



# **Power in the Classroom:**

## Questioning the Heterosexual Norm in Italian Gender Education

Monica Porzionato  
2014-2016

Main Supervisor

Prof. Rosemarie Buikema  
Department of Gender Studies  
Utrecht University

Second Reader

Dr. Dorottya Redai  
Department of Gender Studies  
Central European University



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## *Abstract*

This thesis analyses how in Italy in the first months of 2014 the introduction of a series of pedagogical programs aimed at sensitizing children on gender and sexuality has resulted in a rapidly growing body of discourses that, both explicitly and implicitly, aim at maintaining the heterosexual norm. By deconstructing the Italian debate on education, this thesis demonstrates how the students' identity within the institution of the school is constantly monitored and regulated through normative discourses on gender and sexuality. It then reflects on the potential and duty of the school in fighting gender and sexual inequalities. In doing so, this thesis proposes a pedagogy that argues for a teaching of critical and reflexive understandings of social discriminations as crucial in aiming to overcome them, both within and outside the school system.

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## Introduction

When I started my master in Gender Studies, people I knew would curiously ask me what gender was and what exactly you study in such master. The Italian word 'genere' was also uncommon to hear in both the political and the social realm, remaining circumscribed within those few academic courses within Italian universities offered among bachelor, master and Ph.D. programs that adopted a gender perspective. In Italian schools children and adolescent most often do not receive any kind of sexual education and in Italian politics an awareness on the question of 'gender' flourished only in response of European Union's reprimands for gender equality policies. Therefore, when I left Italy to study gender studies in August 2014, it was difficult to explain the real focus of this field of study and I would find myself often minimizing it as the study of how women's and men's behavior evolved through times.

However, around the end of the same year, Italy saw the spread of a debate on the introduction of some educative programs about gender in primary and secondary schools and, as a result, more and more often the word 'gender' entered the public discourse through newspaper articles, television news and political speeches. Nevertheless, this term gained quite a negative connotation in Italian debate on education since frequently media would associate the study of gender in the school to a dangerous ideology able to unhinge the bases of Italian society and hurt children's natural sensibility. Worried voices arrived from Italian newspapers and blogs where the word 'gender' was portrayed as a foreign enemy ready to threaten the morality of Italian schools through indecent and unmoral discourses. Following the debate from abroad and having gained extensive knowledge throughout my masters, I realized I was having the right tools to understand what was happening in my country and to ground to academic theories the different discourses I was reading and hearing from Italy. Especially, I was able to form my point of view about them. This is why I decided to write a thesis about the debate that arose in Italy on education, because I wanted to share these tools I gained and

allow other people in Italy to create an opinion about it. Of course, I do not pretend to provide any exclusive answer, neither I pretend people to arrive to my same conclusions. However, with this thesis I provide my reading of a debate with the hope that it will contribute to the development of others, more inspiring, exchanges of knowledge.

This thesis is about gender and sexuality and how these two concepts have been framed within a debate on education that spread in Italy between 2014 and 2016. Specifically, it intends to analyze the ways in which both parties of the debate – which throughout this work I call ‘anti-’ and ‘pro-gender’ – through different conceptions of what gender and sexuality are and how they should enter the pedagogical curriculum, maintain and reaffirm heteronormativity as social system of power based on sexual and affective relations between women and men. In fact, by critically deconstructing the bases of their discourses, in this work the main argument that I propose is that the debate on gender education in Italy barely scratches the heteronormative societal system, as both parties, explicitly or not, fail to envision the potential and duty the school has in fighting gender and sexual inequalities. The main question I ask is:

How is heteronormativity maintained and reproduced through discourses concerning how gender and sexuality should be discussed in the Italian school system?

In order to answer this question, I propose other sub-questions such as: How is the sexual and gender identity of the child perceived within the school? Does the school as a public institution have a role in reaffirming and maintaining the heterosexual norm? What does it mean to teach sexual discrimination and gender violence in non-discriminatory ways?

This thesis makes three main theoretical steps: firstly, from the exploration of anti-gender discourses against the introduction of gender education in the schools (Cf. Irvine 2002) I demonstrate that the school is an over-sexualized place in which students’ gender and sexual identity are constantly regulated and monitored (Cf.



Allen 2005, 2007; Kehily 2002; Pascoe 2007). Secondly, from pro-gender education discourse I reflect on what identity is (Braidotti 2006, 2011; Butler 1997, 2005) and what social inequalities are (Ferguson 2000; Hardie & Tyson 2013). Thirdly, and lastly, I propose a selection of ways in which sexual and gender identity should be perceived, approached and taught within a pedagogical project in order to make the school a place in which sexual and gender discriminations are not only repressed but also truly understood in their structural nature (Gilbert 2014; hooks 1994). In sum, after focusing on how the school is the place in which normative conceptions of sexuality and gender are constituted, I reflect on how it is possible to educate on differences and inequalities without re-producing normative and unequal standpoints.

Specifically, chapter 1 describes chronologically the main events of the Italian debate on gender education, focusing especially on Catholic conservative responses. In order to present the Italian debate, what it presupposes and its political and cultural effects, this chapter asks questions like: Where does the anti-gender debate arise from? How and why was it able to develop in Italy? Who are its main actors?

In chapter 2 I read anti-gender discourses through the lens of 'moral sex panic' (Rubin 1984; Weeks 1981, 1985, 1995) and I demonstrate that anti-gender rhetoric, through the making of the child as innocently a-sexual and the school as an a-sexual place, is able to spread conservative, homophobic and anti-democratic values throughout the Italian national territory (Irvine 2002, 2008). By firstly proving the public aspect of sexuality as regulated through social institutions (Foucault 1972, 1980, 1990) such as the one of the school (Allen 2005, 2007; Kehily 2002; Pascoe 2007), my point is to underline the relation between conservative and essentialist visions of gender and sexuality and anti-gender discourses.

In chapter 3 I expose the main argument of those who believe in the positivity of introducing gender education in the schools, namely the fact that the school should be the place in which 'different' sexual and gender identities are included and respected. In particular, starting from what pro-gender perceive gender and sexuality to be, I reflect on human sexual and gender identity (Braidotti 2006, 2011; Butler 1990, 1997, 2004, 2005), and on the possible visions of social inequalities and discrimination derived by it (Ferguson 2000; Hardie & Tyson 2013).

In chapter 4 I suggest a queer approach to sexual and gender education to explore how sexual practices and discourses constitute masculinities and femininities in heteronormative ways within the classroom, the relations of power they presuppose and the different subject positions that embody them (Gilbert 2014; Pascoe 2007). Moreover, through a reconsideration of the role of the teacher and of education (Gilbert 2014; hooks 1994), I underline the potential of a feminist, holistic gender pedagogy which aims not only at expanding students' knowledge about gender, sexuality and other axes of social signification, but also to offer them the tools to critically understand how these axes work and how everyone can contribute to de-construct them (Gamberi *et. al.* 2010).

## Theoretical Backgrounds and Methodology

In this chapter I highlight the theoretical backgrounds of my research. The three main fields of scholarship my work intersects are: the discursive formation of sexual and gender subjectivities; the school as heteronormative institution; the critical analysis of pedagogy as a tool for teaching social inequalities and discriminations. The particularity of my work lies in connecting these three scholarships within the context of an Italian debate over education.

### Fields of Scholarship

#### *1. The discursive formation of sexual and gender subjectivities*

This thesis follows a social constructionist perspective which states that subjectivities are constantly constituted within and through the culture they inhabit. In fact, differently from the Cartesian notion of selfhood that wants the subject to believe in his/her own transcendental peculiarity, rationality and universality (i.e. to think that human beings have some sort of 'inner self' which determines in total who we are), the so-called post-structuralist subject (see e.g. Derrida 1976; Foucault 1990 [1976]; Lacan 1968) is thought to be subjected to the language and the culture s/he is born into and the reality s/he perceives depends on the way s/he looks at it and gives meaning to it. In other words, post-modern thinkers around the end of the 1960s challenge the assumption that a subject exists in transcendence before entering the world s/he inhabits, and rather affirm that subjects are not autonomous and fully finished entities able to create themselves and the world around them. Instead, they are constituted in and through this complex network of social relations. "Nothing has any meaning outside of discourse" affirms Michel Foucault (1972: 32), who believed that the social subject is created through 'discursive practices', different in every society and exercised by institutions through forms of *governmentality* (Cf. Foucault 1980, 1990).

In this thesis I rely on Foucault's work on sexuality (1990), in which he demonstrates that rather than just being a personal characteristic or an intimate relation, sexuality is instead constructed and regulated by forms of institutional power that embeds it in a hierarchy wherein certain sexualities are considered normal in comparison to others, which, in return, are perceived as deviant. In particular, Foucault's analysis of the discourse of sexuality underlines the fact that, even if mostly silenced and invisible, sexuality is a constantly public part of social life. Following Foucault, Judith Butler (1990, 1997, 2004) claims that gender is not only a property of individuals, some sort of transcendental aspect of identity, but is especially discursively constituted in the social and cultural realm the body is embedded in; it is both present as irrefutable characteristic and comprehensible through the social institutions and signs which give the sexual body its cultural meanings. As Butler writes (1997:144):

[G]ender is performative, by which I meant that no gender is "expressed" by actions, gestures, or speech, but that the performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion that there is an inner gender core. That is, the performance of gender retroactively produces the effect of some true or abiding feminine essence or disposition, so that one cannot use an expressive model for thinking about gender. Moreover, I argued that gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions, and that this ritual is socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality.

Thus, for Foucault and Butler subjectivities do not exist prior to discourse but come to be performed inside of the complex net of symbolic, semiotic and material power relations in a given society. Following these lines of thought, in this thesis I consider gender and sexuality as two aspects of human identity which are culturally shaped and constituted within specific social environments where different identities are placed in a hierarchical societal system of power.

## *2. School as heteronormative place and social inequalities*

As already stated above, social institutions are implicated in both the constituting processes of sexuality and the reproduction of sexual identities through forms of

disciplinary power (Cf. Foucault 1990). In particular, according to Youdell (2006: 59) the school is defined by “technologies of hierarchical observation, classification, examination, normalization, surveillance and self-surveillance” which constitute the students and teachers who populate it. In this way, the classroom becomes not only the place where students receive formal education (like math, history or linguistics) but also where young people’s subjectivities are constituted through the symbolical and material valorization of hegemonic discourses and practices (see e.g. Allen 2005, 2007; Bourdieu 1977, 1992; Foucault 1980; Kehily 2002; Redai 2015; Youdell 2005, 2006). Therefore, the school itself can be perceived as an institution in which the reproduction of inequalities and discriminations based on gender or sexuality derives from the ways these concepts are talked about and constantly regulated through teachers and students’ valorizations of some sexual identities over others.

