Navigating high school: A systematic review of trans* students' educational experiences

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a systematic review of 23 scientific publications published between 2011 and 2024 within the field of Education Science, investigating the experiences of trans* students in high school. Employing a Boolean Search strategy and utilising thematic analysis, four themes emerged: Forms and impacts of cisnormativity at school; Resisting cisnormativity; Schools as transformative agencies; and Multiple trans* identities.
Findings reveal that schools are frequently characterised by a pervasive cisnormativity that can lead to marginalization, invisibility, and discrimination. Despite these challenges, trans* pupils demonstrate significant agency and resistance. While schools can perpetuate systemic discrimination, they also possess the potential to foster gender equitable learning environments. Schools can create more equitable and supportive educational spaces. For instance, they can actively challenge their own cisnormative structures and beliefs, and embrace an affirming educational approach that prioritises gender self-determination and recognition of the diverse needs and experiences of trans* students.

L'articolo presenta i risultati di una revisione sistematica di 23 paper scientifici pubblicati tra il 2011 e il 2024 nel campo delle Scienze dell'Educazione, focalizzandosi sulle esperienze di studenti trans* nelle scuole secondarie di secondo grado. Utilizzando una strategia di ricerca booleana e l'analisi tematica, sono stati individuati quattro temi: Forme e impatti della cisnormatività a scuola; Resistere alla cisnormatività; Scuole come agenti di cambiamento; Molteplici identità trans*.
I risultati evidenziano come le scuole siano permeate da una pervasiva cisnormatività che può condurre a marginalizzazione, invisibilità e discriminazione. Tuttavia, lɜ studenti trans* dimostrano agency e capacità di resistenza. Se da un lato le istituzioni scolastiche perpetuano discriminazioni sistemiche, dall'altro hanno il potenziale per promuovere contesti trans*-accoglienti, creando ambiente educativi più equi e supportivi. Per esempio, possono sfidare proprie strutture e credenze cisnormative, e adottare un approccio educativo affermativo che valorizzi autodeterminazione e riconoscimento di esigenze ed esperienze trans*.

Keywords: trans students; high school; school experience; systematic review

Parole chiave: studenti trans; scuola secondaria di secondo grado; esperienza scolastica; systematic review

1. Introduction

The international scientific literature attests a growing body of research on the experiences of trans*[1] students in school settings, from early childhood to adolescence (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Etxebarria-Perez-de-Nanclares et al., 2024; Neary, 2021; Steele & Nicholson, 2020) showing schools' pivotal role in gender identity development among young people (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017; Bragg et al., 2018; Etxebarria-Perez-de-Nanclares et al., 2023).

The significance of school environments is further emphasised by reports from organisations such as TGEU[2], which has analysed data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights on the state of rights for the European LGBTQIA+ population (FRA, 2020). TGEU report highlighted that trans* youths face disproportionate rates of discrimination, aggression, and denial of rights, particularly within educational and healthcare settings. Notably, trans* adolescents are particularly vulnerable to discrimination based on their gender identity (Calderon-Cifuentes, 2021). As a consequence, TGEU recommends educational and social institutions to "implement effective policies to create a safe, welcoming, and empowering environment for trans and gender-diverse children and youth" (Calderon-Cifuentes, 2021, p. 9), particularly stressing the role played by schools.

Despite increasing researches, the literature within the humanities and social sciences on the school experiences of trans* youths remains limited (Horton, 2020; Paechter et al., 2021). Moreover, while some studies have examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, these often fail to adequately address the specific challenges and needs of trans* learners, including their experiences within the broader LGBTQIA+ acronym (McBride, 2021). Furthermore, a significant portion of the existing literature focuses on risk factors, psychological interventions, and negative school pathways, often framing the experiences of trans* youth primarily through a victimisation lens (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2018). This overemphasis on victimisation, as Shelton and Lester (2018) argue, can perpetuate harmful narratives that portray trans* students as passive subjects, while simultaneously underestimating the structural causes of the cisnormative[3] oppression they face.

This narrow focus has significant epistemological and practical implications. It limits the available body of knowledge, renders invisible the diverse experiences of trans* youths, and reinforces a pathologized understanding of their gender identity (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Mariotto, 2020). Moreover, the shortage of research on positive school journeys and agency of trans* pupils hinders the development of gender-equitable educational practices and environments (McBride et al., 2020).

This paper presents a systematic review that addresses these limitations by providing an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the existing literature on the school experiences of trans* students, offering a more nuanced and complex understanding of their diverse experiences, challenges, and strengths.

