



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th - June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy

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Gender Stereotypes between School and Guidance: A Look at European Regulations and Vocational Education in Italy

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Abstract

Gender equality remains a key goal of the EU's Gender Equality Strategy, aiming to promote a gender-equal Europe through social progress. The Gender Equality Index (2023) shows Europe is still far from this goal. Education must focus on implementing gender policies with an intersectional perspective. Statistics highlight segregation in education and professions due to gender stereotypes. This contribution analyzes the main European Commission documents and International Convention on gender equality furthermore the Italian School Legislation, deepening into The vocational education and training track. If public schools today in Italy provide the opportunity for basic and compulsory education to all children, the national education system, still has many goals to achieve.

Keywords: education; gender equality; VET; school; European Commission.

1. Introduction

Gender equality remains a key objective of the EU Gender Equality Strategy, which aims to promote a Europe based on gender equality through social progress. This includes working at various levels to combat gender stereotypes and create equal opportunities for everyone, men and women, boys and girls, in all their diversity. According to the Gender Equality Index (2023), Europe is still far from reaching this goal. This is why teaching and education need to focus on the implementation of gender policies from an intersectional perspective. Statistics show horizontal and vertical segregation in the inclusion of men and women in educational and professional fields due to gender stereotypes perpetuated by school curricula, role models provided by teachers, other school staff, and educational resources, including textbooks (Guerrini, 2015). In this contribution, I have decided to provide a brief analysis of recent documents issued by the European Commission, which offer guidance on promoting gender equality, with a particular focus on the reality of the Italian school system, specifically regional vocational training programs. In these programs, most students are girls from socio-economically complex backgrounds, with high dropout and failure rates. Here, the teacher finds fertile ground to carry out activities aimed at addressing gender stereotypes so that female students are aware of their potential and capabilities. Gender equality education and the fight against gender stereotypes begin first and foremost with the teacher's challenge of being available and empathetic toward their students, supporting them in fulfilling their self-realization needs with the school's help as an educating community. The theoretical framework of reference of this contribution is linked to gender pedagogy (Burgio, Lopez, 2023) understood as the reflection on gender education undertaken by pedagogists, coordinators of educational services, experts in the field of training (Leonelli, 2011). The concept of gender, which took shape within the feminist debate of the Seventies (Cretella, 2018) has changed the perspective on the entire society by highlighting mechanisms of domination that were imperceptible until then. Thus, the existence of an order emerges within which hierarchies and power relations exist: the gender order (Scott, 1988). Once this cognitive framework has been clarified, gender violence can no longer be considered the consequence of a pathology, nor can it be considered a phenomenon attributable to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2009), but rather it should be interpreted as the product of a sexist culture with which we are accustomed to relating and living with since the early years of life (Ulivieri, 1995). This culture asserts itself in the most unsuspected places such as school (Biemmi, Chiappelli, Guirado, 2023). The concept of equality is in fact learned from the early years of life (Abbatecola and Stagi, 2017); an education based on the recognition of equality can therefore teach boys and girls to fight against gender stereotypes (Wrigley, 2021). In this regard, training teachers in a non-sexist perspective in subjects is the key to success in the fight against stereotypes. The massive presence of women in the education sector, from 99.2% in nursery schools to 59.7% in secondary schools (Guerrini, 2015), can lead to changes in meaning and a real symbolic revolution in knowledge and in the ways of processing knowledge (Piusi, 2003) only if the teaching staff possesses those reflective and self-reflective skills that allow them to critically read reality, to be aware of the processes that have determined their own formation and identity and to be able to establish an educational relationship based on the principles of recognition of the singularity of each person, of freedom and respect. Hence the need to invest in the initial training of teachers, to develop those reflective, communicative and relational skills to make the teacher a professional of education and training (Riva, 2008). In this paper, after a brief introduction that outlines the theoretical framework of reference, we proceed to the analysis of European and Italian legislation on the topic of stereotypes, prevention of violence, measures to promote gender equality. Finally, in the conclusions, future scenarios are discussed also in relation to studies carried out at an international level. The essay takes into consideration both quantitative data relating to the most recent research at a European level, and qualitative data that allow a deeper understanding of the problems analyzed. A mixed-methods approach is a research methodology in its own right. As stated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), a mixed-methods research design is a research design that has its own philosophical assumptions and methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it includes philosophical assumptions to provide directions for the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources in a single study.

