, "Let her do whatever she wants and see. Well, this turned her into a happy child in a very short time incredibly fast, so... One says, "Well, [laughs] if that's all it takes to make her happy, cool". (Paolo, parent of Mare, 8 years old, trans girl).

Numerous examples illustrate the affirmative attitude of parents towards their children's gender identity exploration.

So, from one day to another, she said, “Enough, Mom, you have to talk to me with the feminine pronouns” And so I said, “Okay from that day on, I spoke to her only in the feminine. She gave us time. (Annalisa, parent of Dani, 7 years old, trans girl).

Annalisa’s willingness to immediately adjust her language to respect her daughter’s gender identity demonstrates a proactive and supportive approach. By accepting her daughter’s request without hesitation, Annalisa shows a commitment to validating her child’s identity and fostering a supportive environment. A similar attitude is held by this father:

We didn’t want to ask him [to use another name outside the home]. Frankly, we preferred that he would be the one to ask us one day, “Daddy, Mommy, can I change my name?” We didn’t want to be the one to put something in his mouth that maybe he didn’t want. So, we didn’t want to ask him, ‘Fede do you want to be called Federica?’ We felt it was too intrusive and we were putting something in his head that maybe he never thought of, because it was okay. So we let it be him. (Mauro, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Mauro’s approach reflects a respect for his child’s autonomy and agency. By refraining from imposing assumptions or suggestions about his child’s gender identity, Mauro allows Fede the space to express themselves authentically. Parents support their children by relinquishing control and shedding preconceptions to prioritize their child’s self-expression and well-being.

Let’s say that the fact that he has always been so determined has been a great help. I mean, he really paved the way for us because he was so convinced and proud, he was never fearful. He went to school with these embarrassing tiaras, all proud and head held high, so, in short, he helped us a lot in this because if he had been the first to panic, maybe we would have tried to contain it to protect him a bit. Instead, especially at the beginning, we went even beyond what is expected because then he was so proud and convinced that I followed his lead. (Manuela; parent of Fede, 6 years old, genderfluid, AMAB).

Supportive practices in affirming children’s gender identities represent an evolving journey for parents, marked by interpersonal understanding and reciprocal relationships.

Parents really try to deconstruct an adult-centric view, where the parent is the one who knows what is best for their children; instead, they adopt a posture of listening, respecting the timing and desires of their children:

“It’s me who is learning to respect his timing, his needs, and because I really didn’t know about non-binarism, I didn’t know what it was before he came into my life”. Daria, parent of Luca, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Parents in this study, often considered pioneers, actively seek information and educate others, educate society about gender diversity. Through open dialogue and pedagogical efforts, families strive to foster acceptance and understanding within their children’s social circles and broader society.

No, there’s no shame, absolutely... We try to explain to everyone we meet in our life, from relatives to friends, even in terms of correct terminology, because things must be said in a certain way for what they are. (Franca, parent of Alex, 12 years old, trans boy).

Parents implement various practices to ensure that the school environment welcomes the child’s experience, for example by specifically targeting teachers. Families proactively arrange meetings with the principal or their child’s teacher to initiate discussions regarding their child’s gender identity or expression to inform the school about the situation and to comprehend how the school plans to respond, identifying potential ways to facilitate communication and action.

The teachers are fantastic. I have to say, I did my part because I went to talk to the one who was the vice principal at the time, now she is his teacher... [...], I went there even six months before the start of primary school, and I went to introduce this situation. I said: “Look, you will meet a child...” And I told her everything. (Romina, parent of Mattia, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

In school settings, families often feel compelled to intervene, positioning themselves as staunch allies of their children, advocating alongside them for increased acknowledgment and support. One of the objectives of advocacy, and formal requests that parents engage in, is regarding the formal use of the chosen name at school:

Now I want to request a meeting with the principal to ask if starting from September of next year, in second grade, we can change the name on the register to Dani. [Name of the psychotherapist from the center for gender affirmation where the family is being followed] suggest us to do this. [...] The fact that her advised us to do this makes me think that maybe it’s possible, I mean, that it’s a request that could be accepted. So now we’ll see, the school’s answer will be completed when we talk to the school principal. (Annalisa, parent of Dani, 7 years old, trans girl).

Furthermore, they ensure prompt attention is given to any possible instances of discrimination:

I sort of jokingly threatened [laughs] the principal. I told her, “The first case of bullying against Alex, and the whole school will come crashing down on you” (Mario, parent of Alex, 12 years old, trans boy).

