



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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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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Beyond Patriarchy: Teaching Profession, Gender Issues and Teacher Education in Italy

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Abstract

This theoretical paper examines the link between patriarchal culture and the low presence of men in teaching. We examine the role of teacher education in reducing stereotypes and prejudices and in promoting creativity and equity in gender relationships. The reflections are accompanied by a focus on the Italian context.

Keywords: patriarchy; gender equality; teacher education; male teachers; Italy.

1. Introduction

Gender equality and the fight against gender-based stereotypes, prejudices, inequalities and violence are international commitments (UN, 2015). Education has a central role in providing young people with the keys to understand the complexity of the problem and in promoting a problematizing attitude that goes beyond outrage as the only response: they must become aware of the millenary patriarchal culture and of all microaggressions that everyday mark gender inequality and can turn into violence (Applin et al., 2023; Capodilupo, 2010).

Teacher education plays a crucial role: it fosters awareness with respect to patriarchy as the dominant cultural substrate and the resulting gender-based bias and discrimination (Deng et al., 2023; Skelton, 2007). Furthermore, it suggests possible pedagogical approaches to counteract patriarchal culture from the earliest school years and promote gender education paths aimed at building healthy and creative relationships between people as an antidote to violence and overcoming stereotypical views. The issue also concerns the composition of teaching staff: in fact, it often consists of an overwhelming majority of women and only a few men, with a very small proportion in crèches, kindergartens and primary schools (Chaaban et al., 2024; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This international trend has a strong impact on gender stereotypes and prejudices (Demirkol, 2022; Kollmayer et al., 2018): the idea that education and care are typically female activities and can be equated with motherhood is perpetuated. The dimension of same-gender education is missing (McGinn et al., 2019; Winters et al., 2013): the lack of men in schools has negative consequences on children's growth paths and their protagonism for cultural and social change.

This paper explores the central role of teacher education in promoting awareness of the social and cultural effects of gender variable; it offers some insights into the Italian context. Our reflections aim to highlight the impact of patriarchal culture on the teaching profession and to affirm the need for educational processes in which gender is interpreted creatively and without codified roles¹.

2. Teaching and Patriarchal Culture

Patriarchy is a sociocultural system where men primarily hold power in political, social, economic and family spheres (Miller, 2017; Ortner, 2022). It is structured around a gender hierarchy that places males in a dominant position, controlling resources, decisions and authority. In patriarchal societies, gender roles are rigid: men dominate the public sphere, while women are relegated to the domestic realm; therefore, their access to power and independence is limited (Mensah, 2023; McKinley et al., 2021). This system has its roots in historical and cultural traditions, often reinforced by religious ideologies, laws and social norms that perpetuate women's subordination (Gilligan & Snider, 2018).

Patriarchy is criticized and challenged by feminism and other movements which highlight the injustices that it causes (bell hooks, 2004; Bennett, 2006; Biermann & Farias, 2021). They argue that patriarchy not only limits women's rights and freedoms but also harms men by enforcing rigid masculine norms that stifle emotional expression and flexibility in roles (Brooks, 2001; Krishnan et al., 2020). The struggle against patriarchy seeks not only gender equality but also the creation of a more equitable society where rights and opportunities are not determined by gender (Butler et al., 2019; Menon, 2015). Despite progress, patriarchy remains in various forms, requiring continued efforts to dismantle the structures that uphold it and promote broader social and cultural change.

Patriarchal culture also permeates beliefs and ideas about teaching, which is considered a female profession (Kundu & Basu, 2022; Marchesi, 2012). This cultural factor has financial implications (León et al., 2019): male teachers earn less than men with similar qualifications employed in other sectors, while female teachers' salaries are similar or even higher than those of women employed in other fields

¹This paper is a preliminary reflection by the two authors, also in relation to the project "POT C.A.R.E. – Costruire Azioni di orientamento e formazione alla professione insegnante nel Rapporto Educativo tra scuola e università: contrasto alle carenze nelle competenze di base" (University of Milan-Bicocca). The text reflects their joint contributions: Anna Granata wrote paragraphs 1, 3.1, and 4, while Valerio Ferrero wrote paragraphs 2, 2.1, and 3.

(OECD, 2024). Furthermore, care and education are considered degrading professions with low social prestige for a man (Magnusson, 2009).

These dynamics extend beyond schools: education and care are often disproportionately shouldered by mothers rather than fathers (Granata, 2023; 2024; Minello, 2022). This gender bias significantly influences students' growth, shaping their imaginaries and limiting their ability to envision futures beyond traditional and patriarchal roles (Gong et al., 2018; Sansone, 2017). Addressing this issue requires cultural interventions, including pedagogical approaches that challenge gender stereotypes from early childhood and efforts to increase male representation in educational settings.