2. The European Union and the Policies for Promoting Gender Equality and Overcoming Stereotypes

The European Union's strategy for gender equality sets political objectives and actions to make significant progress toward a gender-equal Europe by 2025. This strategy is grounded in legal frameworks, including the European Parliament's resolution of November 26, 2009, on the elimination of violence against women. The goal is a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen paths in life, have equal opportunities, and can equally and actively participate in political and social life. Key objectives include ending gender-based violence, challenging gender stereotypes, closing gender gaps in the labor market, achieving gender balance in various sectors of the economy, addressing gender pay and pension gaps, and achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics. In 2021, the Commission proposed binding measures on pay transparency to ensure that the principle of equal pay for equal work becomes a concrete reality. The lack of pay transparency was identified as one of the main barriers to closing the gender pay gap, which in 2020 was still around 13% in the European Union. Women earn on average 13% less than men. Regarding the long-term pension gap, it reached 30% in the EU (2018 data). In 2022, the European Commission adopted a new directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence. This directive is the first comprehensive legal tool at the EU level to counteract violence against women, criminalizing certain forms of physical violence, and providing global measures for victim protection, access to justice, and support. Another important outcome is the Directive on gender balance in corporate boards, aimed at breaking the glass ceiling in boards of listed companies. Equally significant is the European strategy for care, linked to new goals for early childhood education and care to improve women's participation in the labor market. Finally, in 2023, the European Commission launched a campaign to challenge gender stereotypes. The #EndGenderStereotypes campaign addressed gender stereotypes affecting both men and women in various areas of life, including career choices, caregiving responsibilities, and decision-making. Also in 2023, the Commission joined the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combatting of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, the Istanbul Convention, which will be further discussed in the following paragraph with regard to education.

2.1 The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (The Istanbul Convention), 11.05.2011

From a regulatory perspective aimed at countering gender-based violence, Italy ratified the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence in 2012, known as the Istanbul Convention. This is the first internationally legally binding instrument aimed at creating a comprehensive legal framework to protect women from all forms of violence. The Convention also addresses domestic violence, which not only affects women but also other individuals, such as children and the elderly, who are equally entitled to the same protective measures. The Convention (Article 3) defines violence against women as: "a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women, encompassing all acts of gender-based violence that cause or are likely to cause physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life." In this context, it is important to define what pertains to education (Article 14). The Convention states that signatory countries must include in their educational curricula materials on topics such as gender equality, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence, and the right to personal integrity, appropriate to the cognitive level of students. Signatory states are also committed to promoting these principles in non-formal educational settings, such as sports, cultural, and recreational centers, and in the media. To date, the treaty has been ratified by 38 parties (37 states and the European Union). All EU member states have signed it, with 21 states having ratified it (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden).

2.2 European Parliament Resolution of March 12, 2013, on the Elimination of Gender Stereotypes in the EU (2012/2116(INI))

This document focuses on education and training, on the contents of school curricula imparted to girls and boys, identifying them as determining factors that influence gender differences and, consequently, choices and access to rights. While it is taken for granted that access to education is ensured in European Union countries compared to other parts of the world, it is important to emphasize that there is not yet gender equality in terms of access and full enjoyment of school systems and study opportunities. In some countries, access for girls from minority groups, such as Romani girls, migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and those with disabilities, remains a significant problem. These documents are based on the idea that gender-based violence is not the result of a pathology nor can it be considered a phenomenon related to masculinity, but instead must be understood as the product of a sexist culture with which we are accustomed to relating and living from an early age. This culture is evident in the most unsuspected places, including schools (Biemmi, Chiappelli, Guirado, 2023). The resolution also emphasizes that the concept of equality is learned from the early years of life, and that education based on the recognition of equality can teach children to fight against gender stereotypes. Teacher training in a gender perspective within subjects is key to success in combating stereotypes. The significant presence of women in the education sector, from 99.2% in preschool to 59.7% in upper secondary school (Guerrini, 2015), could lead to meaningful changes in perception and a true symbolic revolution of knowledge and modes of knowledge processing (Piuksi, 2003), provided the teaching staff possess reflective and self-reflective skills that enable them to critically read reality, be aware of the processes that have shaped their own formation and gender identity, and thus establish an educational relationship founded on the principles of recognizing individuality, freedom, and respect. This underlines the necessity of investing in teachers' initial training to develop the reflective, communicative, and relational skills necessary to make them professionals in education and training (Riva, 2008).