In this thesis I rely principally on the work of a number of scholars who work at the intersection of schooling, gender and sexuality, including C.J. Pascoe (2007), Louisa Allen (2005, 2007), and Mary Jane Kehily (2002). In particular, in her book *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (2007) Pascoe demonstrates that the school is a hyper sexualized space in which students’ gender identities are shaped and influenced by their peers’ normative understandings, and where subjectivity’s constitution is consequential to the maintenance of social inequalities. In fact, the author shows how the boys’ usage of the word ‘fag’ legitimizes and regulates what a boy is and how he should behave. Furthermore, relying on Butler theory of the “heterosexual matrix” (1990), Pascoe underlines how gender roles are also hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality, therefore how the regulation of gender performances is strictly connected to the regulation of some sexualities over others. Similarly, Allen (2005, 2007) and Kehily (2002) show that the school is not only where boys and girls are discursively constituted in their gender identity according to normative considerations of what a boy or a girl should look and be like, but also that the school is a site for the production of heteronormative subjectivities since, as Kehily (2002: 49) writes, “[w]ithin the context of the school [...] the pervasive presence of heterosexuality as an ‘ideal’ and a practice mark[s] out the terrain for the production of gendered and sexualized identities.” According to Pascoe (2007: 57) then, schools

have an unofficial sexual culture that is perpetuated through what she calls “informal sexuality curriculum [in which] [s]chool relations are organized around the assumption that heterosexuality is the ‘natural order of things’.”

In this thesis I rely on these understandings of gender and sexuality within the school as constantly monitored and regulated for them to resemble normative conceptions of identity in order to compare both anti- and pro-gender discourses about gender education. In particular, to underline the limits and the potentials of pro-gender discourses I rely on Rosi Braidotti’s theory of the “nomadic subject” (2006, 2011) and Butler’s theory of the subject’s formation (2005), and I briefly reflect on what gender and sexual identity are and what are the results of pro-gender tendency to naturalize and fix students identities in pedagogical settings.

Braidotti’s theory of the nomadic subject affirms that to move out from the dialectical thinking and reject identity as a implicit presuppose of someone’s subjectivity, we need to “identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming” and that a nomadic subject is “both an analytical tool and a creative project aimed at [this] qualitative shift of consciousness” (2011:11). In fact, the subject for Braidotti is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather it is “the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, determined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyles, and sexual preference” (25). The human being is therefore complex and in continuous becoming towards a state of “affirmative responsibility” (Cf. Braidotti 2006). Similarly, Butler’s perception of the human subject is based on the belief that identity, through the performance of certain acts, comes to be perceived as fixed and natural, while it is rather a process of ‘doing’ identity than a personal property of individuals (1990, 1993, 2004, 2005). In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Butler reflects on the ways human identity comes into being through its relations with others, as human beings are constantly caught between the necessity of being addressed and the risk of being stuck within the terms of that address itself. As she states (40):

My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definite story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are

always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do?

Similar to what both Braidotti and Butler affirm, in this thesis I briefly reflect on the impossibility to determine our identity once and for all, and to the potential this impossibility may have for pedagogical purposes. In particular, I link these understandings of identity as relational, both as stable identification and as fluid potentiality, to a reflection on the tendency to perceive social inequalities and discriminations as derived from individuals' shortcomings (rather than structural consequences of an unequal distribution of power) and, especially, to a reflection on the best ways to approach them within a pedagogical effort.

### *3. Pedagogy of inequalities*

In their study on racial discrimination in a North American high-school, Hardie and Tyson (2013) noticed that racism has been dismissed by teachers as an anomaly introduced by a specific group of people perceived as 'racists' by the rest of the school population and concluded that this way of perceiving racism in terms of individuals (some people are racists while others are not) draw "the attention away from and helped mask racist structures within the school" (84). They call this tendency a 'color-blind pedagogical approach' which "guarantees that the structures from which racial tensions arose will remain in place and that the wounds inflicted from such practices will continue to fester" (99). In other words, Hardie and Tyson suggest that to perceive racial discrimination as an individual act ignores the social structures of power which create race dynamics in the first place. Similarly, in her book *Bad boys. Public schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2000) Ann Arnett Ferguson shows how African American boys are often taught "to learn not to talk back" and learn how "to not confront with power", meaning that they are taught how to behave like white boys in order not to get into trouble outside and inside the school. As she points out, in this way instead of allowing black boys to understand racism in order to be able to gain the tools to protect themselves from it (i.e. to teach the social aspect of racial discrimination at the core of individual racial

actions), this pedagogical effort teaches them “to endure humiliation in preparation for future enactments of submission” (87).

On the contrary, relying on Ki Namaste’s article *The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality* (1994) I use the theoretical concept of ‘*queer*’ in the realm of sexuality in order to shift the terms of the discussion from a focus on sexual and gender discriminated subjects to one on gender and sexual normative identities. Indeed, *queer* as an analytical tool aims at focusing not merely on the construction of ‘the deviant’ and ‘the sexual other’ but on sexuality as a whole and, in particular, on the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexuals as the norm. In this way, then, in education a queer approach to sexuality and gender can help to shift our focus from social inequalities seen as individual shortcomings against ‘the oppressed’ to the ways in which practices and discourses within the school constitute identities as either normative or oppressed in the first place, the relations of power they presuppose and the different subject positions that embody them (Cf. Pascoe 2007).

## Main Concepts

### *Discourse and power*

I conceive discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term (1990, 2014), therefore as a system through which power circulates in the form of knowledge and that has the potential of casting subjectivities into pre-determined forms. Moreover, I consider the discursive way through which a society monitors and regulates its individuals as the same mechanism which consequently constructs identities as embodied in hierarchical power relations.

### *Sexuality, gender and sexual orientation.*

In this thesis the term sexuality is often used to conceive both biological, chromosomal and anatomical sex and sexual orientation, desires and passions, or



the combination of both. In particular, I refer to people's sexual orientation as people's sexuality when I refer to the directions taken by their sexual desires and affections (as two not necessarily correlated aspects) while, if I specifically want to refer to the biological and anatomical part of people's body I write 'sex' or 'biological sex'.

Gender is considered both as role (performing masculinity or femininity) and as hierarchical organization of power in which the roles acquire different social, political and economic positions (Cf. Butler 1990, 1993, 2004). Therefore, following a social constructionist approach, this work takes into account the production of gendered selves, the cultural expectations of the performance of gender and the structure of power that regulates gender identities.

### *Sexual and gender education*

Throughout the whole thesis I often consider sexual and gender education as synonyms. The reason lies in a paradox at the core of Italian debate: while rarely any pro-gender advisors publicly spoke about a 'sexual education', calling it instead 'gender education' or 'affective education' or 'gender and sexuality education', the anti-gender propaganda most often referred to these pedagogical efforts as 'sexuality education'. Thus, even though it is not fully appropriate to refer to a 'sexuality education' in that the majority of the Italian educational projects proposed have as main goal to fight *gender* stereotypes and inequalities, in this work I prefer to use interchangeably the terms 'gender education' and 'gender and sexuality education' and include both points of views.

### *Culture/Nature Debate on Subjectivity*

I am aware of a possible critique in my reflection on identity. In fact, it can seem that I am arguing for a vision of identity as fully cultural and permanently 'in becoming', in this way undermining both the psychoanalytic feminist considerations on the unconscious link between sexuality and subjectivity and the potential of affirming

identity, especially for political purposes. It urges me to clarify that in this thesis I am not arguing that sexuality and gender are *completely* cultural constructions rather than natural ones, since I do not think that there is a clear line to draw between culture and nature, and my point is exactly to overcome this strict dualism. In fact, I believe that no matter the line we decide to draw where, what is important to underline are the consequences derived from the tendency to 'fix' sexual and gender identity whenever we are framing it in a pedagogical effort. In other words, to claim the sexual and gendered characteristics of an identity as if they are fixed and ahistorical (e.g. to claim being a lesbian since I always felt attracted to other women), beside its unquestionable political power means to perceive human beings as having 'naturally different' sexualities and, as a result, to firstly perceive young people as 'normative or non-normative', and secondly to teach that inequalities depend of the ways individuals interact with each other. Therefore, because of the impossibility to state clear boundaries between what is cultural and what is natural about someone's subjectivity, to fix a particular aspect of our identity once and for all (sexuality, for example) has both the potential of politically recognizing subjects positions within society but also the limitation of perceiving human being as essentially casts into homogenous essences of unchangeably natural subjectivities (we are either heterosexual or homosexuals, transsexuals etc.), a risk that in education brings objective consequences (e.g. to re-propose inequalities and to see them as individual shortcomings) (Cf. Allen 2005, 2007; Gilbert 2014; Pascoe 2007; Redai 2015; Youdell 2005, 2006).

### *Intersectionality and social inequalities*

Even though in this work I mainly look at gender and sexuality as two aspects of identity, I am conscious of the impossibility of referring to them without also considering other axes of signification such as class, race, age, ability, ethnicity, religiosity (Cf. Crenshaw 1994). Hence, whenever I write the term 'social inequalities' or 'social discriminations' I refer to the broader conception of them as derived by more variables than just sexuality and gender. Whenever I instead just want to refer to the latter, I write specifically gender and sexuality discriminations or inequalities.

## *School system, pedagogy and education in Italy*

The particularity of the Italian school system is underlined several times throughout the thesis, especially thanks to Yadad de Guerre's impeccable report on the interconnections between the State and the Catholic Church in Italy.<sup>1</sup> The extensive influence the Roman Catholic Church has on the Italian educational system is not only perceived by their strong opposition to gender education but, on a daily basis, through the presence of religious symbols in the classrooms, its control of television channels and newspapers, and its occurrence in political and economic governmental decisions.

In this work I focus on Italian primary and secondary schools and, therefore, for 'young people' or 'youth' I imply individuals aged between 6 and 19 years old.

## Methodology

In order to collect materials for this thesis, from February 2014 to February 2016 I looked at approximately 140 texts (both traditional and new media sources such as newspapers, blogs, interviews, books and printed articles) in which both pro- and anti-gender points of view were expressed. In particular, two moments have been constructive for the collections of my data: at the beginning of 2016, the journal *AboutGender*,<sup>2</sup> one of the first international journals of gender studies in Italy, organized a series of meetings at Palazzo Ducale in Genoa where progressive and feminist exponents were invited to express their points of views and concerns about the Italian debate over education. In that occasion, thanks to a direct contact with the organizers, I was able to gather precious impressions and information through recorded tapes and Skype conversations with some of the members of *AboutGender's* editorial board. Another important moment for the collection of data was when in April 2016 the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation organized at Utrecht University a spring conference in which many Italian students and scholars were invited to talk about the current debate on

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://playingthegendercard.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.aboutgender.unige.it](http://www.aboutgender.unige.it)

education. I participated at the conference and took notes of the interventions which predominantly analyzed anti-gender rhetoric and discourses.