2. Methods

2.1 Bibliographic search procedure

This study aims to investigate the key elements characterising the educational experiences of trans* high school students, as identified in the existing educational research literature. To this end, a systematic review was conducted employing a Boolean Search strategy (Mariotto, 2020). Keywords were categorised by consistency with the research theme, and they were combined as follows:

- Gender Identity: (trans) OR (transgender) OR (non AND binary).

- Age: (youth) OR (adolescence) OR (children).

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- High school experience: (school).

By adopting Boolean Operators, the keyword groups resulted in the following search string: ((trans) OR (transgender) OR (non-binary)) AND ((youth) OR (adolescence) OR (adolescent) OR (children)) AND (school).

The bibliographic search was conducted by applying the search string exclusively to the titles of papers within the broad field of educational sciences. This decision recognises the inherent plurality and complexity of pedagogical knowledge, particularly within the Italian academic context, significantly enriched by contributions from diverse disciplines, such as sociology (Cambi, 2003). For consultation purposes, six databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage and rigorous indexing standards, namely Scopus, ERIC, WorldCat Discovery, Web of Science, Educational Research Abstracts Online, and ScienceDirect. To ensure the inclusion of empirical data relevant to the systematic review objectives, the search was focused solely on scientific articles and research reports, excluding theoretical texts.

2.2 Bibliographic material selection

The bibliographic material selection occurred in two phases, conducted in 2022 and 2024, to guarantee the most up-to-date research findings. The initial phase focused on scientific articles and research reports published between 2011 and 2022, resulting in an initial corpus of 121 publications. A subsequent selection process was then undertaken to ensure alignment with the research aims. This process involved:

- Eliminating duplicate entries.

- Checking for consistency with the research scope by reading the title, abstract, and keywords of each publication.

- Verifying the scientific affiliation of the author(s) and/or the target journal to assess the article's alignment with the research purpose.

Throughout this process, publications were excluded if they did not directly address the research question or if, despite being indexed as educational papers, they belonged to other scientific disciplines, such as psychology or medicine. Furthermore, studies focusing on primary schools, universities, or post-graduate training programs were excluded due to the specific focus on secondary education. Moreover, the literature review prioritised studies that exclusively focused on the school experiences of trans* students. The aim was to identify their specific needs and challenges within school context. Consequently, studies with mixed samples or participant groups (e.g., including both cisgender and trans* students) or those encompassing the broader LGBTQIA+ spectrum were excluded.

Eight publications met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. They were then analysed manually using the ancestral approach technique which allows for the identification of relevant literature that may not be indexed in the consulted databases (Mariotto, 2020). As a consequence, additional publications were identified through the review of the bibliographic references of the eight selected articles, resulting in a final sample of 19 articles.

Finally, a second selection round was conducted in the summer of 2024, focusing on publications from 2022 to 2024. This round identified 215 initial publications, which were then refined to three articles meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A subsequent ancestral approach review identified one additional publication. Consequently, the final bibliographic set comprises 23 publications primarily located in English-speaking contexts and characterised by the predominant use of qualitative methodologies (Table 1).

Table 1. Bibliographic set's geographical distribution and methodological design

	Variable	Frequency
Geographical distribution	Australia	3
	Canada	1
	Ireland	3
	New Zealand	1
	South Africa	3
	UK	6
	USA	5
Methodological design	Mixed Methods	2
	Qualitative	19
	Quantitative	1