2.3 The Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029

On March 6, 2024, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a new strategy for gender equality for the 2024-2029 period. The gender equality strategy focuses on six key objectives: preventing and combating gender stereotypes and sexism; preventing and combating violence against women and girls and domestic violence; ensuring women's equal access to justice; achieving balanced participation of women and men in political, public, social, and economic life; ensuring women's empowerment and gender equality in relation to global and geopolitical challenges; and achieving the integration of gender in all policies with an intersectional approach. This strategy provides the framework within which each EU member state develops its own policy related to the fight against stereotypes, gender-based violence, equality, and inclusion in education, social, and professional life for both men and women in Europe.

3. Gender Segregation, Precarious Work, and Vocational Training

According to data collected by the European Institute for Gender Equality, segregation is when women or men dominate a specific field of work or study. For example, women in the arts and humanities, and men in construction and technology. A gender division between fields of study, combined with gender stereotypes or insufficient options for work-life balance, contributes to the conditions for gender segregation. Gender segregation in the labor market is partly the result of women and men choosing different fields of study in school. For those studying in atypical fields for their gender, the transition from education to employment is not always easy. For example, women who graduate in STEM subjects have fewer chances of obtaining their first job corresponding to their qualifications compared to their male peers. In 2014, one in two men with a STEM high school diploma found a job in a related field. However, this applies to only one in three women with the same education.

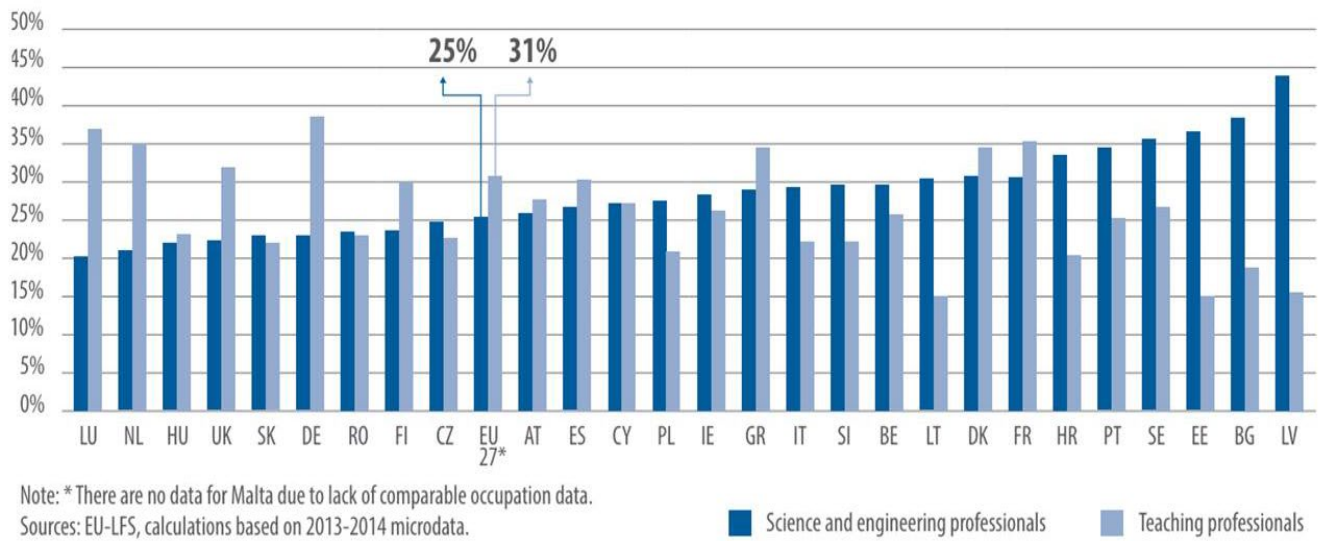
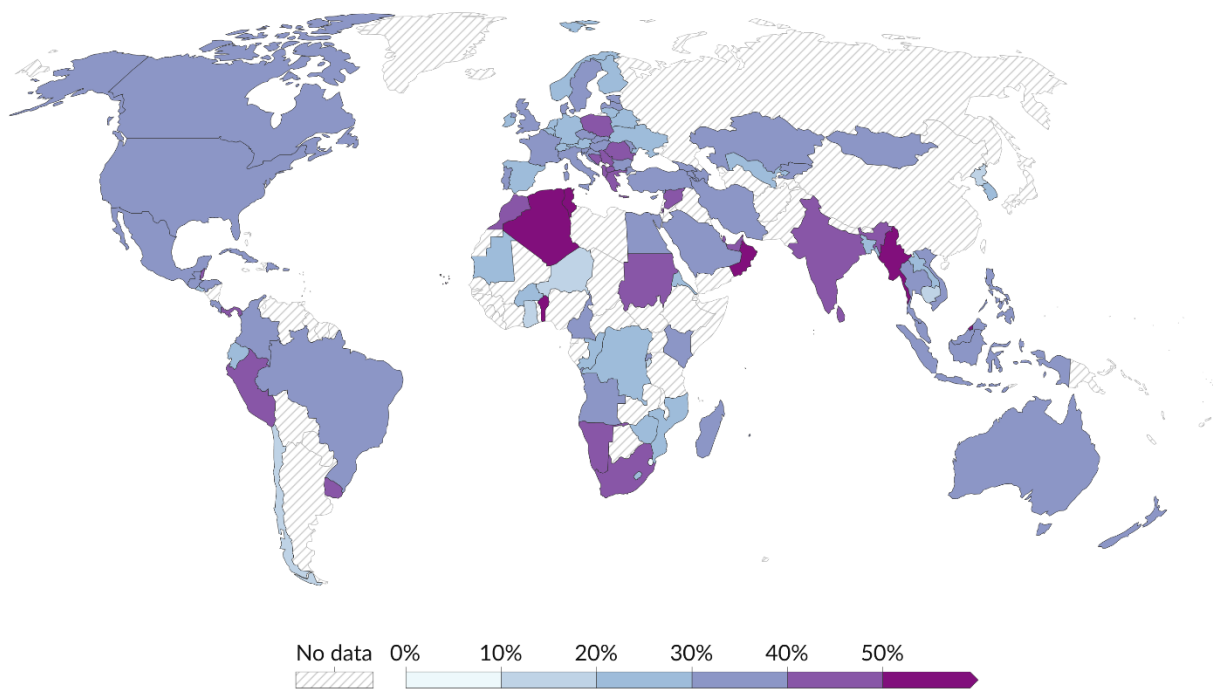


