

Trans Students in Italian Schools: Challenges and Best Practices

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Abstract: Scientific literature focusing on the experience of trans students highlights how schools are a hostile place for trans people, who are subjected to repeated forms of physical and verbal aggression, bullying, and transphobic harassment by the peer group, teaching, and non-teaching staff. To counter these issues and recognise the identity and needs of trans people, schools have introduced the alias career, a tool already present in Italian universities since 2012. The device outlines good practices to protect the well-being of transgender students and improve their school experience. The regulations of the institutes that have introduced the alias career show that in Italy, the trans experience is still strongly pathologised to the extent that medical-psychological documentation is often required for its activation. Moreover, many good practices are absent or implemented incorrectly, such as toilet access, changing rooms, or training for the school staff and the student body. With this article, the authors, by considering the Italian education system's peculiarities, propose good practices that can help improve the alias career by supplementing it with new proposals that allow students to be recognised and protected during their years of schooling. A further aim is to guide the school staff in responding to the needs of trans pupils and bringing change within the school context by restructuring cisnormative value systems.

Keywords: alias career, transgender students, inclusive education, best practices, school, policy

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1. Introduction

This article will illustrate the best practices for recognising transgender students within the Italian school system. Starting from a critical review of the literature on the subject, we will then examine the current school regulations of the alias career (*carriera alias*) in Italian schools, which allow the protection of transgender pupils. The alias career is a confidentiality agreement that recognises the gender identity and needs of transgender students. The alias career is stipulated between the school, the student, and, if underage, their family. This agreement allows students to use their chosen name in unofficial documents such as the electronic register and obtain a new school-issued e-mail address. Within this article, we will use interchangeably the terms “transgender” and “trans”, which are used in contemporary Western society to describe individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned at birth. The terms include individuals with masculine and feminine gender identities (trans men and women) and those who do not identify within the man-woman gender binary, which are known as “non-binary” identities. We use these terms to describe the school reality of transgender individuals in Italy, acknowledging that the concept of gender in this article aligns with a way of understanding identity categories and their embodiment exclusive to Western cultures, which may not be comprehensive in representing gender experiences in other countries, cultures, and communities. The experiences and needs of transgender individuals may vary; some may desire to undergo medical gender affirmation, while others may not express this need and decide to affirm their identity only socially. Being called by the name one identifies with is fundamental for everyone. However, it becomes even more necessary for transgender individuals in a context such as school, where the lack of recognition of this right can lead to their exclusion from active participation in class and hinder their right to education.

As educational facilities, schools must be equipped with the tools to protect and respect the rights of the entire student population. This article outlines best practices to ensure an active and fulfilling school experience for transgender students in Italy. This proposal aims to go beyond the exclusive recognition of the alias career as a protective tool in institutes but also considers additional practices to combat transphobia and safeguard the gender self-determination of trans students.

Lastly, we believe that this work will be valuable and necessary to clarify non-scientific information disseminated by so-called “No Gender” movements that oppose the inclusion of protection for LGBTQIA+ students (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) and the implementation of inclusive education in schools (Prearo, 2020).

2. State of the Art

Recently, there has been increasing attention to the needs and demands of young transgender individuals in Italian institutes, especially by mass media. This surge of attention has revealed a public interest in the transgender experience. The existing literature, mainly from the Anglosphere, concerning best practices to promote the well-being of transgender students has highlighted that increased visibility does not include the recognition of the urgency to reform schools to create inclusive spaces (Horton, 2020; Kosciw *et al.*, 2018; Neary, 2018; Omercajic, Martino, 2020).

Scientific literature emphasises how institutes are particularly hostile environments for transgender individuals, who are subjected to repeated forms of physical and verbal aggression and practices such as misgendering¹ and deadnaming², which—carried out equally by students and teachers (McBride, Neary 2021; Paechter *et al.*, 2021)—result in the invalidation of transgender subjectivities.

The school environment is where episodes of violence and bullying towards the LGBTQIA+ population are most frequently recorded (Greytak *et al.*, 2013; Kosciw *et al.*, 2018; McGuire *et al.*, 2010); these may have significant consequences on their mental health (de Vries *et al.*, 2016) and academic performance. Difficulties in concentrating at school, a tendency to avoid gendered spaces like bathrooms and changing rooms (Kosciw, Pizmony-Levy, 2016), a high number of absences (Greytak *et al.*, 2013), and a high dropout rate (Grant *et al.*, 2011; McGuire *et al.*, 2010) are all elements that emerge from studies dedicated to analysing the experiences of this population in the educational context. The difficulties highlighted in the reviewed literature can be a direct consequence of constant microaggressions (McBride, 2020) that force transgender students to deal, on an interpersonal level, with prejudices and the constant invalidation of their experience.