Note. One selected paper was not included in the Table because it is an Introduction to a Special Issue about trans* students and schools.
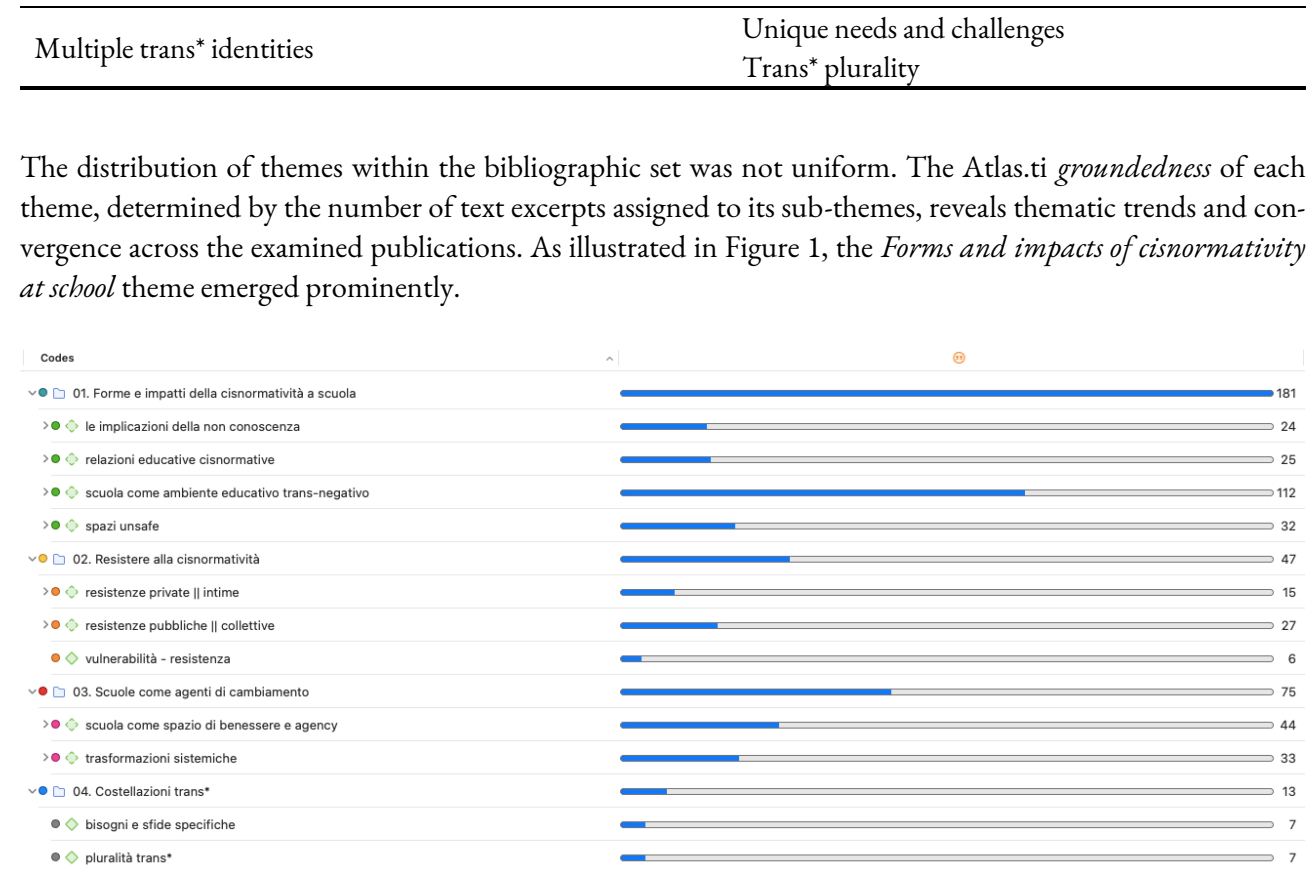
2.3 Analytical procedure

This systematic review employed a qualitative data analysis approach, utilising coding techniques and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021). The selected papers underwent an initial critical reading process to identify theoretical, methodological, and empirical elements relevant to the research question, these elements were then coded using Atlas.ti software. The identified codes were analysed comparatively across the entire bibliographic set. This process involved discarding infrequently occurring codes, aggregating similar codes, and merging them into semantically related sub-themes. The sub-themes were then organised into broader, conceptually coherent themes (Table 2). Four primary themes were identified:

1. Forms and impacts of cisnormativity at school.

2. Resisting cisnormativity.

3. Schools as transformative agencies.

4. Multiple trans* identities.

Table 2. List of identified themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Forms and impacts of cisnormativity at school	Non-knowing implications
	Cisnormative educational relationships
	School as a trans-negative educational environment
	Unsafe spaces
Resisting cisnormativity	Private and intimate resistances
	Public and collective resistances
	Vulnerability - resistance
Schools as transformative agencies	School as a space for well-being and agency
	Systemic transformations

Multiple trans* identities	Unique needs and challenges Trans* plurality

The distribution of themes within the bibliographic set was not uniform. The Atlas.ti *groundedness* of each theme, determined by the number of text excerpts assigned to its sub-themes, reveals thematic trends and convergence across the examined publications. As illustrated in Figure 1, the *Forms and impacts of cisnormativity at school* theme emerged prominently.