Figure 1: share of women among science engineering professionals. Share of men among teaching professionals.

Share of women graduating from STEM programs in tertiary education, 2019



Proportion of female graduates in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields at the tertiary¹ level of education.



Data source: World Bank - Women, Business and the Law (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/global-education | CC BY

1. **Tertiary education** Tertiary education includes all formal post-secondary learning. It ranges from short-cycle vocational programs to bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. These programs offer advanced theoretical and practical knowledge in specialized fields such as medicine, law, engineering, and the arts.

Figure 2: Share of woman graduation from STEM program in tertiary education, 2019.

Women with lower qualification levels are more likely to accept precarious jobs with short contracts, reduced working hours, and very low wages. This can affect their decision to work, especially if searching for or accepting a job incurs additional costs, such as transportation or childcare. Additional costs can have a greater impact on the employment of individuals who earn secondary income and those who care for them, especially if they have more than one child. The availability and costs of childcare services significantly hinder women's careers. Kimmel (1998) emphasizes how family-friendly policies, such as subsidies for childcare and parental leave, have a positive effect on the decision of women with children to work. Furthermore, women in precarious jobs, such as those with fixed-term contracts, also face social protection limitations. In many European countries, for example, there are eligibility rules for parental leave and related benefits, meaning that people with fragmented and non-continuous work may have limited or no rights to parental leave and benefits if they have a child (Reskin, 1988). Therefore, due to the need to care for a child, people may lose their job. Gender differences are built daily through the labor market structure, division of school orientations, family roles, and through continuous ritualization that makes them both taken for granted and immediately recognizable (Bianchi, Fabbri, and Romano, 2018). While education and training continue to reinforce gender stereotypes, boys and girls often follow educational and training paths aligned with these stereotypes, despite recent discussions on this topic leading to the creation of essential documents by the Ministry of Education (currently MIM). In 2015, the Italian Law 107 (the "Good School" law) came into force, specifying in Article 1, paragraph 16, that the implementation of gender equality principles is guaranteed through the three-year Educational Offer Plan (PTOF), promoting education on gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination in schools of every level to inform and sensitize students, teachers, and parents. To implement this, the Ministry of Education established a technical committee, which in 2017 published the National Guidelines, "Educating for Respect: for Gender Equality, the Prevention of Gender-based Violence, and All Forms of Discrimination." These guidelines, along with the Guidelines for Preventing and Combating Cyberbullying in Schools, are part of the National Plan for Education on Respect, promoted by the Ministry of Education to encourage educational and formative actions in schools, ensuring the acquisition and development of transversal, social, and civic skills, which are part of a broader concept of education for active and global citizenship. Vocational guidance, taking gender into account, provides measures to encourage girls to pursue careers in technology and science, but unfortunately, there are very few initiatives aimed at encouraging boys to consider careers in early childhood education, healthcare, or humanities.