Parents’ interventions can concern the use of bathrooms or divisions of activities among students based on gender. In some cases, these meetings have to be repeated during the school cycle:

So, I went to talk to the teacher, and we were a bit upset because, I mean, after two years of having him in class, maybe you could avoid making such a clear distinction [between boys and girls], right? If it wasn’t really essential for the activity... Anyway, then we calmed down. I went to talk to her just to say, “Look, I wanted to talk about Fede, since you’ve had him in class for two years...”. And she was kind and said, “At first, I was a bit hesitant. I had him take off a lot of girls’ clothes, but then I realized that’s just how he is, so I let him be...”. I said, “I hope now that Fede has been here, maybe for the future, she knows that there are children like him, and maybe, even such clear distinctions between boys and girls, between masculine and feminine, if they’re not really essential, maybe they can be avoided!”. And she said, “Yes, yes, you’re right, I hadn’t thought about it. But I’ll take it into account”. So, in the end, we also left on good terms, in the sense that we also helped her a bit. Maybe she saw something she had never seen before in her life, and next time, she’ll think a bit more about how to make the children feel good. (Manuela; parent of Fede, 6 years old, genderfluid, AMAB).

As this last quote shows, parents with the aim to bridge the structural gaps within school environments, often assume the role of educators themselves. Their disposition reflects a desire to change the context, not only for their children but also for a broader vision of social justice. For these parents, the key to instigating societal change lies above all in disseminating information and promoting education.

### 3.1.2. Unaffirming parents’ practices

Conversely, negative and unaffirming practices are also observed among parents. Even if they do not exhibit discriminatory or rejecting attitudes towards their children, as in our sample, they may use strategies that are detrimental even if they are enacted for protective and supportive aims. This is the case for containment practices, wherein parents confine gender diversity only within socially accepted boundaries. While these practices are aimed at protecting their children, at the

same time this functions to restrict a child's self-expression. Clothing choices at school are clearly such a practice.

He knows [the children] that he has my full and complete support in everything. Except for the fact that I take him to school dressed as a boy. Probably if I had followed what he told me, a few years ago, he wouldn't be dressed as a boy, he would be dressed as a girl. (Daria, parent of Luca, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Another parental approach to navigating societal norms involves allowing free self-expression only in private settings while prohibiting it in public domains, especially within educational institutions like schools. This strategy creates a clear distinction for children regarding when and where they can display interests that deviate from traditional societal expectations. For example, one parent recounted how they permitted their child to wear a dress during Carnival and at home but restricted them from doing so in public.

We had bought him a dress, he liked long things, skirts, and so he had bought a witch-like dress, down to his feet. And he wore it for the entire Carnival and to go to school and then, once Carnival was over, he wouldn't take it off and he kept wanting to wear it. In the house. Outside we didn't let him wear it, except in rare cases. (Mauro, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Furthermore, parents, possibly prompted by the school's request, moderate departures from societal gender norms by reaching compromises. They may ask their child to avoid clothing that is seen as overly flamboyant or unconventional for the gender they were assigned at birth.

In kindergarten, you can't wear skirts or things like that, but maybe he has his Elsa [Disney character], fuchsia, or pink T-shirts anyway. (Manuela; parent of Fede, 6 years old, genderfluid, AMAB).

[Sara reporting a conversation with her child] "Do you want to go to school dressed as a princess? You can't go to school because the teacher doesn't want you to, you can't even put nail polish on your nails..... Let's say you dress down, you dress up to go to school you put your dress on, we go to the car, then before we get out of the car, you take everything off, you leave it there and we go to school". And so we started to find small compromises, and he felt accepted... but she changed in two days. (Sara, parent of Mare, 8 years old, trans girl).

The boundaries that shape children's possibilities are deeply influenced by their environment. These limits may reflect personal beliefs about what is socially acceptable, with deviation from the norm possibly resulting in social ostracization. They can also stem from the child's own considerations, balancing their needs and desires against perceived challenges from the school context:

For example, in the past, before reading an article about the importance of an affirmative approach, I used to let her express herself however she wanted at home, but I was quite rigid about the fact that when we went out, she had to, absolutely had to conform to societal expectations in terms of dressing, because I couldn't send her to school like that. However, I never ask her to hide her preferences, it's just regarding the clothes choices, that expose us so publicly at school, which is going to create a very difficult situation. (Sara, parent of Mare, 8 years old, trans girl).