2.1 The Italian Teaching Staff: An Overview

Data from the Italian Ministry of Education's database on school staff² shows that occupational segregation in the teaching profession is alarming (Figure 1). In the 2022/23 school year³, the percentage of men among tenured teachers in kindergartens was 0.79%, while in primary school it rose to 3.68%. If we look at untenured staff, we see that the proportion of men in kindergarten is 1.42%, while in primary school it is 9.14%. In middle schools, the percentage of untenured male teachers is 26.6%, while as far as teachers with a tenured position are concerned it is 22.18%. Finally, in high school, 35.5% of male teachers are not permanently employed and 33.5 are permanently employed.

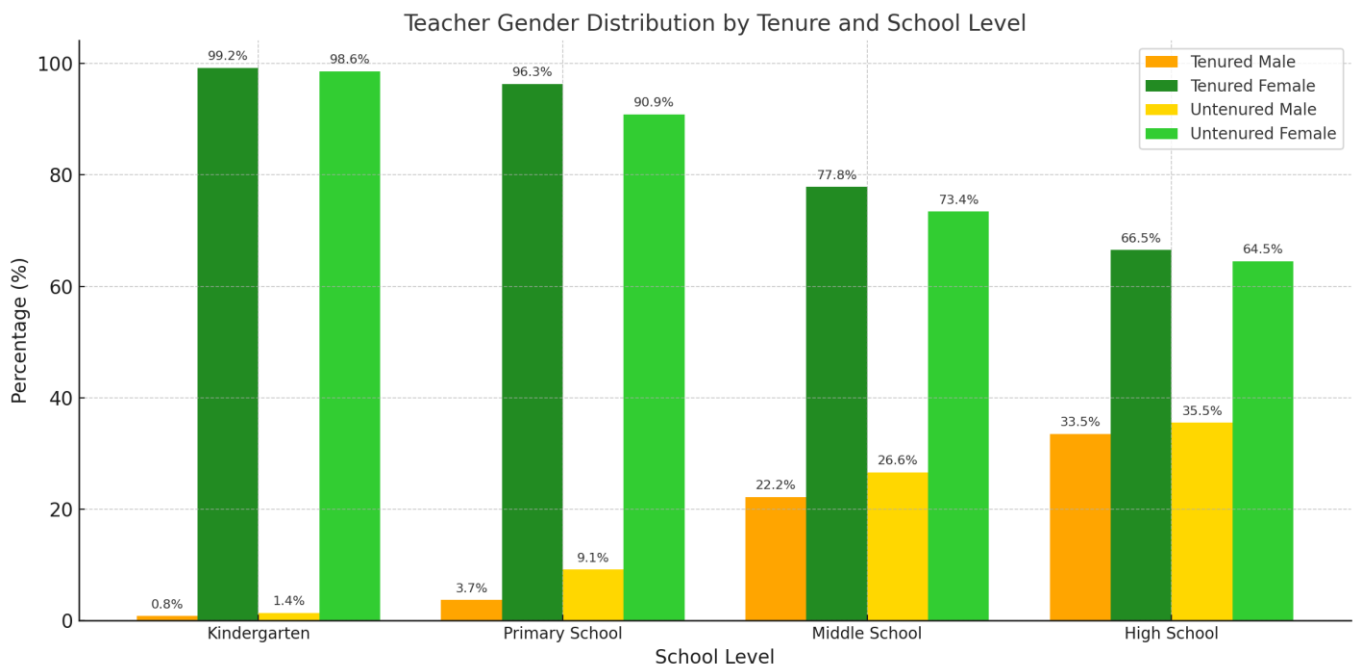


Figure 1: Italian teaching staff composition by gender

The higher percentages of untenured male teachers reflect a cultural shift regarding the bias that teaching is a profession more suited for women. However, the numbers, particularly in kindergartens and primary schools, are still insufficient to consider this segregation overcome. Moreover, the proportion of male teachers tends to increase with the school level. In early education, teaching is seen as a more pedagogical and caring profession (Biemmi & Mapelli, 2023; Persico & Ottaviano, 2024): these aspects are culturally viewed as feminine traits, making the job less attractive to men and potentially leading to implicit discrimination (Wilkinson et al., 2024).

This trend, which is particularly pronounced in Italy, is widespread internationally. The idea of giving preference to men in the procedures to become tenured teachers is certainly not the key⁴: in fact, it would be about stabilising those who have graduated to work as teachers and not focusing on the

² The portal can be reached at the following link: <https://dati.istruzione.it/opendata/opendata/catalogo/#Scuola>.

³ It is the most recent school year for which data is available.