Figure 1. Groundedness of themes and sub-themes within the analysed bibliographic corpus

This theme concerns the challenges faced by trans* students due to the pervasive influence of cisnormative beliefs within the school environment and society as well. The prominence of the theme can be attributed to the research interests of the included studies, many of which explicitly adopt the concept of cisnormativity as a framework for empirical investigation and data interpretation. Moreover, the widespread presence of this theme within the corpus suggests that cisnormative oppressions, intersecting with factors such as age, geographical location, ethnicity, school type (religious or secular), and community size, may constitute a significant and pervasive challenge for trans* pupils across diverse contexts. While acknowledging the unique experiences and identities of the participants in the analysed studies, the findings suggest that school cisnormativity may represent a persistent and deeply ingrained structural barrier that significantly impacts the educational trajectories of trans* students.

2.4 Study limitations

This systematic review has several limitations. Firstly, the included publications primarily originated from English-speaking countries, reflecting a broader trend in the literature on this topic (McBride, 2021). Secondly, relying solely on international databases that primarily index English-language journals may have limited the inclusion of researches conducted in other languages and within non-English-speaking academic contexts. As McBride (2021) states,

> [t]rends in the literature suggest that the field is dominated by U.S.-based research [...] In order to ensure the field develops into a diverse and dynamic scholarly project it is essential that critical qualitative investigations continue to be undertaken, especially within the global south (p. 125).

To address these limitations, the findings of this systematic review are acknowledged as context-specific. By interpreting the identified themes with an awareness of their geographical and linguistic limitations, it is possible to generate valuable insights that can be further explored through comparative analyses. Such analyses can help to identify similarities and divergences across different territorial contexts, educational and legislative systems, and student demographics.

3. Findings

This systematic review explores the experiences of trans* students in high school, examining the challenges and opportunities they encounter within the school context. Findings reveal a complex relationship between trans* pupils and school environments. Schools are often characterized by a pervasive cisnormativity that can lead to marginalization, invisibility, and discrimination (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023). Moreover, the literature highlights the agency of trans* youths in navigating these challenges. Despite facing discrimination, these students actively resist cisnormative structures and engage in various forms of resistance, both individually and collectively (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Francis, 2023, 2024; Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Neary, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

The systematic review reveals the complex and often contradictory nature of the school environment. While schools can be sites of oppression, they also offer opportunities for support and positive change. By actively challenging their cisnormative structures and beliefs (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Phipps & Blackall, 2023) and embracing an affirming educational approach, schools can cultivate a gender ethos that prioritizes gender self-determination, validation, and recognition of the diverse needs and experiences of trans* students (Jones et al., 2016; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Paechter et al., 2021).

3.1 Forms and impacts of cisnormativity at school

The scientific literature extensively demonstrates that schools function as sites of identity regulation, operating within an institutionalised cisnormative framework (Paechter et al., 2021). School environments thus act as strongly binary and cisgenderist institutions, organising the lives of the entire student population around gender scripts and expectations considered 'natural' and normative (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014; Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023). Within these contexts, trans* students often experience invisibility and misrecognition, as the educational culture fails to acknowledge, name, or accommodate their identities (McBride & Neary, 2021). This can lead to significant disparities in social value and opportunities compared to their cisgender peers (Francis, 2024).

Furthermore, research conducted by Paechter et al. (2021) highlights the unique challenges faced by nonbinary students within these environments. Nonbinary pupils experience the paradox of being both invisible and hyper-visible: they become invisible by being erased from the binary system and hyper-visible as they disrupt and challenge dichotomous gender categories.

As the literature suggests, school cisnormativity is, therefore, a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon, operating at symbolic, relational, curricular, cultural, educational, political, spatial, and material levels (Francis & Monakali, 2021; McBride et al., 2020; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

One significant dimension through which cisnormativity denies, marginalises, or hyper-visibilises trans* subjectivities within the school context is the spatial one. Particularly, school bathrooms and changing rooms serve not only as spaces for bodily functions but also as sites of gendered spatial regulation. These spaces perform a spatial function, dictating where individuals should go based on their assigned gender, and a pedagogical function, reinforcing normative gender identities and expectations (Ingrey, 2018).

School locker rooms and bathrooms thus contribute to toilet and gender policing dynamics, exposing trans* students to potential outings and discrimination, and disavowing their gender identity and needs (Jones et al., 2016). To ensure their safety, some trans* youths may avoid using school restrooms altogether, potentially impacting their physical well-being (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; McBride et al., 2020). Furthermore, access to these facilities is often subject to a gender double standard, targeting trans* girls. 'Concerns' raised by peers, families, and school staff, are typically "linked to an unfounded and transphobic assumption that trans girls/women are a danger to other girls/women in female-only facilities" (McBride et al., 2020, p. 42).