Moreover, specific regulations such as school dress codes, including uniforms, play a role in setting these boundaries. However, these regulations can sometimes lead parents to impose restrictive behaviours that may hinder the child's growth. As a result, parents often navigate between these suggestions and their child's preferences.

Then on certain things, for example, on the school apron, we also spoke with the psychologist, because he [the child] would like the white apron and the psychologist told us: "Yes, but there are rules at

school, and he is a child, and he has to wear the blue apron". She [the psychologist] says: "Maybe put him, I don't know, the blue apron with [...] the patch [...] of the Winx [a cartoon with fairy princess]. You're looking for compromises. So sometimes we indulge him, sometimes we have to tell him "No", sometimes we try compromises. (Lorena, parent of Max, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

The parental containment observed reflects a protective attitude towards their child. While not intended to cause harm, this behavior inadvertently limits the child's freedom of expression. For instance, a parent suggests their son use the boys' bathroom because of worries about potential discomfort in the girls' bathroom, emphasizing physical differences over the child's emotional comfort.

Eh but you know, on the other hand maybe some little girl in the girls' toilet, ... maybe they see you with your willy ... it's good maybe so, that you go to the boys' toilet. (Mauro, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

This cautious approach stems from adults' concerns about their vulnerability in environments that may not accept gender diversity. It also arises from parental beliefs, which are sometimes influenced by mental health professionals. In some cases, participants shared that professionals suggest encouraging children's gender expression within the family setting while postponing certain steps of social gender affirmation pathways in other context such as using a chosen name, using affirming-gender pronouns-until puberty or later, indicating that children's full comprehension of their experiences develops as they mature.

### 3.1.3. Affirming and supportive schools' practices

Parents reported finding supportive and collaborative teachers who were open to recognizing and affirming their child's gender identity at school. The teacher's supportive response, as evidenced by the following quote, demonstrates immediate acceptance and validation of the child's expression of gender. In the absence of policies and programs to support and affirm TGE students, positive school responses and practices are often experienced by parents as unexpected and are welcomed with gratitude:

When we met before school started, the teachers seemed very open. They told us: "Make sure that if you have problems, you come to us, don't go elsewhere, because things will be solved between us...". So we had promised ourselves to give them a couple of weeks to get their own impressions, not to indoctrinate them right away. Maybe talk to them after a while, after they had formed some understanding of Fede. On the third day, Fede came back to school with a notebook in which he had drawn himself, and of course, he had drawn himself as a girl, wearing a pretty dress... and the teacher had written "well done"<sup>7</sup> at the bottom of the page. That really moved me a lot, because a woman who, without even knowing him directly, after three days of school, already tells him "well done", to me that is really beautiful, so... [Manuela becomes emotional]. We trust that the road will be paved for him as well. (Manuela, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

The positive response from teachers holds paramount importance, as teacher support significantly contributes to the well-being of TGE students. Parents acknowledge the intentions of the teachers to create a safe space and remove barriers that can limit gender affirmation specifically for their child:

Then Matt just happened to be with this teacher. It wasn't done randomly this one thing, because this teacher had already had a

<sup>7</sup> The use of gendered adjectives in the Italian language can pose an additional challenge for TGE people in the country (Anzani et al., 2023; Baiocco et al., 2023). In this case, "well done" is a translation of "bravissima," the female form of the adjective meaning very good.

similar case years before, [...] she even thanked us that we went to have a talk first because she said, “Nobody does that, you were good to come”. And she gave absolutely maximum availability on everything, really on everything. She said “We will be careful; we are on your side. We must create a very strong class group because where you create the group, the group also protects the individual who may be in trouble”. And so, absolutely maximum cooperation. If, in my opinion, I tell them tomorrow that we want to use another name instead of the registry name, they will absolutely say yes. (Antonella, parent of Matt, 7 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Parents highlight that teachers are not trained on best practices to support and embrace gender diversity in childhood. This is still an unknown issue in primary school and parents are often put in the position to (informally) educate the school personnel about the existence of TGE children and the best way to support them. Sometimes they feel they have to do it, in other cases, they are explicitly asked. The latter situation is experienced by parents as a positive practice that makes them feel their child is treated with love and respect also at school:

With the change of school from the kindergarten to the primary school, I was terrified. He had been lucky enough to find a wonderful teacher in kindergarten, a very simple person, a very simple person who had never heard of gender issues in her life. And when I went to tell her about something, she said: ‘We want informing material, give me more, give me more, give me more. We will want to learn, how we have to behave?’. They have learned in their simple way of seeing the world, they have adapted and have looked for the best for my son, and they have treated him with affection and respect. (Daria, parent of Luca, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

As some of the interviews indicated, teachers can proactively collaborate with families, associations and experts on gender diversity in childhood to create a supportive environment. The willingness of the primary teachers to meet with the child psychologist to learn how best to support the child, demonstrates a commitment to understanding and accommodating the child’s needs.