In order to gather knowledge on the ways in which the school as public institution is at the core of the process of maintenance and defense of heteronormativity, I followed a course on “Gender and Sexuality in Compulsory Education” at Central European University in Budapest. There I was able to reflect and deeply immerse in an academic environment which provided me with the necessary tools to theoretically understand and analyze the Italian debate and, especially, to create my point of view about it. Once the course at CEU had finished, and the debate on education blurred into other political issues like gay marriage and stepchild adoptions, I decided to connect my thoughts into a research proposal in which I intended to analyze the limits and potentials of gender education for the maintenance or dismantling of heteronormativity.

Successively, through the methodological tool of ‘discourse analysis’ (Cf. Fairclough and Wodak 1997, Tonkiss 1998), I examined in terms of semiotic and sociolinguistic understandings of gender and sexuality the material I collected and the discourses both pro- and anti-gender conveyed. In fact, in the analysis of these materials I paid particular attention to their socio-political and cultural context and the ways in which both concepts were phrased, how they were used to either oppose or advocate for gender and sexuality education in the Italian school system and the relations of power they presupposed. Consequently, I grounded these discourses within some theoretical frameworks derived from two years of studies on theories of gender and sexuality, using specifically the materials collected through the course I followed at Central European University.

In creating this thesis, I situate myself as an Italian feminist student engaged in the understanding of patriarchal, neoliberal and sexist structures of power in western countries. This positioning influences my personal standpoint and shapes the way in which I approach theories, I conduct data analysis and I expose them throughout the whole document. In particular, being an Italian student who is receiving feminist education on issues of gender and sexuality from two foreign universities allows me to truly read and personally understand the various historical roots, cultural habits and social conducts which emerged in the Italian debate while

keeping a critical gaze upon them, grounded on Anglo-European and American academic theories. Being a feminist also played a role in the ways I form my opinions and I draw my conclusions, since it is only through perspectives on inequalities and discriminations derived from feminist standpoints that I consider theories to be really able to unfold power dynamics and change the unequal ways Western societies are structured. Finally, being white, being a lesbian, being able to talk and write in English, being part of the so-called middle-class, are all aspects that contribute in a way or in another to development of this thesis even though their effect I am, unfortunately, unable to grasp.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Chronology of the Italian Debate on Gender Education**

In this chapter I chronologically present the evolution of Catholic conservative responses to gender education in order to show that, rather than being a sporadic conservative reaction imbued with religious morality, as it may seem at first sight, anti-gender discourses are the result of a deep and long historical relation between the Roman Catholic Church, Italian policy and educational institutions. In fact, in Italy religiosity and secularism are not strictly separated and delineated to their own spaces, rather they often co-exist simultaneously within and outside public institutions. Examples among others are the presence of the crucified Christ in the classrooms of public schools, intrinsically secular, or the great influence the Church has in the regulation of Italian media.<sup>3</sup> According to Sara Garbagnoli, Ph.D. candidate at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne – École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, in countries with a strong Catholic influence like Italy and France “[t]he creation of a familiarization of the State based on a familiarization of the religious realm characterized, in the long term, the complex relations between Catholic Church and national State.”<sup>4</sup> As a result of its slow and synergetic influence within public social realms, the Catholic Church gains an influent position in social and political debates even though these are supposed to be free from religious impacts. It is thus for their deep historical and cultural roots inside Italian democratic social system that Catholic groups, traditionalist groups and extremist Italian right wing fringes are able to take a vivid position in the debate over education.<sup>5</sup> In order to have a better idea of the Italian contemporary debate, what it presupposes and its political and cultural effects, the questions I want to ask in this chapter are: Where does the anti-gender debate arise from? How and why was it able to develop

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. [playingthegendercard1](#)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. [euronomade.info](#) (Last visit April 29, 2016) Original text in Italian: “La creazione di un familialismo di Stato calcato sul familialismo ecclesiastico ha caratterizzato sul lungo periodo i complessi rapporti tra Chiesa cattolica e Stato nazionale (Cf. Lenoir 2003, Saraceno 2012).”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [playingthegendercard1](#) and Garbagnoli 2014.

in Italy? Who are its main actors? Following this purpose, in the next paragraphs I map the role of the term 'gender' in provoking Catholic reactions starting from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until now in order to contextualize the contemporary Italian debate on gender education.

### *"Gender" in Catholic discourses from 1990s to 2010s*

Between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s the Roman Catholic Church and its political forces mobilizes mainly in defense of heterosexual predominance over other forms of sexual orientations and relative political rights, leaving initially out of focus the question of 'gender' in the schools. However, religious' attention to the issue of 'gender' appears when at the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the term is described as a social and cultural construction based on individuals' own identification with a specific sexual body. As a reaction to this international development on the term 'gender', Dale O'Leary, an American member of the Opus Dei (institution of the Roman Catholic Church), writes a *pamphlet* called *Gender: The Deconstruction of Women* (1995) wherein she explains the dangerousness derived from an understanding of sex and gender as two separate entities in human identity, claiming instead for the naturalness of the dualistic relation between one's biological sex and her/his gender identity. With her writings O'Leary soon catches the Vatican's interest which, in September 15, 1995, publishes a *Declaration regarding the interpretation of the term «gender»* where it states that "the word 'gender' is interpreted by the Holy See as based on the biological sexual identity, masculine and feminine" and "excludes ambiguous interpretations based on worldwide perspectives, which affirms that such sexual identity could be adapted indefinitely in order to serve new and different aims."<sup>6</sup> Gender for the Holy See is therefore already present in the natural body and not strictly separable from it.

Following the same lines, in 2003 the Holy See publishes a document called

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) Last visit August 8th, 2016. (in Spanish) Original text: "La Santa Sede entiende el término «género» como fundado en una identidad biológico-sexual, varón y mujer. ... La Santa Sede excluye, así, interpretaciones dudosas basadas en concepciones muy difundidas, que afirman que la identidad sexual puede adaptarse indefinidamente, para acomodarse a nuevas y diferentes finalidades."

*Lexicon Termini ambigui e discussi su famiglia, vita e questioni etiche*,<sup>7</sup> (in English: *Ambiguous Terminology on family, life and ethics*) an encyclopedic dictionary with around ninety definitions on the questions of gender, sexuality and bioethics for the most part still inspired by O’Leary’s work and with the collaboration of two French conservatives, Xavier Lacroix and Tony Anatrella. In particular, Monsignor Tony Anatrella writes the introduction of the *Lexicon* titled «La théorie du genre comme un cheval de Troie» where he describes the peril of a “new ideology [which] is more oppressive and dangerous than Marxism [in that] it pretends that professions do not have a sex, that love does not depend from the attraction of men and women, that the masculine psychology is confused with the feminine one when, instead, from a psychological point of view, they are not the same psychical structures.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, relying on O’Leary’s essentialist theories, at the end of the 1990s the Catholic Church publicly highlights its positions on issues of gender identity which is that sex and gender are not only one consequent of the other, but especially naturally complementary in their opposition.

However, until the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Catholic Church and its political forces do not specifically manifest its alarm that progressive understandings of sexuality and gender would enter the Italian educational system, but instead remain more focused on other political issues such as abortion, gay marriage and stepchild adoption. Indeed, in 2005 relevant Catholic associations linked to the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) like Azione Cattolica (*Catholic Action*), Movimento Cristiani Lavoratori (*Christian Working Movement*), Forum delle Famiglie (*Families’ Forum*) e Comunione e Liberazione (*Liberation and Communion*) create the association *Scienza & Vita* (*Science & Life*) with the goal to contrast feminist demands of sexual rights and those political requests for equality by LGBTQI communities.<sup>9</sup> The president of the newborn association is Massimo Gandolfini, neuropsychiatrist and president of the Association Catholic Italian Doctors (AMCI) of the Lombardia region. Later in the same year, *Scienza & Vita* publishes a document

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Garbagnoli (2014:254). Original text in Italian: “i mestieri non abbiano sesso, che l'amore non dipenda dall'attrazione tra uomini e donne, che la psicologia maschile si confonda con la psicologia femminile, laddove da un punto di vista psicologico non si tratta delle stesse strutture psichiche”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. [playingthegendercard1](#)



in which appears the only article written in Italian by O’Leary with the title “Maschi e Femmine?”, together with two books on homosexuality written by Xavier Lacroix and Joseph Nicolosi called *Oltre l’omosessualità* (in English *Beyond Homosexuality*).<sup>10</sup> On May 12, 2007, *Scienza & Vita* is among the organizers of the first Italian ‘Family Day’ in Rome with the slogan “Più famiglia. Ciò che è bene per la famiglia è bene per la società” (In English: *More Family. What is good for family is good for society*), in which the ‘traditional’ heterosexual family is defended against the political bill known as “DICO” *Diritti e doveri delle persone stabilmente conviventi* (in English: *Rights and duties of stable co-habitants*), which aims at legally recognizing homosexual and heterosexual stable cohabitation outside of marriage. However, as stated above, in the first ‘Family Day’ the word ‘gender’ is not yet part of the conservatives’ vocabulary since the term is still a latent notion which is more present in European and international environments and not yet undermining Italian society (Cf. Garbagnoli 2014).

It is at the beginning of the 2010s that concerns about the concept of gender and education appear in European countries like Poland, Hungary, France and Spain, where in 2011 the Opus Dei curates the first European conference on the “ideology of gender” at the Navarra Universidad of Pamplona, three days of intense discussions on the origins and the political implication of the concept of ‘gender’ for education. In the same year in France almost 200 right wing parliamentarians ask to the Ministry of Education to retreat from the schools some biology manuals which are suspected to be inspired by “the theory of gender” and to transform the school into “a place of propaganda” (Cf. Garbagnoli 2014). The year after, in 2012, French manifestations grow against the bill called “Mariage pour tout”, an extension of the civil unions to homosexual couples<sup>11</sup> and in response the French conservative association “Manif pour Tous” is formed which will then become extremely visible in the fight against gender education. It is here that the expression “ideology of gender” diffuses in the media and political space. According to Garbagnoli (2014: 258): “Those who oppose egalitarian marriage were the ones who adopted the expression “LTDG” (La Théorie du Genre) in order to label and stigmatize those who

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> The law will be promulgated in May 2013

they considered their political enemies: socialist majority government, pro-law parliamentarians, LGBT/Q militants, feminists, gender studies researchers. For those protesters then the “Mariage pour Tous” is the result of ‘one theory’ whose application would produce inauspicious consequences for the maintenance of the social order (considered natural).”<sup>12</sup> In the same year, in a public discourse cardinal Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger (then Pope Benedict XVI) formally speaks about the term ‘gender’ as an adverse concept to the Vatican, a position that Ratzinger confirms in his speech on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia in December 2012, in which he states that “the theory of gender” is a dangerous anthropological challenge for humanity.