When schools implement gender-neutral restrooms, the literature often highlights potential challenges. These facilities are frequently perceived as solely intended for trans* students, potentially leading to their marginalisation and hyper-visibility. The provision of designated 'trans bathrooms' can create a sense of segregation, isolating trans* youths from their cisgender peers and potentially increasing their anxiety and vulnerability to aggression (Johnson et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021).

In the absence of gender-neutral restrooms, schools may resort to 'third options', such as converting spaces like the infirmary, restrooms for disabled people, or disused offices into single-user facilities. However, this approach fails to address the underlying issue of a cisnormative school environment. As Phipps and Blackall (2023) assert,

> The use of a 'third option' toilet or changing room still raises concerns around trans pupils being catered for on an individualised and reactive basis [...] This approach gives trans pupils 'permission to exist within a cisnormative system', with no requirement for the systems to change. (p. 1107)

Lastly, the gender segregation of bathrooms and changing rooms can create barriers to full participation in school activities, particularly in sports, potentially limiting or denying access for trans* students (McBride et al., 2020; Phipps & Blackall, 2023).

Another significant aspect of cisnormative school culture is the exclusion of trans* topics from the curriculum (Horton, 2020; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). By omitting gender diversity from educational contents, schools deprive trans* adolescents of access to crucial symbolic and conceptual resources for their gender identity development. This absence can reinforce harmful social messages and hinder students' self-understanding (Horton, 2020; McBride et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021). Furthermore, when LGBTQIA+ issues are addressed in the classroom, they are often treated in a tokenistic and isolated manner (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Horton, 2020; McBride et al., 2020). As Neary (2018) argues, this approach fails to acknowledge how schools, and society, actively support and reproduce a binary and cisnormative gender order.

This approach to addressing the needs of trans* students often relies on 'inclusive' and individualised intervention strategies, which are typically implemented only in response to specific instances of coming out or bullying (Paechter et al., 2021). As Phipps & Blackall (2023) argue, "[t]he ad-hoc and individualized nature of this approach thus fails to disrupt structural inequalities which contribute to the erasure of trans identities in the first instance" (p. 1106). Furthermore, school policies frequently reinforce gender binarism, for example, through the enforcement of gender-specific uniform regulations, while also perpetuating victimising and pathologizing discourses (Ingrey, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). These policies often frame

trans* learners primarily within the context of vulnerability, emphasizing the need for protection and safeguarding through ad-hoc protocols, rather than recognising and supporting their right to gender self-determination (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Ingrey, 2018).

Moreover, even when schools implement anti-bullying and anti-aggression procedures, their effectiveness is often limited. As noted by Greytak et al. (2013), such policies may not always achieve their intended goals due to a lack of meaningful student involvement and a top-down approach that fails to adequately address the specific needs of the students they are designed to protect (Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018).

The literature extensively documents the prevalence of aggression and bullying experienced by trans* students within school settings (Johnson et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2020). Peer-to-peer aggression, concerning physical violence, gossip, verbal abuse, and outings, frequently occurs in spaces with limited adult supervision, including physical spaces like corridors, bathrooms, and changing rooms, as well as online platforms. Furthermore, trans* youths are subjected to unique forms of aggression, including *deadnaming* (using their birth name) and *misgendering* (using pronouns or language that does not align with their gender identity), perpetrated by both peers and teachers (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2023).

A significant factor contributing to this issue is the lack of adequate training for school staff, particularly teachers, on gender identity and trans* subjects. This lack of knowledge often reinforces a binary and essentialist understanding of gender, frequently conflating it with sexual orientation, and poses significant challenges for trans* pupils in navigating the school environment (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021; McBride et al., 2020). Moreover, many teachers do not critically reflect on their educational practices and may inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases. The lack of trained teachers can manifest in various ways, such as reinforcing gender segregation in classroom activities and failing to acknowledge or address the specific needs and experiences of trans* students. Furthermore, teachers may – intentionally or unintentionally – perpetuate cisgenderist and transphobic biases through their words and actions (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; McBride et al., 2020; O'Flynn, 2016; Phipps & Blackall, 2023).