Then the doctor [specialized psychologist] had a meeting with the teachers. The primary teachers were really willing, too, and asked them if they could meet with her to find out how best to deal with it...I have to say that although we live in a provincial town, so far, we haven’t had a single problem. Then we’ll see in the future, but so far, we have found the most open, welcoming both from the teachers and the parents of the class (Annalisa, parent of Dani, 7 years old, trans girl).

Overall, these interview excerpts underscore the importance of collaboration between parents, teachers, and mental health professionals in creating welcoming and safe spaces for TGE children within educational settings. It also highlights the potential for positive outcomes when there is a commitment to understanding and supporting the needs of trans children within their communities.

#### 3.1.4. Unaffirming school practices

This subtheme delves into the barriers and challenges encountered by parents and TGE children within the school environment, as elucidated by parents during interviews. Findings show that, in the absence of regulations guiding school employees on effectively supporting TGE students, the recognition and validation of gender diversity in childhood is not easily granted. The perception of gender identity as always binary, and aligned with the sex assigned at birth, can result in teachers adopting restrictive approaches towards TGE children. This rigid understanding may lead to the imposition of narrow gender norms and expectations on TGE children, which can manifest as subtle or overt forms of mistreatment by adults within educational settings. These restrictive approaches may include enforcing gendered dress codes, or denying TGE children the freedom to express their gender identity:

Oh, and also the [catholic] religion teacher. Last year he had a religion teacher who made him take off his little dresses. When he came with a little girl’s dress, she [the teacher] made him take it off. But when there was also another dress underneath. In the beginning, because in the beginning he had pants and over the little dress, and the religion teacher would make him take off the little dress and leave only the dress underneath. (Mauro, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

The invalidation of TGE children’s identities and the neglect of their needs often stem from a dismissive attitude toward their requests, treating them as mere whims or inconsequential matters unworthy of serious consideration by adults. This approach, communicated to parents in a seemingly reassuring manner, implies that being a TGE child is perceived by schools’ adult members as a problematic experience that needs to be addressed by aligning the child’s gender expression with societal norms.

They called me in for a school meeting, which is done routinely anyway, I guess. And in the presence also of the pedagogist, who was instead one who...who had her own ideas, in short, one of those very...who indeed completely denied the fact that Mare preferred to dress in female clothes...she was telling me things that in my opinion were not true...as if to try to calm me down, that is, to calm me down telling me: “Look, no, the child is absolutely like everyone else, in fact, here he never dresses up. We even have a corner where there are costumes, and the child never does...” And I just don’t believe in that. And that she was saying to me “In my opinion, they are also tantrums, and you have to try, I’m not saying not to let him play with certain games that... his favorite games maybe, or that are typically female, but maybe to also propose to him...” (Sara, parent of Mare, 8 years old, trans girl).

Our interviews not only pointed out the gaps in teachers’ understanding and the lack of policies shaping the school environment, but they also highlighted specific instances, especially during events like school performances, including those held during Italy’s beloved Carnival festival. As emerged from the interviews, for many TGE children who have not openly shared their identity or have not used a name or pronouns different from the ones aligned with the gender assigned at birth, Carnival represents an unmissable and joyful opportunity to attend school wearing dresses, accessories, and embellishments deemed appropriate for the gender opposite to that assigned at birth, which they are not permitted to wear during the regular school year. However, the celebrations that take place during Carnival or other school festivals are often organized along binary gender lines, segregating males and females. This can pose a significant challenge for the child who is not recognized at school with the gender they identify with, as they may be compelled, even on these special occasions, to forgo the freedom to express themselves openly. The following quote highlights a cisnormative and adultist attitude from teachers who do not support the child’s desire to act as Harlequin,<sup>8</sup> invalidating the child’s choice. Adultism also surfaces when teachers assume that decisions to withdraw from performances stem solely from parents rather than recognizing the agency of TGE youth in navigating their individual paths and addressing associated challenges:

Last year during Carnival, she [the teacher] wanted to give a performance where children sang “Colombina<sup>8</sup> in a pink dress”, and then she asked: “who wants to do Colombina? and who wants to do Harlequin?”, she asked the children. All the females wanted to do Colombina in pink dress except Jo, who wanted to do Harlequin, spontaneously choosing by herself. The teacher then suggested dressing the girls in pink and with a skirt...I pointed out that in two

<sup>8</sup> Harlequin and Colombina are two Italian traditional Carnival characters. Harlequin is a boy, Colombina is a girl. They are a couple.

thousand and twenty asking to dress females in pink with a skirt to perform at Carnival was absurd! Eventually, Jo then decided of her own choice not to participate in the play anymore, and the teachers even accused us of being the ones who influenced Jo to withdraw. (Stella, parent of Jo, 6 years old, gender fluid, AFAB).

A barrier for TGE children lies in the organization of the school space, particularly regarding access to bathrooms. Given that most school toilets are strictly divided into male and female facilities, the absence of policies explicitly permitting TGE students to use the bathroom according to their gender identity often results in teachers denying them access to their preferred restroom.

Now he has recently started primary school. He is at ease. The only thing: there seems to be a little problem with the bathroom still, because, of course, in primary school, there is the girls' bathroom and the boys' bathroom well separated. We asked him, "Fede, which bathroom do you go?" And he said, "Eh, I have to go to the boys', they won't let me go to the girls'. The teacher doesn't want to". (Mauro, parent of Fede, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Some parents recounted experiences of intense suffering stemming from the child's inability to use the bathroom corresponding to their gender identity. This underscores how the straightforward act of restroom use can become a source of anguish and discomfort for the child.

Also, about this bathroom thing for example, which instead is something that makes him, quote-unquote, suffer much more. I mean, for him it is a problem with this bathroom thing. When he told us about it, sometimes he was even almost in tears. But we knew after who knows how many times it had already happened to him. (Antonella, parent of Matt, 7 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Numerous families reported instances of child discrimination and segregation within educational institutions where cisnormative policies fostered an environment conducive to transphobic behaviors. The following interview excerpt provides valuable insight into the difficulties and pressure TGE children experience at school when they do not respond to the societal expectations relating to gender expression.

Mattia has been accepted as he is ... but maybe the idea of feeling different or wrong, I think, was partly there. For example, maybe ... he would come home crying because maybe he had nail polish on his nails, "Mom, everyone makes fun of me, we have to take it off. Mom, maybe we can only put it on the feet so no one can see it with shoes on". But I could see that it still hurt him a lot". (Romina, parent of Mattia, 6 years old, gender fluid, AMAB).

Mattia's distress over wearing nail polish and the child's request to only wear it on the feet to avoid ridicule from peers reflects the societal pressure and stigma surrounding gender-nonconforming behavior even at a young age.

When TGE children venture beyond their safe spaces and engage with broader society, particularly in environments like schools, stigmatizing relational dynamics such as harassment and bullying may occur without adequate adult intervention. Not only do classmates engage in such behaviour, but parents of other children may also exhibit stigmatizing attitudes towards TGE children. These actions not only restrict the child's ability to express themselves freely but also can hinder the affirmative strategies implemented by families within the educational setting. Some of the interviews with parents also provide valuable insights into the socio-political landscape surrounding transgender issues within the community. For instance, the mother of an 8-year-old transgender girl recounts the city mayor's attempt to censor educational materials by compiling a list of banned books, as part of broader anti-gender movements. This action underscores the presence of institutionalized discrimination and efforts to suppress discussions about gender diversity and inclusion in schools. Additionally, the mother recounts a specific incident involving a parent's reaction to the

presence of two TGE children in the same kindergarten class. This parent's response, marked by skepticism and a desire to scrutinize the curriculum for 'strange books,' reflects underlying prejudice and discomfort towards transgender identities, as something "unnatural":

Well... actually, the history of the anti-gender movements in our city -- there was that episode where the city's mayor made a list of books to be banned in schools. And then, for example, when we were in kindergarten there was a parent who went to talk to the teachers because the fact that we had arrived and there were now two trans children in the same class, eh, he wanted to go and see that there weren't strange books about penguins... [laughs] I kind of feel sorry for these people, they're not people I have relationships with, so, it was, it was kind of funny. It's an episode where a parent had thought to go to the teacher and see if... and ask her to show her what books she had because, it was strange, that there were even two [trans children] in a class, "something the teachers must have been done". (Sara; parent of Mare, 8 years old, trans girl).