Recent literature indicates that the marginalisation of transgender individuals in schools is caused by systemic macroaggressions and cisnormativity³ (McBride, Neary, 2021; McBride, 2020; Riggs, Bartholomaeus, 2018) which, operating on both a symbolic and material level, contribute to defining which are the possible ontologies (Martino, Cumming-Potvin, 2018). Administrative practices, the utilisation of public spaces, schools' architectural design, and the implementation of uniforms within educational centres that adhere strictly to a binary sex/gender system can result in both the invisibilisation and excessive visibility of transgender identities (Shuster, Lamont, 2020). As a result, systematic obstacles hindering transgender students' access to the same opportunities as their cisgender peers might surface (Riggs, Bartholomaeus, 2018; McBride, 2020). Some authors also note how literature and school procedures referring to transgender pupils in schools almost exclusively cite the experiences of young binary transgender individuals and do not consider other experiences, such as non-binary experiences (Bower-Brown *et al.*, 2021; Neary, 2018; Paechter *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, school staff is often poorly trained on the subject and often acts based on personal prejudices and cultural influences regarding issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Bochicchio *et al.*, 2019). These factors can significantly contribute to creating a hostile environment that does not provide support from adult figures (McGuire *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to ensure proper training within schools, one of the most critical social contexts after the family, regarding best practices and correct language use, respecting differences and acknowledging diverse needs (Jones *et al.*, 2016).

Studies on the families of transgender children and adolescents (Mariotto, 2022; Pullen-Sansfaçon *et al.*, 2015) highlight how parents/caregivers react to the lack of preparedness among school administration, teachers, janitors, and administrative staff regarding gender identity issues by personally intervening to transform the school into a safe and welcoming space for trans youths (Neary, 2019; Lorusso, Albanesi, 2021; Rahilly, 2015; Riggs, Bartholomaeus, 2018). Their efforts have led, in some countries, to the formulation of specific procedures to be applied in the case of students who do not identify with the gender

¹ The non-recognition of a person's gender using pronouns based on the sex and gender assigned at birth rather than the person's chosen pronouns.

² The use of a transgender person's legal name without their consent.

³ Cisnormativity is the assumption that all individuals are cisgender, namely that their gender aligns with the one assigned at birth.

assigned at birth (Greytak *et al.*, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2016; McBride, 2020). Among the suggested best practices that can contribute to improving the mental health of transgender students (Wong, Chang, 2015), the most important ones concern the recognition of the name and pronouns indicated by the individual (Russell *et al.*, 2018), the possibility of using gender-neutral bathrooms and changing rooms or those corresponding to the gender with which the student identifies, and the choice to wear a uniform that aligns with their gender expression. Even though literature regarding the experience of transgender students indicates that these practices have a positive impact on their mental health (Durwood *et al.*, 2017; Gibson *et al.*, 2021; Kelley *et al.*, 2022; Olson *et al.*, 2016; Russell *et al.*, 2018), recent studies reveal that few students have access to these resources (Horton, 2020).

The Council of Europe (2010) has attempted to respond to the needs of transgender students by urging Member States to adopt appropriate measures to ensure the recognition of the name and gender with which the transgender person identifies in all areas of their life, including education. Among the proposals is the activation of prompt and accessible procedures to promote, based on the principle of self-determination, the issuing of school documentation recognising the name and gender the transgender person identifies with (Council of Europe, 2015).

Despite these indications, actions taken to address trans pupils' needs are still severely limited in Europe, particularly in Italy, where there is a lack of precise policies regarding training and the recognition of differing gender identities and sexual orientation in schools and universities (Briatore & Mariotto, 2023; IGLYO, 2022). The Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) has yet to make a statement on the matter, despite requests from grassroots associations to promote mandatory unified procedures throughout the National territory and existing proposals for alias career regulations (through initiatives of some school administrations in collaboration with Italian LGBTQIA+ associations—particularly Agedo, GenderLens, and Rete Lenford) (Bourelly, 2023).

3. Critical Analysis of the Alias Career Regulations in Schools

Starting from the 2018/2019 academic year, some Italian schools have implemented tools to protect and improve the psychophysical well-being of transgender students. One of these protective measures is the alias career, which can be activated at the discretion of the school administration. Schools' requirements for activating this device can be divided into two categories: "pathologisation" and "depathologisation". The former requires the presentation of medical-psychological documentation (in the form of a gender dysphoria/gender incongruence diagnosis) by the student from a gender clinic, a Local Health Authority (ASL), or private professionals certifying that the youth has started transitioning. The criticalities of these regulations are evident, not only because non-medicalised transgender experiences are effectively excluded but also because they perpetuate a pathologising narrative of transgender experiences (Lorusso & Albanesi, 2022). Based on the principle of student self-determination, schools with the second type of regulation do not require any documentation to support the request for activating the alias career. Institutes with more advanced regulations also include additional best practices, such as creating gender-neutral bathrooms and changing rooms. Additionally, they may incorporate LGBTQIA+ education for the entire student population and training for the school staff. Some of these good practices have been included in the regulation proposal drafted by the associations Genderlens (2024) and Agedo (2024) in 2021 and in that proposed by Rete Lenford (2022), which can currently be considered the most advanced alias career regulations in Italy.