⁴ From 2023, in Italy, male candidates are given preference over female ones in selection procedures for a permanent position as a teacher if they achieve the same score.

reasons for their career choice. Thus, it is crucial to deconstruct the stereotypes rooted in patriarchal culture that frame teaching as a female profession.

3. Teacher Education for Healthy, Creative and Equal Gender Relations

Teacher education is crucial in fostering a cultural shift that challenges patriarchal culture (Falter, 2016; Kelly, 2019). Teachers serve as role models and their communication, interactions and appreciation of differences significantly shape the school environment. Through specific teacher education, they can become aware of gender dynamics and cultural influences that reinforce stereotypes and adopt pedagogical strategies that promote gender-equitable education (Ferrero & Messi, 2023). Recognizing and addressing their own unconscious biases is the first step in creating a setting where all students can express their identities and potential without being constrained by traditional roles.

A key aspect of teacher education is enhancing interpersonal skills to promote empathetic and non-judgmental dialogue (Jaber et al., 2018; Neary, 2020). It fosters a more open and creative school environment where students learn to collaborate by valuing differences as strengths: in fact, creativity thrives in settings grounded in mutual trust (Zeffane, 2015). Teacher education paths can include workshops and simulations to explore innovative classroom management and encourage activities that break traditional gender norms. For instance, interdisciplinary projects can highlight the value of everyone's contributions to collective success, regardless of gender (Tonnetti & Lentillon-Kaestner, 2023).

Teacher education can play a pivotal role in driving cultural change and making the profession more appealing to men (Heinz et al., 2023; Mills, 2004). Before starting the paths (as an orientation aid) and during them (as a motivational tool), moments of male self-awareness (Rahmani Azad et al., 2023) could be useful in order to challenge gender stereotypes around care and education and highlight the complementary value of male contributions (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). It is essential to deconstruct the notion that teaching is exclusively a female activity and demonstrate how men can achieve professional satisfaction in this field.

Ultimately, teacher education can help to build an educational community in which gender roles are lived more dynamically (Sadker et al., 2014). This could lead to a greater representation of men in schools, not only as positive role models for male students, but also as witnesses to a more equitable culture (Cushman, 2010; Piburn et al., 2011). The balanced presence of men and women creates a microcosm that reflects societal diversity, preparing students to live gender collaboration as the norm. Thus, purposeful teacher education can transform schooling into a powerful tool to shape relationships based on respect, creativity and equity, with a positive impact on future generations.

3.1 Teacher Education and Gender Issues in Italy

Since 1998⁵, teacher education has been fully managed by universities, with specific paths for future teachers in kindergartens and primary schools and multiple steps for those preparing to teach in secondary schools (Magni, 2024; Mortari & Silva, 2020). The Master's degree for kindergarten and primary school teachers includes knowledge in education, psychology, sociology and anthropology, focusing on pedagogical methods to teach various subjects. However, the attention given to gender issues varies depending on the universities' autonomy. Teachings that challenge gender biases and prejudices to support the cultural change needed are only included in a few cases (Biemmi, 2015; Guerrini, 2022).

Teacher education for future middle and high school teachers has undergone several reforms over the years. They complete a Bachelor's and Master's degree in a specific disciplinary area before embarking on a one-year teacher education program that focuses on education and subject-specific teaching (Mincu, 2019). However, the gender aspect is often not explicitly addressed (Pagliapoco, 2022).

The lack of an adequate focus on the topic in initial teacher education does not allow for the structural and cross-curricular implementation of gender education in schools. These activities are often

⁵ Before this date, kindergarten and primary school teachers were trained in a specific high school branch.

delegated to external professionals, with a negative impact on their capillarity and continuity (Alfonsi, 2019; Sapegno, 2014). Instead, teachers should take care of this fundamental aspect of students' growth, in order to promote a cultural change that overcomes patriarchy and reduces episodes of gender-based discrimination and violence.

4. Conclusion

Internationally, there is a widespread tendency to regard care and education as typically female professions. This phenomenon has its roots in patriarchal biases that associate roles with certain genders, reinforcing occupational segregation. Thus, the teaching profession becomes a field with a high proportion of women and a low presence of men: this aspect contributes to perpetuate stereotypes, prejudices and patriarchy. Such an imbalance has profound implications, not only on employment, but also on educational models that reproduce stereotypical roles and expectations. However, education plays a crucial role when it comes to fight the dynamics of gender segregation, inequality and violence. Teacher education is fundamental for the development of professional awareness and the introduction of pedagogical approaches that promote gender equality. In Italy, the strong occupational segregation in the teaching profession reflects the unbalanced workload in the family, which places a particular burden on women and reinforces stereotypical role models, patriarchal culture and structural inequalities. Teacher education that addresses these issues is essential to challenge these conventions and promote equity and gender creativity.

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