Overall, it is important to note that the lack of structured school policies, including initiatives like the Alias Career policy, leaves TGE children vulnerable to a lack of gender affirmation and protection within an environment crucial for their personal and social well-being. The absence of tailored protocols to support TGE students places the burden on parents to advocate for these initiatives within the school community. This process is frequently time-consuming and dependent on the cooperation of teachers, principals, and administrative personnel encountered during negotiations. Moreover, positive outcomes are not guaranteed, as they rely on the discretion of these actors.

#### 4. Discussion

In this study, based on interviews with their parents, we delve into a comprehensive examination of the experiences of TGE pupils within the context of Italian primary schools. Our analysis focuses on the strategies and practices employed by both parental figures and school personnel in navigating the complexities of supporting a child who challenges traditional gender norms and seeks recognition in alignment with a different gender identity from that assigned at birth. Results reveal that parental practices take place on a still largely unexplored path, wherein parents cultivate an understanding of children's needs through interpersonal relationships (Pyne, 2016) and, in some cases, through a child-led approach (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). It is through this reciprocal and bidirectional process, in which parents and children are involved in the performative production of new identities, that the child's personal and social construction process takes shape and social recognition occurs. However, when a TGE child enters school, gender processes, which were once confined to the private realm within the family, become public. This transition prompts questions about the child's placement within the social order, as their gender identity and/or expression becomes a matter of broader societal consideration. It is in this moment, as Meadow puts it (2018, p.26), that a "child's gender became the definition of a problem an intricate, unanswered question [requiring] consideration or solution". The way adults respond to gender diversity in childhood encompasses different strategies and practices that are strongly influenced by the sociocultural and political context in which it takes place. In Italy, gender diversity in childhood is still considered an issue that requires special attention and validation from medical experts (Mariotto, 2020). With a few exceptions – primarily observed among professionals who endorse an affirmative approach which emphasizes responding to the needs of transgender children and granting them the autonomy to explore new subjectivities (Ehrensaft, 2014; Hidalgo et al., 2013; Menvielle & Hill, 2010) – the prevailing therapeutic model in Italy adheres to the "watchful waiting" approach (de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2012; Fortunato et al., 2020). This approach is restrictive since it limits children's free gender expression with family settings, while deferring steps of the social gender affirmation pathway (i.e., use of a chosen name, use



of affirmative gender pronouns) in public spaces until until adolescence or later.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by this therapeutic model and the pressure to prioritize children's well-being above all else, while also adhering to societal and moral standards, a challenge termed "mandate juggling" (Ryan, 2017, p. 72), some parents described having adopted containment practices, where efforts were made to confine the nonconforming gender expression within the home or socially accepted boundaries. In the case of TGE children, containment practices might involve parental efforts to limit or control a child's full self-expression. This could manifest in various ways, such as discouraging non-conforming behaviour, controlling the child's gender expression, especially the clothing choices, or limiting access to toys and activities considered inappropriate for the gender assigned to the child at birth (Rahilly, 2015). While mediating with gender societal norms can be assumed as a part of the process through which gendered subjectivity is formed, in the case of TGE children, this process can be very oppressive, when power is totally in the hands of adults. Motivated by the desire to protect children from school harassment, adults often impose restrictions on TGE children, inhibiting their ability to express themselves freely. Even when parents opt to expand the possibilities for the child to freely express their gender at school, only in a very few cases is the child offered the possibility to be recognized by the gender and name they feel are right for them. At the time of the interviews, the understanding of trans identities in childhood at an ontological level remained unrealized, and children's deviations from gender normativity were often perceived as merely exploratory, expected to potentially cease upon reaching adolescence. In such an environment where formal recognition for TGE pupils was lacking, parents found themselves compelled to negotiate with school environments, fostering dialogical flexibility with teachers and principals through ongoing conversations, negotiations, and interactions woven into daily routines (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). Consistent with existing literature (Sharek et al., 2018), the parents in our study actively mobilize to gather information beyond clinical settings and to educate those they encounter, thereby breaking the silence and fostering openness. Employing specific pedagogical methods and literacy initiatives (Rahilly, 2015), families strive to engage and educate members of the child's social circle, and sometimes extend their efforts to society at large (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021). These may include organizing informational sessions for families, disseminating pertinent materials, and arranging training sessions in collaboration with local associations or experts in gender diversity. This activity, which can impose a considerable emotional and cognitive burden on families (Riggs & Bartholomew, 2018), becomes particularly noteworthy as children transition from the initial school cycle (akin to kindergarten), where diverse gender behaviors are typically accepted without significant issues, to the subsequent cycle (primary school), characterized by heightened pressure to adhere to social gender norms. Based on the insights provided by the interviewed parents, it was evident that there were no specific policies in place for TGE students in their children's schools, and there was a notable absence of training for teachers in sexual and gender diversity. However, despite this observed lack of institutional support, the parents consistently expressed a positive overall experience regarding their children's school environment and the presence of supportive, even untrained, teachers. Many parents mentioned that teachers present themselves as sensitive and open to learning about gender diversity. This result is consistent with previous research findings (Davy & Cordoba, 2020), suggesting that TGE child's experience can significantly influence and transform adults' values and attitudes (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2021; Mariotto, 2022), leading even "doubtful" parents and teachers to reconsider their initial reservations and become more available to support TGE children. However, as Mariotto (2020) already suggested, the positive experiences reported by parents in Italy may also arise from a