Additionally, when teachers lack accurate and up-to-date information about trans* and nonbinary identities, they may place the emotional burden of education on trans* students. This can manifest in situations where students are expected to educate teachers and peers about their gender identities, often at the expense of their privacy and well-being. As Paechter et al. (2021) observe,

> Respondents were all vociferous about the need to educate teachers, parents and other students about non-binary identities and what they meant. Having had to educate themselves about gender, some of them were then having to teach their families and even school staff. This made it much harder for them to come out, as they were never sure that someone would understand them. It also meant that their basic needs could be ignored, or that staff would not stop problematic behaviour because they failed to realise that it constituted bullying or discrimination. (p. 708)

The analysis reveals that many schools create hostile, exclusionary, and, in some cases, openly transphobic environments for trans* pupils (Francis, 2024; Johnson et al., 2014; Van Asselt, 2019; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023). This perceived or actual hostility can have a significant negative impact on students' self-acceptance, academic performance, and overall well-being, potentially leading to increased rates of school dropout (Johnson et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2020).

3.2 Resisting cisnormativity

The second theme highlights the agency demonstrated by trans* students within the school environment. Analysis revealed diverse forms of resistance, which can be categorised into two interconnected dimensions: the personal and the public. At the personal level, self-education plays a crucial role. Gaining access to online resources empowers trans* adolescents by providing them with vital information and language to understand and articulate their gender identities. As McBride and Neary (2021) note,

> For many trans youth, self-educating online gave them access to vital knowledge that enabled them to better understand their gender identity and name their experience as well as providing them with the terminology with which to express their identity and explain their needs and rights to others. (p. 1097)

This process of self-discovery often involves a gradual process of coming out, which may include utilising various disclosure negotiation strategies, such as social media and humour, to express their gender identities to others (Bower-Brown et al., 2021).

Within the academic literature, coming out is recognised as a significant act of self-determination that challenges cisnormative assumptions and alters the prevailing gender dynamics within school contexts. As Francis (2023) states, "[i]n school contexts where cisnormativity goes unquestioned, the participant's identification as transgender or non-binary is itself a significant act of resistance against cisnormative power structures" (p. 694). Furthermore, coming out can serve as a catalyst for other forms of resistance within the school environment. These may include informal educational initiatives, where trans* students utilise their own experience to educate peers and teachers about gender identity, or interventions to challenge the invisibility of trans* subjects within classroom discourse (McBride & Neary, 2021). This process of education fosters a connection between pedagogical and political agency. As McBride and Neary (2021) observe,

> Trans youth felt that by engaging in educative dialogue they could shift knowledge, attitudes and intentions within their school. Mobilising their lived experience to provide a deeper understanding of trans identities, trans youth challenged cisnormative assumptions and motivations among peers and educators. Some trans youth were enthusiastic advocates and derived a sense of purpose from educating others. (p. 1098)

The desire to effect positive change within the school environment, defend oneself and one's LGBTQIA+ friendships, and build a supportive community among trans* youths also motivate engagement in activism (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2018).

Another significant form of resistance identified by McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) involves the strategic use of pronouns. By using neutral pronouns, intentionally shifting their usage within conversations, or refusing to adopt gendered pronouns, students challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of the cis-heteronormative system, highlighting the fluidity and diversity of gender identities. As the authors argue, it "illustrates the parody of heteronorms and thus 'troubles' the heteronormative matrix by exposing taken-for-granted gender binaries and heteronormative understandings of sex– gender–sexuality" (p. 247).

Additionally, planned strategies of resistance can be found, such as challenging cisnormative practices like the binary division of bathrooms and uniform regulations, countering discrimination, and creating supportive LGBTQIA+ spaces within the school environment (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Francis, 2023, 2024; Jones et al.,

2016; McBride & Neary, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Notably, founding and/or participating in LGBTQIA+ groups within school emerges as a significant form of collective resistance against cisnormativity. These groups provide a space for visibility, promote recognition of trans* adolescents, and contribute to improve quality of life both within and beyond the school environment (Jones et al., 2016).

Furthermore, in the face of aggression, exclusion, or delegitimization, these students often employ cognitive restructuring strategies to cope with negative experiences. These strategies involve re-framing and re-interpreting negative situations to minimize their impact and maintain their well-being (Bower-Brown et al., 2021).

It is crucial to acknowledge that resisting educational cisnormativity and navigating gender-based oppression within the school doesn't come without its costs. These acts of resistance, while essential for survival and well-being, can also increase the visibility of trans* students, potentially making them more vulnerable to further discrimination. Then, these strategies should be understood as processual renegotiated survival tactics that emerge in dialogue with the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the school context (McBride & Neary, 2021).

3.3 Schools as transformative agencies

This systematic review highlights not only the challenges faced by trans* students but also identifies positive educational experiences and the potential roles schools can play to create more supportive environments for these youths.