Meanwhile in Italy, the second *Marcia Nazionale per la Vita* (*National March for Life*)<sup>13</sup>, an Italian protest against abortion and euthanasia; the first edition took place the previous year) is held in Rome during which the collective *Giuristi per la Vita* (*Jurists for Life*) by Gianfranco Amato and the monthly newspaper *NotizieProVita* (*Pro-lifeNews*) are created. In the years to come, the collective and the newspaper will prove to be two of the main actors against gender education in the debate that will spread in the Italian territory. The first publication of *NotizieProVita*<sup>14</sup> is presented in October 2012 both in Rome and in Rovereto with the collaboration of right wing political parties like Fratelli D’Italia (*Italian Brothers*) and Alleanza Nazionale (*National Alliance*). Two months later, this direct alliance between a newspaper that has an anti-gender rhetoric and right wing politics is a phenomenon that is reconfirmed in Milan when the number is presented in the offices of the neo-fascist association Forza Nuova (*New Force*).<sup>15</sup> From now on, *NotizieProVita* becomes the meeting point of pro-life, anti-gender and extreme right wing activism and starts to be perceived as “a political opportunity able to reactivate the sleepy cells of the

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<sup>12</sup> Original text in Italian: “Il fronte degli oppositori al matrimonio egualitario ha, infatti, adottato l’espressione «LTDG» per etichettare e stigmatizzare la coalizione di quelli che considerava i suoi avversari politici: governo a maggioranza socialista, parlamentari pro-legge, militanti lgbt/q, femministe, ricercatrici e i ricercatori attivi nel campo degli studi di genere. Per i manifestanti, federatisi principalmente attorno al collettivo «Manif pour tous», il «Mariage pour tous» sarebbe, dunque, il portato di «una teoria», la cui applicazione produrrebbe conseguenze nefaste per il mantenimento dell’ordine sociale (supposto naturale).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. [www.famigliadomani.it](http://www.famigliadomani.it)

<sup>14</sup> This is the [first number](#)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. [playingthegendercard1](#) and [playingthegendercard2](#) last visit April 28th, 2016.

catholic activism, also by creating a competitive spirit among different forces.”<sup>16</sup>

### “Gender” in the Italian Education Realm

From 2013 till now in Italy there have been a number of important events connecting the issues of gender and the realm of education. In 2013 the Ministry of Education and the Equal Opportunity Department confirmed the art. 5 of DL. D.L. 93/2013 known as the law against femicide and commit to make schools more aware on issues of gender inequalities and sexual discrimination. Two years later, in May 2015, this results in the emanation of a newsletter that invites schools to participate to the international day against homophobia.<sup>17</sup> In the spring 2013, after the law against homophobia (Scalfarotto law) and the proposal of a law on civil union (Cirinnà law), the Italian catholic world mobilizes and, following the French revolts in the same years, creates *Manif pour Tous Italia* (now *Generazione Famiglia*, in English *Family Generation*), and the *Sentinelle in Piedi* (*Standing Sentinels*) linked to right wing party Alleanza Cattolica, start their “wakes” throughout the whole national territory.<sup>18</sup> Notably, Italian conservative and Catholic associations gain more and more faith in their fight against the “ideology of gender” once the French associations start to raise their voices against the Ministry of Education and other governmental apparatuses. However, as Garbagnoli underlines, “because of the nature, the rate and the objective of Catholic Church’s actions, I would not only talk about an ‘exportation’ of those acting modalities from one country to the other, but of a transnational construction of rhetoric and repertoires, of inter-textual and citation’s networks, of real international tournées of key actors of this crusade.”<sup>19</sup>

On February 2014, the Beck Institute (Rome), in an entrust with the National Racial Anti-Discrimination Office (UNAR) and within a broader initiative in

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. De Guerre in [www.ilpost.it](http://www.ilpost.it) Original in Italian: “un’opportunità politica potenzialmente in grado di riattivare le cellule dormienti dell’attivismo cattolico, non senza suscitare, però, uno spirito concorrenziale tra le diverse forze”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Zabatoni in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](http://www.chi-ha-paura-del-gender.it)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. <http://sentinelleinpiedi.it/>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. [www.euronomade.info](http://www.euronomade.info) Original in Italian: “data la natura, la portata e l’obiettivo delle azioni della Chiesa cattolica, non parlerei solo di “esportazione” di modalità di azione da un Paese all’altro, ma di costruzione transnazionale di retoriche e repertori, di reti di intertestualità e di citazione, di vere e proprie tournées internazionali di attori chiavi della crociata.”

conjunction with the European Commission, promotes the circulation of three informational booklets called *Educare alla diversità a scuola (To Educate to Diversity at School)*.<sup>20</sup> (Fig.1).



Their aim is “to contribute to the fulfillment of a plan of administrative measures, which, beyond an incomplete legal framework, can support national and local policies in gender discrimination.”<sup>21</sup> The three pamphlets are specifically made for teachers of the primary and secondary school levels in order to provide guidelines for a better welcoming and respectful teaching towards differences by enriching the teachers’ knowledge on gender variances, diversity of sexual orientations, and thereby giving them the tools to contrast the rise of homophobic related incidents in the schools. Soon after their introduction, these initiatives provoke an escalation of openly oppositional rhetoric in the pages of Catholic newspapers such as *Tempi* and *L’avvenire*<sup>22</sup> (*The Future*) and by the protests of Catholic parents’ associations<sup>23</sup> which, eventually, obtain the retreat of the three pamphlets from the web and the interruption of their promotion in the schools. In fact, already in March, the new undersecretary of the Ministry of Education, University and Research Gabriele Toccafondi stops their distribution while in the same days Cardinal Bagnasco – president of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) – explicitly speaks against ‘the dictatorship of gender’ (sic.) and every possible educational activity that openly deals with the question of gender and sexual orientation’s differences. In April 2014, the first pro-gender public response appears from the editorial board of the Italian “Society of Historians” which sends a letter to the Minister of Education Stefania

<sup>20</sup> [www.istitutobeck.com](http://www.istitutobeck.com) (in Italian)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. [www.pariopportunita.gov.it](http://www.pariopportunita.gov.it) (in Italian. Cf. page 4)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. [www.tempi.it](http://www.tempi.it) ; [www.avvenire.it](http://www.avvenire.it) (in Italian)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. [www.agesc.it](http://www.agesc.it) (in Italian)

Giannini in which they affirm the necessity to activate in the schools pedagogical programs on gender and to contribute to “the development of a more just and tolerant society” through a reflection on sexual stereotypes, in the mark of a critical approach towards ideas and knowledge, of a conscious struggle against sexual discriminations and homophobia.<sup>24</sup>

Successively, in the first months of 2015, the general attention shifts towards a kindergarten in the northern province of Trieste where some teachers want to adopt *Il gioco del rispetto*,<sup>25</sup> (*The Respect Game*) a plan to challenge children’s ideas about gender roles through pictures that subvert the stereotypical gender role division between the sexes. Examples are the portrayal of images of male teachers, female chefs, female firefighters and a man pushing a pram (Fig.2).



Fig.2

The program urges teachers to pay attention to the use of certain colors in the classroom which are traditionally geared in a gender-specific way, and how many and which toys are used that also adhere to gender stereotypes. As a response, a strong Catholic boycott campaign spreads out in the media with a series of articles that begin to appear in the local newspapers describing the plan as “ribald games at the kindergarten.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in January 2015 the Catholic portal *NotiziaProVita* launches on its website a petition against the spread of, what it refers to as, the “ideology of gender” within the Italian educational system,<sup>27</sup> an initiative that is presented by the Italian Parent’s Association (AGE) and the Catholic Schools Parents Association (AGEsc) to the Ministry of Public Education, the President of Italy, and

<sup>24</sup> Cf. [www.senonoraquando-torino.it](http://www.senonoraquando-torino.it) (in Italian)

<sup>25</sup> Cf. [giocodelrispetto.org](http://giocodelrispetto.org) (in Italian)

<sup>26</sup> Cf. [ilpiccolo.gelocal.it](http://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it). In July 2016 the ‘game’ has been definitely abolished by the right-wing mayor of Trieste Roberto Dipiazza: [www.huffingtonpost.it](http://www.huffingtonpost.it)

<sup>27</sup> The link for [the petition](#)

the President of the Council of Ministers. Herein they state that their own children “could find in the school, no destabilizing ideologies as the ideology of gender but rather projects, courses and educational strategies that allow the healthy development of their personality in accordance with their ethics and their family, respectful towards everybody and especially towards human nature.”<sup>28</sup>

On April 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, a political meeting takes place by Massimo Gandolfini a Sommacampagna, Verona, organized by the Cultural Association “La Pieve” in the parish cinema of the town. The committee Giordana Bruna explains in a reportage made after that event that the speaker referred a lot of times to the dangerousness of this ‘ideology of gender’ for families, freedom of expression and the religious and sexual education right of parents.<sup>29</sup> The next month, on May 24<sup>th</sup>, Gandolfini is also present at the conference organized by the *Manif Pour Tout* in Prato called *Gender Education, Ideology of Gender: what is it? Dangers and Challenges for Family, School and Society*,<sup>30</sup> while, a few hours earlier, Pope Francis in an encyclical called “Laudato Si” speaks of the acceptance of ones’ own body as divine gift, arguing therefore that a behavior which implies the erasure of sexual difference is not healthy if it does so because it does not know anymore how to confront with it. In this way the Catholic Church underlines once again its position against any understandings of human gender and sexual identity as different from the normative one (male-man, female-woman). On June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 the second ‘Family Day’ takes place in Rome to defend Italian families and moral values from the introduction of a dangerous “ideology of gender”. On the day that precedes the event, Gianfranco Amato writes in the conservative journal *LaNuovaBussolaQuotidiana* that

Facing this new form of dictatorship, as when facing every kind of dictatorship, you can only react in two ways: with connivance or with resistance. Tomorrow June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015, in San Joseph square in Rome, will take place the first collective and public form of pacific resistance against the power of a totalitarian effort of impose as law the ideology of the ‘unique thought’, a vision of the world absolutely foreign to our people’s culture and civilization, and that

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. [the petition](#). Original text in Italian: “possano trovare nella scuola, non ideologie destabilizzanti come l’ideologia gender, ma progetti, corsi e strategie educative che permettano uno sviluppo sano della loro personalità, in armonia con la famiglia e con le istanze etiche, rispettosi di tutti ed in primis della natura umana”.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. [chihapauradelgender3](#) pg. 10

<sup>30</sup> Cf. [www.giuristiperlavita.org](#). Original text in Italian: “Gender (d)istruzione - Ideologia gender: che cosa è? Pericoli e sfide per la famiglia, la scuola e la società”

is instead the fruit of a colonization attempt by powerful lobbies and groups that respond to logics which are foreign to the interests of our community.<sup>31</sup>