passive and uncritical attitude stemming from their inability to envision and legitimize possibilities of existence beyond cisgender norms and from the absence of any current political demands that prioritize the health, well-being, and rights of TGE children and adolescents in schools. Having a TGE child is considered solely within its private and personal dimension, overlooking the social and political ones. This neglect fails to acknowledge how societal norms (cishnormativity and adultism) can adversely impact the lives of these children. As a result from the interviews, cishnormativity in schools is evident through a range of daily actions that encourage and endorse adherence to a binary gender system while rendering invisible, marginalizing, or hyper-visualizing identities that do not conform to this system (Paechter et al., 2021). These practices subtly shape the school environment, influencing curricula, activities, and spaces (Ingrej, 2018). Specifically, cishnormativity is observable in the physical organization of school spaces, like the gender-based division of bathrooms and adults regulating bathroom access without considering a child's affirmed gender (Barquín, 2015; Browne, 2012). In Italian primary schools, gender-differentiated aprons<sup>10</sup> as part of the uniform, distinguished by colour or embellishments, are also common.

The interviews revealed that teachers and professional figures (i.e. pedagogist) frequently advise parents on enforcing gender norms, sometimes taking it upon themselves to impose these norms either out of caution or due to a belief in strictly adhering to school rules for the child's benefit. However, adultism is less blatant, even if it is observable in all those practices that devalue children's identities precisely because they are children. When it comes to gender identities in childhood it becomes clear that the risk of a vicious circle forming between cishnormativity, and adultism is very real. Invalidation of TGE children's identities, limitations in gender expression, and restrictions on using gendered spaces according to their preferences were commonly reported in this study. As a result of the research, it became apparent that lacking protocols in favour of TGE children, teachers have considerable freedom to act based on their personal ideas, values, and prejudices. In this regard, our research highlights intense scrutiny faced by the Italian school environment regarding discussions and behaviours related to gender. This scrutiny is notably influenced by the presence of the Catholic religion and anti-gender movements, which receive support from a substantial portion of the political class (Prearo, 2020; 2024). These factors collectively shape the systemic landscape of the school environment, impacting curriculum development and constraining the implementation of measures aimed at supporting the inclusion and affirmation of TGE pupils. This influence is further manifested at the individual level, where certain teachers and parents, particularly those from conservative religious backgrounds, closely monitor children's school activities, practices, materials, and regulations.

A cishnormative perspective regarding the trans experience as problematic, together with an adultistic approach contributes to what Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) define as a culture of limitation. This paradigm of constraints, through both tangible and symbolic constraints, hinders efforts to create a school climate free from fear and misrecognition. For schools to become spaces where trans students feel validated and secure, there is a critical need for systemic efforts to challenge the pervasive influence of cishnormativity in all aspects of trans individuals' lives and to recognize and confront adult-centric practices prevalent in primary education. Children, not only TGE ones, should be recognized as subjects who are capable of knowing who they are, what they prefer and what their needs are. Instead of considering the child as an innocent and incomplete creature that is conceivable only in the future, and that needs to be protected until it reaches maturity (Dyer, 2017; Edelman,

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the different therapeutic models see Turban and Ehrensaft (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Apron in this context refers to a type of garment worn by students in Italian schools, typically as part of a uniform or dress code. These aprons or smocks are often worn to protect students' clothing during messy activities or to promote a sense of unity and discipline among students.