Improving trans* pupils' school life requires comprehensive staff training, particularly for teachers (Johnson et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021). This training should focus on deconstructing essentialist, biological, and binary understandings of gender identities (Francis, 2024; Phipps & Blackall, 2023) and equipping educators and school staff with up-to-date knowledge, non-discriminatory language, and trans-affirmative pedagogical approaches. As Evans and Rawlings (2021) state,

> Educators require current knowledge about terminology to describe gender diversity and need to feel comfortable in using this in discussions with students. All staff members should be provided with the skills to have meaningful relationships and to engage in constructive dialogue with transgender and gender diverse students. Resources provided in classes should not only reflect the diversity seen within the students, but aim to resist the presumption of heterosexuality and cisnormativity of students. (p. 1504)

A critical aspect of fostering an equitable school environment involves adopting a pedagogical approach that acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of gender identities and challenges the cisgenderist assumptions within the teacher-student relationship. By moving beyond static and essentialist understandings of gender, educators can create a learning environment that respects the diverse experiences and identities of all students (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). This approach asks teachers to critically examine their own biases and how their teaching practices may inadvertently reinforce cisnormative beliefs. By engaging in critical self-reflection and adopting an anti-oppressive framework, teachers can begin to dismantle the cisgendered norms that pervade the educational system (Francis, 2024).

Furthermore, teacher training equips educators with essential relational skills, such as active listening, respecting chosen names and pronouns, and intervening effectively in cases of aggression, enabling them to provide crucial support to trans* students (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Evans & Rawlings, 2021; McBride et al., 2020).

Perceiving acceptance, recognition, and support from one or more teachers can significantly facilitate the coming-out process by reducing anxiety and fear associated with self-disclosure (Johnson et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2020). Maintaining confidentiality and respecting student's privacy is paramount in building trust and fostering a supportive relationship between teacher and learner (Evans & Rawlings, 2021). Additionally, supportive educators and school staff can play a pivotal role in assisting students, with their consent, in navigating the coming-out process with family members, other teachers, or classmates (Paechter et al., 2021).

The quality of the school experience for trans* pupils is significantly influenced by positive peer relationships, particularly friendships. The scholarly literature emphasises the crucial role of peer support networks in providing a safer and affirming environment. Friendships offer valuable resources, including a shared vocabulary for exploring and expressing gender identity, opportunities for self-disclosure and emotional support, and a sense of belonging and validation. Furthermore, peer groups offer help in challenging misgendering and addressing instances of transphobia within the school environment (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Paechter et al., 2021; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023).

In addition to fostering positive educational and interpersonal relationships, the systematic review stresses the necessity for schools to adopt a multi-level approach to creating a more welcoming and affirming environment for trans* youths. This demands a shift towards a "gender complex" (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 428) pedagogical culture that actively challenges cisnormativity and proactively addresses the needs of trans* students (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2023).

As Francis and Monakali (2021) argue, a queer and anti-oppressive pedagogical framework is essential for this transformation. Such a framework

> is insistent on questioning the ideas that shape the construction of identity (gender) and asks how pedagogy might critique its own ignorance about gender. [...] Approaching cisnormativity as constructed, fragile and unstable unsettles the status of 'normalcy' that is often accorded to these identities. (Francis & Monakali, 2021, p. 727)

This shift in perspective necessitates moving away from pathologizing discourses that focus on risk and vulnerability towards a more affirmative approach that celebrates the diversity of trans* lives. This requires cultivating a gender ethos that actively prioritises principles of gender self-determination, support, and validation (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021).

The literature also emphasises revising educational materials and curricula to incorporate positive representations of gender diversity. This includes integrating knowledge that addresses the complexity of gender from an affirmative perspective and avoiding pathologizing narratives about trans* existences (Francis & Monakali, 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023)

Including LGBTQIA+ topics in the curriculum has been shown to have positive impacts on the self-esteem, sense of belonging, and academic engagement of trans* students. Moreover, such equitable curricula can foster a more supportive learning environment for all learners by promoting respect and understanding of diverse gender identities (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Finally, the literature suggests that fostering strong community partnerships is crucial for creating a more equitable school environment. Educational institutions can collaborate with local LGBTQIA+ organisations and community resources to provide training for school staff, students, and families on issues related to gender identity and sexuality (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021). These partnerships can also facilitate valuable

dialogue between schools, families, trans* pupils, and community organisations to address the unique challenges and needs of these students (McBride & Schubotz, 2017).