In the summer of 2015, new legislations are made by the Italian government in terms of gender awareness in the schools with in July the promulgation of the law 106, known as the *Buona Scuola* (in English, the *Good School*). The first article of this law (comma 16) affirms that “the triennial plan of the formative offer assures the actualization of the principles of equal opportunities by promoting in the school of every order and level the education of equality between the sexes, the prevention of gender violence and of all the discriminations.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the *Buona Scuola* instigates the reactions of the no-gender integralism which denounces that such law would hurt children and adolescents in their natural psychological and physical development (I explore this point extensively in chapter two). In order to contain the conservative revolt, on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2015 the Minister of Education Stefania Giannini emanates a newsletter directed to the schools which confirms the absence the ‘ideology of gender’ in the *Buona Scuola* law and promises the families that their children are not going to be ideologically manipulated.<sup>33</sup> Despite this ministerial statement, the assessor at the Education of Veneto region, Elena Donazzan, decides to send to all the teachers, scholar directors and families a letter (motion 13) in which she affirms the necessity to “not introduce dangerous ideologies for the development of students like ‘the ideology of gender’” and commit the Veneto Region “to intervene in schools of every order and level so that to [...] educate to recognize the value and the beauty of sexual difference and of the biological, functional, psychological and social complementarity that from it derives.”<sup>34</sup> In the

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. [www.lanuovabq.it](http://www.lanuovabq.it) Original in Italian: “Di fronte a questa nuova forma di dittatura, come di fronte ad ogni dittatura, si può reagire in due soli modi: con la connivenza o con la resistenza. Domani, 20 giugno 2015, a Roma in Piazza San Giovanni, si realizzerà la prima forma collettiva e pubblica di resistenza pacifica alla tentazione totalitaria del potere di imporre per legge l’ideologia del “pensiero unico”, una visione del mondo assolutamente estranea alla cultura e alla civiltà del nostro popolo, e che semmai è frutto di un tentativo di colonizzazione da parte di potenti lobby e gruppi di potere che rispondono a logiche estranee agli interessi del popolo.”

<sup>32</sup> Cf. [www.istruzione.it](http://www.istruzione.it) Original in Italian: “Il piano triennale dell’offerta formativa assicura l’attuazione dei principi di pari opportunità promuovendo nelle scuole di ogni ordine e grado l’educazione alla parità tra i sessi, la prevenzione della violenza di genere e di tutte le discriminazioni.”

<sup>33</sup> Cf. [www.istruzione.it](http://www.istruzione.it).

<sup>34</sup> Original in Italian: “non introdurre ideologie pericolose per lo sviluppo degli studenti quali l’ideologia gender” and “impegna la Giunta regionale ad intervenire nelle scuole di ogni ordine e grado della Regione del Veneto affinché [...] si educi a riconoscere il valore e la bellezza della differenza sessuale e della complementarietà biologica, funzionale, psicologica e sociale che ne consegue.”

same region and at the same time, the mayor of Venice Luigi Brugnaro decides to prohibit and retrain from the schools 49 books because they are considered to derive from the 'ideology of gender', hence he describes them as a "psychoanalytic vision of society introduced with cultural arrogance."<sup>35</sup> In this regard, such a political campaign aims at contrasting every form of progress in terms of juridical equality for non-heterosexual people.<sup>36</sup>

As a pro-gender reaction, on October 20<sup>th</sup> Michela Marzano, Italian philosopher and politician, publishes the book "Papà, Mamma e Gender" (2015, in English: *Dad, Mom and Gender*) which receives immediately a warm welcome by gender education exponents, LGBTQI associations and progressive media. Marzano starts her tour of meetings throughout the whole national territory which, in the moment I am writing this thesis in July 2016, is still active; I am going to focus on Marzano's book within the broader attention to pro-gender discourse on chapter III. On December 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, in an initiative of three Italian Catholic organizations *NotiziaProVita Onlus*, *Voglio la Mamma (I Want My Mom)* and *Giuristi per la Vita*, coordinated by *Generazione Famiglia*, hundreds of people throughout Italy protest against the introduction of the 'ideology of gender' in the public schools.<sup>37</sup> On the flyer that promotes the initiative it states:

National Day for the Right of Educative Priority of the Family.  
Parents will abstain in sending their children to school in order to reaffirm the exclusive role of the family in regards of sexual, affective and moral education.<sup>38</sup>

On the pro-gender front, from the 23<sup>th</sup> of February till the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, the only Italian journal on gender issues *AboutGender* organizes a series of meetings at Palazzo Ducale in Genoa where progressive and feminist exponents are able to express their points of views and concerns. In the first months of 2016, then, the third and last 'Family Day' is organized by Massimo Gandolfini in Rome with the goal

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it)

<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as Garbagnoli points out ([www.globalproject.info](http://www.globalproject.info)), this motion beside stigmatize against homosexual people and their children, it invites the Region to economically maintain private schools instead of public ones, which are notably owned by the Catholic Church.

<sup>37</sup> [www.giuristiperlavita.org](http://www.giuristiperlavita.org)

<sup>38</sup> Cf. [www.notizieprovita.it](http://www.notizieprovita.it) Original text in Italian: "Giornata Nazionale per il Diritto di Priorità Educativa della Famiglia. I genitori si asterranno dal mandare i figli a scuola non in polemica con essa ma per ribadire che nell'educazione sessuale, affettiva e morale viene prima la famiglia".



of protesting against both the same sex union law (Cirinnà law, which will then be approved by the Senate in February and by the Chamber in May after being emptied from its content on the stepchild adoption) and against the introduction of gender education in the schools.<sup>39</sup> In the remaining months of 2016 the debate on education becomes more and more mixed with other Italian political debates and, as a result, until now gender and sexuality education in Italian schools has been nationally approved as a compulsory component in educational curriculum only in terms of prevention of sexual discriminations and gender violence<sup>40</sup>, remaining optional and predominantly carried out by small private associations (Cf. Bortolotto 2014).

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. [massimoprearo.com](http://massimoprearo.com)

<sup>40</sup> Cf. [www.istruzione.it](http://www.istruzione.it)

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Anti-Gender Discourses and The School as Heteronormative Space**

In the previous chapter I presented the chronological development of the Italian contemporary debate and the different actors that are either promoting or opposing the introduction of programs in the school, which aim at sensitizing children to gender roles and sexual identity. In this chapter I analyze the oppositional discourses within a theoretical framework that will help me to explain where they rely on and what they provoke. In particular, I read anti-gender discourses through the lens of 'moral sex panic' (Rubin 1984; Weeks 1981, 1985, 1995) and, following Janice Irvine's analysis of conservative's use of language in an American debate on sexual education, I consider them as "highly scripted paradoxical events" (Cf. Irvine 2008: 4) that aim at constructing an emotional homophobic and patriarchal clash. In her book *Talk About Sex. The Battles over Sexual Education in the United States* (2002), Irvine argues that battles over sexual issues in education are "occasions in which activists evoke in audiences intense feelings and encourage their public expression" (142). Similarly, I affirm that what seems to be a circumscribed discourse of extremist of religious parties is instead a powerful political action aimed at concealing the spread of conservative, homophobic, and anti-democratic values throughout the Italian national territory, a movement – as de Guerre argues – that "constitutes [...] an anti-democratic coalition promoted by the alliance between Catholic integralists and neo-fascist traditionalists."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, Catholic discourses are part of a broader and more general manipulation of conservative politics in Italy that is now "specialized on the struggle against 'the ideology of gender'",<sup>42</sup> depicted as extremely dangerous for Italian moral values. In particular, in the next sections I argue that through a vision of the school as free

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. [playingthegendercard.wordpress.com](http://playingthegendercard.wordpress.com) Original text in Italian: "Costituisce [...] un fronte di mobilitazione anti-democratica promosso dall'alleanza tra integralisti cattolici e tradizionalisti neofascisti."

<sup>42</sup> Cf. [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#) Original text in Italian: "'specializzata sulla lotta contro 'l'ideologia gender'" (pg.33)

from sexuality and the consequent creation of the child as naturally hetero-a-sexual, the Catholic conservative discourse represents the introduction of gender education as a danger for young people's healthy development and for social morality. In other words, I claim that the Catholic conservative discourse built up a vision of the school as free from sexual influences and the child as a-sexual in order to represent the introduction of gender and sexuality education as threatening both school's protected space and children's innocence. Following this purpose, in this chapter I first introduce the concept of sexuality and its cultural aspect (Cf. Foucault 1990) and secondly show how the school as a public institution is a place in which the sexual identity of the students is constantly regulated through the valorizations of some sexualities over others, in this way maintaining and reproducing social inequalities and discriminations (Cf. Allen 2005, 2007; Kehily 2002; Redai 2015; Youdell 2005, 2006;). As a conclusion, I claim that through the creation of an emotional discourse on cultural morality what conservatives really fear is not that sexuality could enter the school system but that different sexual identities would.

### *The Public Aspect of Sexuality*

Foucault's work demonstrates that rather than just being a personal characteristic or an intimate relation, sexuality is instead a public part of social life (Cf. Foucault 1990). In Western society sexual meanings are embedded in a hierarchical distribution of power in which certain sexual identities and activities are considered normal in comparison to others, which, in return, are perceived as deviant. In this regard, he shows how throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in relation to heterosexuality, homosexuality has been constructed as illness, disease and abnormality through normalized discourses that aimed at maintaining a heteronormative system of power relations between individuals (Cf. *ibid*; Weeks 1981, 1985, 1995). In other words, by constructing "the other" different from oneself, heterosexuality proclaimed itself the norm in contrast to which other forms of sexualities and desires were considered abnormal. Furthermore, Foucault argues that subjects know the world and come to be known in the world through 'discursive practices' which emerge within specific social realms embedded in power relations that are exercised

specifically by social institutions through forms of *governmentality*, the last being either repressive or creatively used as a form of resistance (Foucault 1980; Foucault *et. al.* 2014). In fact, social institutions are implicated in both the constituting processes of what sexuality means and on the reproduction of sexual identities through forms of ‘disciplinary power’ which “is exercised through its invisibility and works through ‘subtle coercion’ producing ‘subjected and practised bodies’ whose regulation as such is achieved more effectively” (Foucault cited in Allen 2005: 501). Following Foucault’s analysis, in this thesis the social institution of the school is considered as a discursive field in which a number of strategies, practices, and power relations are in place and construct student’s sexual subjectivities.