The changes in the Italian educational system over the past thirty years (decentralisation, autonomy, territorialisation) have led to the transfer of decision-making power to school administration (Benadusi *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the school administration can choose

whether to include within its institute policies and educational practices aimed at improving the school experience and psychophysical well-being of transgender students. Hence, the requirements for the activation of the alias device and the decision on which type of support to offer to students are determined by the school administration. Indeed, there is a lack of directives from the MIUR that indicate the requirement to implement devices such as the alias career and other best practices. Therefore, despite the pressure from students, parents/caregivers, activists, and transgender health professionals, regulations for the alias career have only been implemented in approximately 314 schools of all levels between April 2019 and December 2023 (Genderlens, 2024; Agedo, 2024). However, most of them do not truly recognise (and understand) the needs of transgender students (Bourelly, 2023). In Italy, few schools have staff trained in gender issues and the needs of transgender students (Lorusso, Albanesi, 2021; Mariotto, 2022). Consequently, many transgender students are unable to experience their school life serenely (Bourelly, 2023).

From the analysis of the alias career regulations, it emerges that most schools require a gender dysphoria diagnosis for its activation, reinforcing the pathologisation and interpretation of transgender experiences solely through the medical paradigm (Bourelly, 2023; Lorusso *et al.*, 2023; Mariotto, 2020). This requirement leads to further inequalities related to the geographical location of young transgender individuals (i.e., public gender clinics are lacking in many Italian regions—for further information, see Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2020) and the socioeconomic statuses of their families. In the case of adult students, despite the possibility of obtaining the alias without family consent, if a diagnosis is requested and unsupportive parents/caregivers are present, there might be a risk that students cannot independently produce the necessary documentation due to economic or safety reasons (Bourelly, 2023).

The study of the alias career also reveals that schools often adopt or modify the regulations of other institutes and sometimes those from associations (Bourelly, 2023), which places student self-determination at its core. In most schools, self-determination is severely limited, especially when a diagnosis is required. Additionally, there are other important issues, such as the regulation adopted by eleven schools in the North of Italy, which require family consent even for adult students (e.g., Liceo Cornaro, 2021). Another negative example comes from Liceo Di Giacomo (2022) in Naples, where a gender-neutral bathroom has been created. However, access is only allowed for transgender students who explicitly request it. This practice forces anyone using the facility to reveal themselves as transgender to the entire school community, jeopardising not only their privacy but also their physical, emotional, and psychological safety, potentially exposing them to a high risk of bullying. We can also find some virtuous regulations, such as those that sanction disrespect towards trans pupils' gender identity and transphobic bullying (e.g., IIS Anagni, 2022). Another positive initiative comes from an institute in Turin, which uses an asterisk⁴ in official communications with the student community to avoid gendered language (Basilici Benini, 2021). In addition, some use the asterisk (e.g., Liceo Classico Luciano Manara, 2022) and schwa⁴ (e.g., ISS Michele Buniva, 2022) within the alias career regulations.

The following proposed practices come from existing literature, situated knowledge in different disciplines, and our first-hand experiences as transgender and cisgender individuals advocating for transgender rights. This situated positioning allows us to witness the great benefits such practices bring to transgender students and the entire student community.

⁴ In Italian, the transgender community uses graphical symbols such as the asterisk, the *schwa*, or the ending "u" because it allows to overcome the rule of the masculine as a universal formula and move beyond the binary vision of genders (Manera, 2021).

4. Best Practices for the Recognition of Transgender Students

This section will illustrate the best practices for recognising transgender students in Italian schools. The proposals are presented in list form as a practical and valuable tool for creating and modifying future regulations.