A deeper understanding of existing job opportunities in the labor market would certainly facilitate better access to all vocational training courses. In this regard, the National Guidelines for Permanent Guidance are an important reference in the Italian landscape of vocational guidance for young people. This document aims to contribute to defining an integrated, unified, and responsible guidance system centered on the individual and their needs to prevent and address youth distress and promote full and active employment, social inclusion, and intercultural dialogue. The school system is central and represents an irreplaceable space where every young person must acquire basic and transversal skills for guidance, necessary to develop their identity, autonomy, decision-making, and planning. Guidance, in fact, must help individuals develop their self-actualization, make decisions about their personal and professional lives, and facilitate the connection between training demand and supply, and later between job demand and supply. Given that the socio-economic context has changed and the culture of guidance has evolved, it is inevitable that the traditional approach to guidance by schools, based on information often delegated to external experts, must also change. Schools must invest in the initial and continuous training of all teachers so that they can meet diverse needs and the demands of society and the labor market, as well as the new learning models of young people, including their difficulties and challenges. Since the Lisbon Strategy, all European documents emphasize key concepts such as "lifelong learning," "lifewide learning," and "lifelong guidance." Guidance is seen as "a set of activities that enables citizens of all ages, at any stage of their life, to identify their abilities, interests, and skills. This also implies making informed decisions about education and employment, managing one's personal life paths in learning and working situations in other contexts." In this regard, Ministerial Decree 328 of 2022 supports that, in line with the European

Union's policy, Italy has recognized the need for all member states' educational systems to aim at reducing the percentage of students who drop out of school early to below 10%.

4. Conclusions

Referring to some international research, we can state that parents' income is one of the most significant factors in choosing a school for their children. When parents' income is high, there is an intention to choose private schools, whereas when income is low, parents are more likely to choose public schools (Tarkhnishvili and Strielkowski, 2022). Studies on this phenomenon have been conducted in Georgia, India, Qatar, Ethiopia, and Israel (Leoncini, 2018). Private schools often offer more resources to extend learning in the afternoon when parents are busy (Hossain, Shohel, & Jahan, 2017). While public schools today offer the opportunity for basic and compulsory education to all children, the national education system still has many goals to achieve. According to Istat data for the 2011-12 academic year, 95% of enrollments in degree programs leading to teaching careers are women, as well as 83% in the linguistic area and almost 82% in the psychological area. Meanwhile, in the scientific sector, 67.4% of enrollments are male, as well as 76.7% in engineering. While women are more consistent in their studies, they remain tied to certain sectors, and there are still very low education levels in some countries worldwide concerning the female population. Globally, around 750 million adults and 102 million young people cannot read or write a simple sentence. Two-thirds of them are women, and there has been almost no progress in reducing this proportion, even though the global illiterate population has decreased. In Italy, the most significant negative figures are found in the provinces of Crotone and Brindisi. Specifically, Crotone has the highest percentage of males (6.4% of the population aged 9 and above) without any qualifications, while Brindisi holds the highest percentage for females (8.5%). Even in the choice of secondary school, there is a lower presence of females in the scientific-technological sector: 54.9% of males graduate from scientific high schools or technical institutes in the technological sector, compared to 25.5% of females. In 2020, the percentage of people obtaining their first university degree increased to 39.6%, and the percentage of master's degrees reached 24.4%. The best performance is seen in women, with over 47 cases out of 100 twenty-five-years-old obtaining their first university degree (compared to about 32 out of 100 men). Women also have a higher rate of completing long studies with a master's degree (29.2% compared to 19.9% of men). One can only hope, as Paola Cortellesi would say, "There is still tomorrow." The consistency of female education and the initiative of males in challenging traditional gender perspectives lead us to believe that, slowly, something will change.

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