### *School as Heteronormative Space*

In her book *Talk About Sex. The Battles over Sexual Education in the United States* (2002), Irvine argues that fears arise more easily when a discourse about sexuality is connected to the education of young people, since these discourses rely on the idea that children are innocently asexual and that the school is not the place for them to hear about sexuality and gender (Cf. also Alldred & David 2007; Epstein *et al.* 2003). Following this statement, I argue that in the Italian debate on gender education Catholic conservative discourses aim at representing the school as an a-sexual place in order to depict gender and sexuality educational projects as dangerous for young people’s sexual and gender identity development. In other words, I claim that by representing the educational environment and the youth that inhabits it as unrealistically a-sexual, Catholic opponents take advantage of common adult’s fears that young people would learn and talk about sexuality prematurely and in inappropriate places (Cf. Irvine 2002; Pascoe 2007; Redai 2015). Furthermore, considering Foucault’s work on sexuality (1990), in this section I look at the ways discourses on sexuality in the school contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequalities by underlining that students’ sexual and gender identity are not only already present in the school, but that there their normativity is constantly maintained and regulated. Indeed, schools are defined by “technologies of hierarchical observation, classification, examination, normalization, surveillance

and self-surveillance” (Youdell 2006: 59) that enable them to act as “agencies of cultural reproduction” (Allen 2005: 500) of hierarchical and unequal distributions of power.

According to Pascoe (2007), schools have an unofficial sexual culture that is perpetuated through what she calls “informal sexuality curriculum [in which] [s]chool relations are organized around the assumption that heterosexuality is the ‘natural order of things’” (57). Schools are saturated with sexuality and gender and already pre-school aged children use heterosexualized discourses as a resource for their relationships with peers and with adults (Cf. Martin 1998; Ryan 2012). In fact, no matter the variety of ways available to children to perform masculinity or femininity, the unsanctioned and un-excluded ways of acting genders bring all to “an expectation of a heterosexual future” (Epstein *et al.* 2001: 138). In this regard, as Butler’s concept of ‘the heterosexual matrix’ explains (Cf. 1990), gender roles are hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality, and through discourses and practices that stigmatize, highlight or exclude different gender performances and sexualities, which, in return, transform the school into a site for the production of heteronormative subjectivities. As Kehily affirms:

Within the context of the school much informal learning takes place concerning issues of gender and sexuality; the homophobia of young men, the sexual reputations of young women, and the pervasive presence of heterosexuality as an ‘ideal’ and a practice mark out the terrain for the production of gendered and sexualized identities (2002: 49).

Thus, homosexuality and non-normative gender performances in the schools are read as differences only in comparison to the ‘normality’ of heterosexual relations and behaviors and, as a consequence, such understandings contribute to the constitution of the school as a heteronormative space (Cf. Allen 2005). In this way, for example, to perceive a boy as gay because of his un-success in soccer or to consider a girl as lesbian for the opposite reason leaves intact the normative heterosexual relation of gender roles that wants males to be willing/able to practice a physical ‘masculine’ sport such as soccer and females to be unwilling/unable to do so. As a consequence, it can be said that what a discourse against gender and

sexuality education really presupposes is the defense of the superiority of heteronormative identities and practices against the introduction in the school of non-normative forms of gender, sexuality and desires.

### *Teaching (Hetero)Sexuality*

As showed in the previous chapter, the two main educational projects contested by conservative right parties (the UNAR pamphlets and *The Respect Game*) are meant to raise awareness on gender inequalities by sensitizing teachers on the stereotypical aspect of certain classroom settings (i.e. colors, the location of activities), of games available to both males and females and on the use of gender stereotypical language. However, in a petition written on its website in January 2015 in response to the introductions of such projects, the Italian *NotiziaProVita* (*Pro-LifeNews*) depicted them as possibly hurting children's natural sensibility, innocence and vulnerability, leading them to prematurely wanting to *perform* sexuality in irresponsible ways (Cf. Irvine 2002):

[I]n other countries where similar educational strategies have been applied time ago, like in England and Australia, [their introduction] had caused already a premature sexualization<sup>43</sup> of youngsters which resulted in the rise of sexual abuses (even among youngsters), in pornography dependence, premature sexual activity with consequential rise of pregnancies and abortions since adolescence, and in the rise of pedophilia.<sup>44</sup>

In this scenario sexuality is perceived as risky and dangerous for young people's consciousness which is consequently believed to be free from sexual interest and curiosity. In her article *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* (1984) Gayle Rubin underlines that "in our society all erotic behavior is

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<sup>43</sup> For more research on the discourse about the "premature sexualization" or "oversexualization" of youth see e.g. Egan and Hawkes 2010; Kehily 2012; Attwood 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. [Petition](#). Original text in Italian: "[I]n altri paesi dove simili strategie educative sono da tempo applicate, come in Inghilterra e Australia, [la loro introduzione] ha già causato una sessualizzazione precoce della gioventù che ha portato ad un aumento degli abusi sessuali (anche tra giovani), alla dipendenza dalla pornografia, all'attività sessuale prematura con connesso aumento di gravidanze e aborti già nella prima adolescenza, e all'aumento della pedofilia." Moreover, it is interesting to notice the presence of a nationalistic discourse that represents children as being both depended by and constructors of particular visions of the Italy and other nations (Cf. e.g. Mosse 1985).

considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love” (278). Thus, in conservative points of view, when considering discourses on sexuality in the classroom, students can only deal with the biological aspects of sexuality or with specific normative discourses of loving relations as long lasting and heterosexual (Cf. Allen 2007; Jackson & Weatherall 2010; Santelli *et al.*, 2006). In this way, sexual life becomes a process that starts from the finding of the right person of the opposite sex with whom to begin a balanced romantic relationship in which sexuality is seen as healthy and, since it aims towards reproduction, meaningful.

Sexual education should be about the recognition of the value and beauty of sexual difference and of its biological, functional, psychological and social complementarity. In this way students will learn also that the mother and the father, within the family even more than in the business world or in other contexts, bring their own irreplaceable specific richness.<sup>45</sup>

For *NotiziaProVita* sexual difference imposes a conception of human relationships as exclusively heterosexual since it is believed that only within a heterosexual loving relation there can be reproduction and, therefore, the fertile sexuality depicts all other possible sexual behaviors and practices as immoral and unnatural. As a consequence, when gender and sexuality have to be discussed in the school, according to anti/gender they can only be imagined through arguments such as biological maturation and development, contraception and STI prevention, pregnancy, giving birth and caring for infants (Cf. Irvine 2002; Redai 2015) so to preserve children’s morality and to not influence them negatively. In fact, those who believe in the natural asexuality of the young fear that, in hearing discourses on sexuality, children would not only prematurely be willing to perform sexual activity, but that they would also become homosexuals.<sup>46</sup> In other words, to teach about

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. [Petition](#). Original text in Italian: “si educi a riconoscere il valore e la bellezza della differenza sessuale e della complementarietà biologica, funzionale, psicologica e sociale che ne consegue. In questo modo gli studenti impareranno anche che la madre e il padre, nella famiglia, ancor più che nel mondo del lavoro o in altri contesti, apportano la loro propria ed insostituibile ricchezza specifica”.

<sup>46</sup> In this regard, see also Sedgwick (1990) about the fundamental incoherence of Western civil’s concept of sexuality and notice that the apparent fear that to become homosexuals are firstly boys rather than girls (Cf. Mosse 1985).

sexuality is seen as not only leading young people to have sex in the wrong moment (too soon) but, especially, to have sex in the wrong way.

### *Fearing Homosexuality*

As already stated above, sexual meanings are embedded in a hierarchical distribution of power in which certain sexual identities and activities are considered normal in comparison to others, which, in return, are perceived as deviant (Cf. Foucault 1990). Consequently then, to talk about gender and sexuality diversities in the schools alongside discussions of heterosexual marriage and parenting is seen as destabilizing precisely because it suggests that sexuality can step out of the heterosexual norm (Cf. Irvine 2002; Weeks 1995). In her study, Irvine demonstrates that “playing with fears that children will be converted to homosexuality dominated conservative discourse, with explicit suggestions that a growing acceptance of homosexuality would lead children to become gay” (2002:174). Thus, in perceiving the child as innocently hetero-a-sexual adults try to keep them away from a sort of identity corruption, an external ideological force that could change their naturalness into something deviant, other, unnatural:

We just have to talk about “natural family”. [...] We do not defend the tradition or the Constitution, but nature, what it has been given, what it has been valid for all men of all times and of all cultures, and that no human intervention can change.<sup>47</sup>

In this regard, ‘nature’ for anti-gender advocates is not solely a scientifically proved fact, but a divine aspect according to which homosexuality and homosexual unions come to be collocated outside the confines of humanity, as illegitimate forms of sexuality.<sup>48</sup> As Irvine again explains: “[the] demonization of an enemy is common in

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. [www.lanuovabq.it](http://www.lanuovabq.it) Original text in Italian: “Si deve parlare solo di “famiglia naturale” . [...] Noi non difendiamo la tradizione o una singola Costituzione, ma la natura, ciò che è dato, ciò che è valido per tutti gli uomini di tutti i tempi e di tutte le culture, e che nessun intervento umano può cambiare.”

<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, such affirmations seem to do not take into account hundreds of years of psychoanalytical studies on human sexuality which start from the sexuality of the child (Cf. Freud 1968 [1933]). In fact, contrarily to anti-gender conservative and religious understandings on sexuality, Freudian psychoanalysis affirms that sexed identity is an achievement rather than a natural given essence and argues that the bisexual child is one who psychically is not yet either a man or a woman and that femininity or masculinity is in particular just one trajectory of the Oedipal Complex rather than an innate characteristic. In particular, Freud writes that



moral protest movements, in part because this strategy triggers strong feelings of hatred and anger that bind together activists in opposition to the threatening Other, who is cast as legitimate and deserving target” (2002: 176-7). Therefore, panics about gender education simultaneously produce homophobic reactions, new ideas about childhood and sex in that, “if childhood was to be protected, it must be kept free of homosexual contagion” (Lancaster 2011: 42-3). In this realm, homosexuality remains a sin that is best avoided, and those who advocate for sexual equality or those who identify themselves as homosexuals become forms of social corruption able to reverse the natural order of things, dynamite for the heterosexual order as political regime based on reproduction. Responding to the question if he hates homosexuals, Massimo Gandolfini states: “I respect the homosexual as sinner, I hate homosexuality as sin.” In this regard, Garbagnoli asserts that in these affirmations “the center of the argumentation shifts from pathos to logos: you depict yourself as ‘non-homophobe’ while affirming the ‘naturalness’ of the heterosexual family.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, if heterosexuality is the ‘natural anthropological data’ from which unquestionable dogmas derive such as the one in which men and women are said to have ‘naturally’ different interests and are necessarily complementary in their physical, biological, functional, social and psychological diversities, then human sexuality is seen as part of a transcendental, pre-social, private and immutable system in which men and women have a natural consequentiality in their being born males or females. As Gandolfini also underlines in his speech at Sommacampagna on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015: “It is [...] an affront to human nature to pretend to modify the biological data from which the equilibrium of our species derives.”<sup>50</sup> As a consequence, when hearing about sexuality and gender, children should not hear anything different from this and those who dare to challenge the dualistic relation of sex and gender by describing it as not naturally linked (gender not naturally

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“psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition.” Freud, Sigmund, 1968:116 [1933].