- The basic principle on which the alias career must be based is the self-determination of the transgender experience. Therefore, the school should not require any certification or medical-psychological evaluation by specialised professionals, school psychologists, general practitioners, or dedicated multidisciplinary centres.
- The activation of the alias profile should include the modification of the chosen name by the student on the electronic register, a new school-issued e-mail, reference badges, and the modification of other unofficial documents within the school. All transgender individuals, including non-binary individuals, must be able to activate the alias career.
- The primary objective should be the well-being, respect, safety, and privacy protection of transgender individuals. Teaching staff should possess the skills to provide support when requested. We recommend paying particular attention to those lacking family support, both for adult and underage students. In instances where parents/caregivers are unaware of their child's gender identity, the school should refrain from sharing this information without explicit consent from the student, as it could jeopardise their safety and psychological well-being within the family unit.
- It is advised to establish a dedicated team of teachers to ensure the proper management of the alias career or assign this responsibility to existing working groups within the institution, such as anti-bullying or inclusivity groups.
- The adoption of the alias career should be communicated to the entire school community by publishing the regulations and application forms on the school's website. The files must be easily accessible via a search bar.
- Teaching, administrative, and technical staff will commit to exclusively using the student's preferred name and pronouns that align with their affirmed gender when requested. The school administration will ensure that the community respects the student's identity.
- Access to bathrooms and changing rooms should align with the student's gender when requested. We suggest creating gender-neutral bathrooms and changing rooms accessible to the entire school community and refraining from allowing access only to trans students.
- If applicable, it is recommended to propose a uniform (including school smocks for kindergarten and primary school children) without gender connotations or provide the student with the choice of uniform.
- It is crucial to include within the regulations training for the school's staff on gender issues and countermeasures to transphobic bullying to ensure that institutes become safe and inclusive spaces for transgender students; these training sessions should consider all elements that make up a person's social sphere (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and social class, to name a few) that contribute to determining the extent of discrimination students face, namely by adopting an intersectional stance. Additionally, the sessions should be scheduled in collaboration with relevant LGBTQIA+ associations and professionals with demonstrated expertise in the field.
- The educational plan (P.O.F) should include extracurriculars that delve into the history of the LGBTQIA+ community and include prominent figures from the LGBTQIA+ community in the school curriculum with whom LGBTQIA+ students can identify and find inspiration. Furthermore, we suggest making books by

LGBTQIA+ authors available or discussing topics related to gender exploration. These texts should be present and accessible in school libraries.

- The school will strive to communicate these best practices to substitute teachers, teachers of extracurricular courses, and components of external commissions for the final middle school and high school exams, ensuring that these figures address the students by their preferred names and pronouns. Students can sit exams while teachers address them using their chosen names and pronouns.
- The school will endeavour to engage with relevant authorities to ensure the respect of the alias career even outside the school, for example, during Pathways for Transversal Skills and Guidance (*Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento*)⁵, educational trips, competitions, and contests.
- The diploma will be printed with the student's legal name for legal reasons. If the student legally changes their name after completing their studies, the school must provide an amended diploma per Law 164/82.
- Physical education teachers will aim to offer gender-neutral activities to the class. In cases where academic evaluations are divided by sex assigned at birth (e.g., Cooper test), students can choose whether to apply the male or female chart.
- The school will aim to recognise and sanction bullying, particularly transphobic bullying. Specific norms should also be included in the anti-bullying and cyberbullying regulations.
- The school will maintain an open dialogue with the family (in the case of adult students only if requested) to ensure the student's needs are consistently met and evaluate further interventions together.
- The school aims to recognise the importance of an 'expanded language' (Manera, 2021) and practices that affirm the value of diversity in all its expressions. It will promote using the asterisk, 'u' ending or the schwa in the regulations and all communications to the school community.

5. Conclusions

This article aimed to reflect on the implications of practices designed to support the transgender student population, a reflection currently absent in Italy. It sought to analyse how student citizenship is or is not guaranteed to transgender individuals in the alias career regulations approved by Italian institutes.

The overall picture highlights how, in the absence of unified guidelines, individual school administrations adopt diversified regulations, which are not always favourable for transgender students. The pathologisation of their experience, combined with the lack of training for school staff and the presence of a cisnormative vision that permeates the entire Italian education system, build real barriers that prevent the school from being considered a safe and discrimination-free space for transgender individuals. The proposed practices consider these structural barriers and outline a path for school staff, providing valuable guidelines to address the needs of transgender students. While acknowledging that the proposed suggestions might not be accessible or feasible in all institutes, our main ambition remains to propose practices and language that produce lasting and consistent positive effects for the entire school community. It is not just about proposing practices within a pedagogical paradigm that involves the mere inclusion of one person, and therefore, a gender—secondary and marginal compared to a majority and hegemonic group—without questioning the same system of values and beliefs that lead to a hierarchical classification of experiences. Embracing the proposed perspective becomes a means to give space to a

⁵ It is a mandatory form of cooperative education for all high school students. It may vary depending on the specific type of upper secondary education: liceo, technical school, and vocational school.

pedagogical model based on a less rigid and more egalitarian understanding of gender for all identities, both cisgender and transgender—this becomes possible only by acknowledging that the legitimisation of spaces for transgender identities and the issues they raise involves the entire community on a broader level. The ongoing social transformation confronts us with a complexity of experiences to which we are called to respond, acknowledging the different forms of oppression and discrimination that constitute them, where even remaining indifferent becomes a stance.

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