2004; Robinson, 2008; Stockton, 2009; 2016) adults should recognize and promote their agency and their central role in transforming educational environments and society at large.

#### 4.1. Limits and future directions

This study has certain limitations. It primarily explores the school experiences of trans children through the accounts of parents rather than directly involving the children. This approach arises from two main reasons: challenges in recruiting children for research due to limited access (Sinclair, 2004) and ethical considerations surrounding the historical control and scrutiny of trans individuals within the medical realm (Suess Schwend, 2023). However, this method restricts opportunities for trans children to voice their perspectives on issues affecting them and hinders their active involvement as advocates for social change related to their experiences.

Future research should prioritize direct engagement with children, focusing on their needs rather than solely relying on adult perspectives. Moreover, this study's limitation extends to its depiction of interactions with school members, solely based on parents' viewpoints. The inclusion of teachers in future research is essential to examine any structural barriers they encounter. This could involve constraints imposed by the school system, other parents, or the socio-cultural context, all of which may obstruct the implementation of inclusive education. Another limitation is the homogeneity of the families studied, all being European, white, and able-bodied. This limitation restricts exploration of how intersecting factors, not covered in this study, might impact the experiences of different children and families. Parents were recruited through associations, thus including very supportive and protective parents toward their children. This explains the absence of discriminatory attitudes and rejecting behaviours towards their children. Future research should also recruit parents from other contexts to gather additional experiences.

## 5. Conclusion

With this study, we aimed to illuminate the experiences of TGE children in Italy by uncovering the barriers and challenges they encounter within the educational context. School settings, in conjunction with family settings, stand out as one of the primary institutions where the normalization of children's bodies and identities occurs. This normalization extends beyond overt discriminatory actions and encompasses the reinforcement and acceptance of norms that render non-normative experiences invisible and marginalized (Butler, 1990; 1993; Foucault, 1984). For TGE children, the regulation of subjectivity occurs notably at the crossroads of two intersecting axes of oppression: cis-normativity and adultism. Our research has revealed a troubling reality: the absence of formal regulations and adequate training on gender diversity for teachers result in the adoption of corrective (and protective) measures towards transgender students by both parents and teachers. Parents devise various everyday strategies, balancing their children's expression with the constraints imposed by cisnormativity within educational contexts, but only in very few cases the child is allowed to fully express themselves and/or to be recognized with the gender they identify with. Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies depends largely on the responsiveness and understanding of adults in the school setting. The cautious approach to TGE children arises from adults' concerns about their vulnerability in environments that might not accept gender diversity and immaturity, which hamper children's full comprehension of their experiences. However, these arguments have problematic facets, portraying children as vulnerable, incomplete, incapable, and consistently reliant on adult protection (Ammaturo, 2019; Platero et al., 2023). They also uphold the notion that children usually follow a straightforward developmental trajectory leading to adulthood, at which point their needs and aspirations receive attention (Castañeda, 2015). While childhood indeed faces prevalent forms of

adultism in our society, it is crucial to note that these practices intensify significantly at the intersection of gender, potentially obstructing a child's development in understanding and expressing their gender identity (Ammaturo & Moscati, 2021; Hall, 2021; Schroeder, 2012).

Interestingly, despite numerous obstacles in the school setting, the majority of parents expressed positive opinions about schools' approaches to their children, even if not fully comprehensive and necessitating containment practices. In our analysis, parental contentment is the result of a lack of awareness and confidence regarding the potential for young children to autonomously shape unconventional paths yet to be acknowledged by society. Additionally, we think this satisfaction is linked to an oversight in critically evaluating relational dynamics and power imbalances significantly influencing the educational landscape for trans children. Our analysis emphasizes the imperative for improving school regulations and training initiatives for teachers and school employees. These initiatives should transcend mere accommodation strategies and actively facilitate the acknowledgment and validation of gender diversity within educational settings. This advancement calls for the implementation of a participatory framework that recognizes children as valuable partners and crucial stakeholders in reaching shared decisions alongside adults. Crucially, it calls for a rigorous re-evaluation of the cisheteronormative paradigm that adults impose on children, recognizing that it restricts children's free expression and significantly shapes their current experiences and future trajectories.

#### Ethics approval

Research adheres to the ethical guidelines and standards established by the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona for Social Science Research and the University of Bologna.

#### Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors thank all the parents who participated in the research. Special thanks to Betta Ferrari, president of the GenderLens Association, for the updated information on the Alias Career.

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