<sup>49</sup> Cf. [www.euronomade.info](http://www.euronomade.info) Original in Italian: “il centro dell’argomentazione si sposta dal pathos al logos: ci si dice “non omofobi” – gli omosessuali non sarebbero perversi o criminali –, ma contestualmente si afferma la “naturalità” della famiglia coniugale eterosessuale.” Moreover, Garbagnoli also analyzes the homophobic rhetoric and demonstrates that it has been formally thought through a sort of *restyling* which “uses the representational codes and the modalities of action of the opponents” Cf. AG:260

<sup>50</sup> Cf. [massimoprearo.com](http://massimoprearo.com) Original text in Italian: “E’ [...] un affronto alla natura umana pretendere di modificare il dato biologico da cui deriva l’equilibrio della specie.”

consequent of sex) or by questioning the naturalness of the heterosexual desire both negate the difference between men and women and potentially disrupt the 'healthy' sexuality of children and of society as a whole.

However, what the Vatican and gender education Catholic opponents are opposing is not the word 'gender' in its reference to women as a 'natural' group of people, rather its critical potential as "an analytical category which de-naturalizes the sexual order by inscribing it in the realm of social dominion relations (Cf. Butler 1990, Delphy 2001, Scott 2013)."<sup>51</sup> In fact, in conservative discourses it is not only heteronormativity that has to be protected, but a whole patriarchal societal structure of power that comes to be threatened "by the same social structure that should sustain it: a relation of interests, friendships, lovers and ideals shared among alike."<sup>52</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI underlines on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia on December 21<sup>st</sup> 2012:

The profound falsehood of this theory [gender theory] and of the anthropological revolution contained within it is obvious. People dispute the idea that they have a nature, given by their bodily identity, that serves as a defining element of the human being. They deny their nature and decide that it is not something previously given to them, but that they make it for themselves. ... The words of the creation account: "male and female he created them" (*Gen* 1:27) no longer apply. No, what applies now is this: it was not God who created them male and female – hitherto society did this, now we decide for ourselves. Man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will. The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now becomes man's fundamental choice where he himself is concerned.<sup>53</sup>

In general then, in this debate we assist to a sort of Catholic identitarian pride re-birth which opposes the European democratic values of equality and acceptance of

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Bertagnoli 2014:256. Original in Italian: "una categoria analitica che denaturalizza l'ordine tra i sessi, iscrivendolo nell'ambito dei rapporti sociali di dominio (Butler 1990, Delphy 2001, Scott 2013)."

<sup>52</sup> Cf. [www.internazionale.it](http://www.internazionale.it). Original text in Italian: "dallo stesso impianto sociale che dovrebbe sostenerla: un legame di interessi, amicizie, amori, ideali condivisi tra simili."

<sup>53</sup> [Address of His Holiness](#), Benedict XVI on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2012. From this followed the comment of L'avvocato "per la vita" Gianfranco Amato afferma che il "gender" è addirittura più pericoloso delle derive totalitarie del Novecento: "Ha ragione il Papa quando dice che questo è peggio del nazismo. Perché il nazismo e il comunismo hanno ucciso l'uomo, e noi piangiamo quei morti. Ma qui stanno spegnendo l'anima, stanno trasformando l'antropologia. Trasformare l'uomo in un transumano è peggio di ucciderlo".

differences in the broader social and personal realm in the name of a moral religiosity founded on a vision of 'nature' as immutable divine gift; "[m]ovements" – as Prearo argues – "driven by a reactionary and conservative ideology of catholic sort with well-defined political purposes."<sup>54</sup>

In the next chapter I introduce the theoretical bases of the discourses of those who support the introduction of gender and sexuality education projects in Italian schools by paying attention to their idea of children's sexual and gender identities and the school this vision presupposes. I demonstrate that pro-gender discourses, different from the conservatives' points of view, do not perceive gender as consequent to biological sex, and promote a more inclusive conception of gender and sexual identities. However, as will become clear through my analysis, I demonstrate that their idea of the school as a place in which non-normative subjectivities are included in fact still relies on binary understandings of gender and sexuality as two separate and fixed aspects of identity. In addition to my argument I will reflect on the role of the school in facing social inequalities by underlining the importance of a school in which social power relations are deconstructed rather than re-proposed as differences between individuals.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. [massimoprearo.com](http://massimoprearo.com) Original in Italian: "spinti da un'ideologia reazionaria e conservatrice di stampo cattolico con fini politici ben definiti."

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Pro-Gender Discourses and the (Re)Affirmation of Social Inequalities**

In the previous chapter I showed in which boundaries gender education opponents believe an education on gender and sexuality in the school should be contained. In fact, according to conservatives' opinion the only possibility to allow for the protection of young people's development and the preservation of social sexual morality is by controlling discussions on sexuality in the schools. In this chapter I introduce the counter voices in the debate, namely the discourses of gender education that advocate and believe that the 'ideology of gender' is a Vatican invention<sup>55</sup> that conservative religious parties have been using to promote their homophobic and patriarchal beliefs and divide once again between normal and the abnormal sexual identities. Moreover, according to pro-genders the opponents to gender education have been distorting what in academic context are called 'gender studies' through rhetorical strategies in which 'gender' has always been used in its English form instead of the Italian 'genere' even in Italian contexts and at the singular (i.e. the ideology of gender, theory of gender etc.), in this way obfuscating the complexity that such studies have for political and social purposes throughout the world. In this chapter I first compare the argumentations of the two poles of the debate by showing how pro-gender oppose and re-work anti-gender's position on human gender and sexual identity. Secondly, I argue that, even though progressive discourses make a step further in valorizing the cultural aspect of gender, by claiming the naturalness of different types of sexual identities (homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals etc.) they do not deconstruct the dualistic framework that create identities as either normative or non-normative in the first place. In other words, gender education advocates in perceiving sexual identities as naturally

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Bernini in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#), and Garbagnoli in 2014.

different from one another risks to keep in place the social structure that position these identities into a hierarchical distribution of power, hence in this way not taking advantage of the potential this public debate has in Italian educational system and in Italian society as a whole. In fact, as a consequence to their understanding of sexual identities as fixed 'natural' essences, pro-gender risks to consider social issues like homophobia, violence against women, racism etc. as the result of individual shortcomings which can be resolved through an education that aims at unlearning oppressive codes in order to then re-learn politically correct ones (Gatens 1983). Instead, in this chapter I argue that through a revalorization of sexuality as public and cultural (Butler 1993, 2004; Preciado 2013) it is possible to imagine the school as a place that, rather than wanting to include in the realm of the 'natural' those 'different' sexualities, it can help to reflect on the complex system of power that creates 'the natural' and 'the different' in the first place.

### *Fixing Sex and Gender*

Gender pedagogy in Italy went through a three-fold process that began with a first attention towards the equality of women to men (1970s-1990s), a second phase in which sexual and gender difference has been the main focus (1990s-2000s) and a third phase where it included also LGBT issues, a critical perspective on gender roles, stereotypes, and prejudices (2000s-today) (Cf. Leonelli 2011). In the current period, gender and sexuality education in Italian schools focuses mainly on the prevention of gender discriminations and violence but its guidelines remain vague and discretionary (Cf. Bortolotto 2014). However, as already stated, there have been many attempts throughout the recent years to define its presence in the pedagogical realm especially by external private organizations present in the Italian territory such as the association *L'Ombelico (The Bellybutton, in Milan)* and of the association *Scosse (Shocks, in Rome)*, which promote a series of initiatives in order to raise teachers' and students' awareness on gender and sexuality stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations while discussing also topics like gender violence prevention,<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> E.g. by 'L'Ombelico': [Parole Dette e Non Dette](#) (in english: Said and Unsaid Words) and [A tavola con Platone](#) (At the table with Plato) two program for the prevention of sexual violence.

women's representation in media,<sup>57</sup> gender stereotypes,<sup>58</sup> affection, sexuality and relationships,<sup>59</sup> gender education books and toys,<sup>60</sup> homosexual families, one-parent families and divorced parents,<sup>61</sup> and women's history.<sup>62</sup>

One of the main arguments used by gender education advocates in Italy is that gender is culturally consequent to sex, hence in their perspective it does not depend on the physical body that, for example, men are more aggressive and entrepreneur than women, that men work outside and women work inside the house, that men earn more money than women and that there are more men than women in politics: they are all cultural constructions. As Chiara Saraceno, one of the most important Italian sociologist to write about gender, states: "The body is important, the confirmation of the body is something that has to be reflected upon, thought about, elaborated on [...] but from this do not descend neither psychological characteristics nor social behaviors."<sup>63</sup> As a result of these understandings, sexual identity is seen as a combination of a cultural aspect (gender) and two natural ones (sex and sexual orientation), in which being masculine or feminine is independent from one's own body and more culturally influenced while, on the other hand, both sex and sexual orientation are natural in their being more physical, biological and chemical aspects of one's own subjectivity, from which derives their impossibility to be culturally changed:

[G]ender is one of the three components of sexual identity. The other two are the sex and the sexual orientation. Sex is the physical, biological component of sexuality, which is also the sum of different factors: the external and internal genitalia conformation, gonads, hormones and sexual chromosomes. Sexual orientation is the prevalent direction of desire which can be towards people of the

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<sup>57</sup> The most famous example is Lorella Zanardo's documentary on the representation of women's body in television ([Il Corpo delle Donne](#)), which the author presents annually in Italian schools from North to South.