3.4 Multiple trans* identities

The fourth theme, while less extensively explored in the literature, emphasises the diverse experiences, needs, and understandings of trans* identities among students. Trans* identities are expressed by adopting a wide range of terms, including genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, trans, bigender, and questioning, and are deeply intertwined with individual biographical and social experiences (Jones et al., 2016; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Paechter et al., 2021). As Paechter et al. note in their research with nonbinary learners,

> All of our respondents identified as non-binary in some way, though this might mean different things to different people. For some it denoted a definite move beyond the binary to something specifically different, while for others it simply reflected a feeling of not being either male or female. The term 'non-binary' could also just be a convenient and relatively easily recognised label for a more complex identity [...], or an unwillingness to accept gender at all [...] Being trans was seen as something at least partly independent of being non-binary, and for some was related to dysphoria. (2021, p. 699)

The literature suggests the necessity to recognise the intersectional nature of trans* lives, acknowledging that these identities intersect with other social and personal trajectories. This intersectionality shapes the unique educational experiences of each student (Jones et al., 2016; McBride et al., 2020; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). At this respect, McBride et al. (2020) highlight the unique and significant challenges faced by trans* girls in the school environment. At school, trans* girls face high rates of prejudice and discrimination, such as being denied to wear skirts as part of their school uniforms, and access to restrooms consistent with their gender.

Moreover, nonbinary students often face difficulties due to a lack of understanding of nonbinary identities among school staff, including the misuse and disrespect of gender-neutral pronouns.

The literature shows the limitations of rigid gender categories and the importance of recognising the diverse and fluid nature of gender identities. It highlights the gap between the labels used to describe gender and the lived experiences and self-determination of trans* students, including linguistic self-expression. The systematic review suggests schools acknowledge the diverse educational path and needs of each trans* student, and strive to create an affirming environment that respects and supports their gender identities (Jones et al., 2016).

4. Conclusions

This systematic review emphasises the complex and often contradictory relationship between trans* students and schools.

Findings indicate that schools are frequently characterised by a pervasive cisnormativity, creating significant and multifaceted challenges for these students. Cisnormativity manifests in various forms, including gender-segregated educational practices, absent or inadequate training for school staff, limited access to school facilities (e.g., restrooms and changing rooms), exposure to transphobic violence and discrimination, and the maintenance of harmful cisgenderist assumptions through a widespread school culture (Francis, 2024; Francis & Monakali, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Vicars & Wolfe, 2023).

The analysis highlights that tackling the challenges faced by trans* pupils demands a systemic approach. Indeed, these issues cannot be addressed through individual interventions alone, as they are rooted in broader societal

and institutional structures of power. As Miller et al. aptly state: "The issues trans youth face in educational settings are political problems, not problems that are intrinsic to their identities" (2018, p. 348).

In this context, the resistance strategies adopted by trans* students offer a more complex and nuanced understanding of their school experiences, showing the active role they play in affirming their needs and exposing the cisnormative school culture (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Francis, 2023, 2024; Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Neary, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). The engagement in fighting for their rights also critics a widespread victim narrative, which depicts trans* students as passive individuals, unable to act against discrimination (Horton, 2020; Shelton & Lester, 2018; Singh et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the review highlights the need for proactive and anticipating measures to support the well-being of trans* pupils, without waiting for a case of transphobic violence or coming out to occur (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021). Schools have to proactively challenge their cisnormative structure and cultivate a gender-welcoming and affirming learning environment. This process requires a systemic shift towards a more equitable and gender-complex educational system (Phipps & Blackall, 2023) that prioritises gender self-determination and recognition of the unique needs and experiences of trans* students and their peers (Francis & Monakali, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Note

1. In this paper, I use the term 'trans*' as an umbrella term referring to individuals whose gender identity and/or expression differs from the gender they were assigned at birth (Halberstam, 2018), while 'cisgender' refers to those who are comfortable with their gender assigned at birth.

2. TGEU is a non-profit organisation led by trans* people for the rights and well-being of trans* population in Europe and Central Asia.

3. Cisnormativity refers to the social hierarchy that privileges cisgender individuals over trans* people (Simmons & White, 2014). It is rooted on an essentialist, biologist, and binary understanding of gender, which assumes that gender is fixed, immutable, and inherently aligned with the sex assigned at birth. This idea, termed cisgenderism, results in the systematic erasure of trans* people at both socio-cultural and epistemological levels (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Kennedy, 2013).

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