<sup>58</sup> [www.scosse.org](http://www.scosse.org)

<sup>59</sup> E.g. by "L'Ombelico" the projects: [E Se Non Fosse La Cicogna?](#) for parents of pre-school children against gender stereotypes and [Io Sono Speciale](#), a sexual education course for children and parents.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Irene Biemmi's book "Educazione Sessista. Stereotipi di genere nei libri delle elementari" (2011) and the project by 'Scosse' called [Leggiamo Senza Stereotipi al Teatro Argot](#)

<sup>61</sup> Cf. [www.famigliearcobaleno.org](http://www.famigliearcobaleno.org) and the Scosse's project [Educazione all'Affettività](#)

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the initiative for high-school students called [La filosofia è maschia](#) made by Fiammetta Mariani and Lorenzo Gasparrini from Rome University La Sapienza. The aim is to offer a "counter-pedagogy" on gender which could allow students to gain the tools to critical deconstruct gender issues. For a list of other initiatives these are the links to the associations: [L'Ombelico](#) and [Scosse](#).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it) Original text in Italian: "Il corpo è importante, la conformazione del corpo è anche qualcosa che va riflettuta, pensata, elaborata [...] ma da questo non discendono né caratteristiche psicologiche né comportamenti sociali"

opposite sex, of the same sex or towards both. Gender...is instead the psychological component of sexual identity, or even better put it is the socio-psychological component: it does not rely exclusively on the body, but also with the sense of self of a subject: to feel masculine or feminine depending of what is considered appropriate to be a male or a female in the culture the subject belongs to.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, for progressive points of view, those combinations of sex and gender which do not conform to the norm (e.g. being female but not feeling a woman) are considered variations of a broader human sexual complexity in which a majority of people have a 'normative' combination of sex and gender while a minority has not:

In the majority of cases people who are biologically males (sex) have a masculine gender identity and behaviors which belong to the cultural canons of masculinity in a given society. In the majority of cases people who are biologically females (sex) have a feminine gender identity and behaviors which belong to the cultural canons of a given society. In a minority of cases, instead, people can have a gender identity which is different from the sex they are born with (transsexuals or transgender FTM or MTF). In another minority of cases, some people can have an identity conforming to the sex they are born with but certain behaviors do not perfectly align with the gender cultural canons.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, for pro-gender 'gender' is considered cultural but, in its combination with a certain sex (being this either male or female), the identity that derives is seen as natural and, as a consequence, the different combinations of sex and gender presuppose the natural realm of human sexual and gender complexity. As a result, progressive gender and sexuality education entails mainly to teach to young people

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Lorenzo Bernini in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#), pg. 8. Original text in Italian: "il genere è una delle tre componenti dell'identità sessuale. Le altre due sono il sesso e l'orientamento sessuale. Il sesso è la componente fisica, biologica della sessualità, ed è a sua volta la somma di differenti fattori: la conformazione dei genitali esterni e interni, la conformazione fisica, le gonadi, gli ormoni, i cromosomi sessuali. L'orientamento sessuale è la direzione prevalente del desiderio, che può rivolgersi presso persone del sesso opposto e dello stesso sesso o a entrambe. Il genere ... è invece la componente psicologica dell'identità sessuale, o meglio la componente socio-psicologica: non ha a che vedere esclusivamente con il corpo, ma anche con il senso di sé di un soggetto: sentirsi maschio o sentirsi femmina a seconda di ciò che si intende appropriato a un maschio o a una femmina nella cultura di appartenenza."

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Lorenzo Bernini in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#), pg. 9. Original text in Italian: Nella maggior parte dei casi le persone che biologicamente sono maschi (sesso) hanno un'identità di genere maschile e comportamenti che rientrano nei canoni culturali della mascolinità della società a cui appartengono. Nella maggior parte dei casi le persone che biologicamente sono femmine (sesso) hanno un'identità di genere femminile e comportamenti che rientrano nei canoni culturali della femminilità della società a cui appartengono. In una minoranza di casi, invece, le persone possono avere una identità di genere diversa dal sesso di nascita (persone transessuali o transgender FTM o MTF). In un'altra minoranza di casi, alcune persone possono avere un'identità di genere conforme al sesso di nascita ma alcuni comportamenti non perfettamente allineati ai canoni culturali del genere."

both the naturalness of their sexual bodies and their sexual orientations (their sexuality) and their being and feeling masculine or feminine (their gender) in order to acknowledge human complexity and combat harmful prejudices and stereotypes because “only by teaching acceptance and diversity it is possible to really protect everyone” (Marzano 2015: 75).<sup>66</sup> However, because sex and sexual orientation, according to the pro-gender line of thought, are perceived as pre-social, personal aspects of children’s identity that cannot be changed, these pedagogical programs do not produce any sort of identity-confusion in students:

None of the European educational programs elaborated till now want to oblige males to wear pink trousers! None of the European educational programs want to erase sexual difference and transform your children in neutral subjects! Sexual identity is not something you learn. And neither you learn your sexual desire.<sup>67</sup>

In this way, pro-genders respond to anti-gender panic that students would be damaged and confused when hearing about ‘different’ types of sexual identities by arguing that gender education allows mainly children to acknowledge the complexity of human difference but that it is certainly not sufficient to activate any transformation of children’s sexual orientation, sexual body or gender identity if children are not naturally aspiring to. To fight inequalities and prejudices through education therefore means to teach that, no matter the differences, sexual identities must all be perceived as equally valuable and in need of respect.<sup>68</sup>

In my point of view, to consider gender and sexuality as two aspects of subjectivity that can be combined into a fixed amount of, equally natural,

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<sup>66</sup> Original text in Italian: “solo insegnando l’accettazione e l’alterità si possono proteggere veramente tutti e tutte.”

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Lorenzo Bernini in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#), pg. 13. Original text in Italian: “nessuno dei programmi educativi europei fino ad ora elaborati vuole obbligare i maschi a indossare i pantaloni rosa! Nessuno dei programmi educativi europei vuole cancellare la differenza sessuale e trasformare i vostri figli in soggetti neutri! L’identità sessuale non si apprende. E neppure si apprende il desiderio sessuale.”

<sup>68</sup> I arrived to a similar conclusion when I interviewed two kindergarten’s teachers for a paper I wrote at Central European University titled: “Sexuality and Gender Roles in an Italian Kindergarten: Reflections on a Queer Pedagogy.” In that paper I analyzed the ways two kindergarten teachers perceive children’s potential homosexual identities through their non-conformity to gender roles and I concluded that both teachers’ pedagogical approach consisted in relating to a presumed homosexuality as a personal identity that, no matter its difference, needed to be treated equally to heterosexuality. In my point of view, this pedagogy missed to take into account the fact that, outside of the classroom, homosexuality and heterosexuality are far from being equally treated and therefore risk to underestimate the cultural aspects of social inequalities. I will extensively expose these affirmations in the rest of this thesis, starting from the next paragraph.



identitarian configurations (being heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, polysexual, transsexual etc.) does not deconstruct the dualistic vision of sexuality that create identities as either normative or non-normative in the first place. Hence, against the conservative fear that heterosexuality is in danger by a discourse that depicts homosexuality as equally natural, pro-gender chooses to depict homosexuality as being naturally belonging to certain people and not to others in this way perceiving human differences as casts into homogenous essences of unchangeable naturally sexual subjectivities (we are either heterosexual or homosexuals, transsexuals etc.). In this way, advocates of gender education ultimately fail to take into account both the fact that sexuality itself is to some extent constructed and the fact that human differences are not *just* differences, but are instead placed into hierarchical positions within complex structures of power that are constantly produced and reinforced through social institutions and governmental apparatuses. Therefore, for example, to perform heterosexuality (Cf. Butler 1990, 1993, 2004) rather than to be in a homosexual relationship allows individuals to gain certain benefits for the simple fact that heteronormative subjectivities are positioned higher in the social hierarchy of power. What is, then, this necessity to set our and other people's sexual identities once and for all? And, what are the consequences of such choices for the way we teach inequalities in the school? I tackle these question in the following section.

### *Reflections on Identity*

In her study of how subjects occupy the pronoun 'I', Butler (2005) states that our own identity comes into being through our relations with others, and that we are constantly caught between the necessity of being addressed and the risk of being stuck within the terms of that address itself. In one of her most popular works, *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler reflects on the cultural construction of gender and sexual identity and invites us to think of them as 'doings' instead of as personal properties of individuals. In fact, she argues that gender and sexuality are effects of a process in which social norms are internalized in such a way that all the historical aspects of one's own subjectivity become invisible in name of a unique vision of identity as naturally heterosexual (see also 1990, 1993). In other words,

subjectivities do not exist prior to discourse but come in to being as *performed* inside of the complex net of symbolic, semiotic and material social power relations. Furthermore, both sexuality and gender are not only culturally constructed but constantly reproduced through daily performances of bodies. Subjectivities, rather than stable, interior possessions of a self-knowing subject can be perceived as “artifacts of discourses that produce these subjects as though they were pre-existing” (Youdell 2006: 55). Similarly, Braidotti’s theory of the nomadic subject (2006, 2011) imagines identity as a knot on a rhizomatic net in which the subject is no longer perceived as fixed and stable but rather as changeable and, indeed, nomadic. As Braidotti writes (2006: 94):

[A] non-unitary subject defined as a qualitative multiplicity is not only extended in space, but also in time. Let us take an example from the anti-racist question: ‘can one be Black, or Muslim, and European?’; or the feminist one: ‘can one be black, or lesbian and a feminist?’ These questions rest on the assumption that political discourse implies a vision of the subject as a unified identity. Thus, to be ‘European’ is postulated on an implicit identity that excludes blacks and Muslims. To be a feminist assumes an identity that excludes blacks and lesbians, and so on. If we approach this political problem within the nomadic subject as a *qualitative or intensive*, not *quantitative or extensive*, entity, however, steady identities are rejected as the implicit or explicit assumption for any subject position. Difference emerges accordingly in all its positivity, having abandoned the dialectical frame. [italics mine].

Referring to this conception of identity as not-steady,<sup>69</sup> I imagine that when a subject is born her identity depends upon the place and time she is into (her culture) but that, throughout her life, she moves to other knots of the net and build up other aspects of her own subjectivity. In this model, knots are pre-existing the subject, but the net expands itself under every subject’s walk; on the other hand, the subject is immanent in that she constructs her identity every time she moves (intensive) and every time she stops (extensive) to achieve and affirm her identity. In fact, in my point of view, subjects necessarily stop when they need to recognize a stable identity, and they move when they gradually want to pass from one knot to another,

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<sup>69</sup> However, in her posthuman ontology (Braidotti 2013) Braidotti moves from a focus on the human vs. culture to an examination of those animate and inanimate forces which are commonly depicted as non-agentic (Cf. Allred and Fox 2015 whose analysis instead suggests to look at the sexual body as a sexual-assemblage).

in a constant state of development. In this way different aspects of subjectivity (ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality) assume different meanings, depending both on the particular embodiment of the subject and on her positionality within the net, defining identity as both a stable identification and a fluid potentiality. As Gamberi *et al.* state, we all have “*multiple subjectivities*, like a process of continuous construction and re-negation of meanings, where gender identity is constantly articulated with other crucial dimensions in our construction of ‘ourselves’, such as the cultural, class, generational belonging” (Gamberi *et. al.* 2010: 13).<sup>70</sup> In this way, masculinity and femininity are seen as a set of practices and discourses that can be performed and embodied by both males and females, instead of being properties of specific sexual bodies (Cf. Pascoe 2007). However, as pointed out earlier, in the present hierarchical social order every knot of the *imaginary* rhizomatic net achieves a different hierarchical position and, as a consequence, a subject in a certain knot gains more social privileges than those in another knots. As Pascoe writes (2007: 10): “[H]eterosexuality [but also gender, class and race] is not just a private matter but one that links a person to certain state benefits [because] what seems like a private desire is part of the mechanisms through which the microprocesses of daily life actually foster inequality.” According to this vision of identity, sexuality, gender, class, race are both culturally created and personally performed while in social life every performance is then settled in a specific knot/position of the social hierarchy. As Gamberi *et.al.* (2010: 17) writes:

We are [...] an intersection of differences which inform the perspective we have of the world but that, at the same time unfortunately, are translated into inequalities which limit the possibility of a full citizenship for those who are positioned outside the margins of the norm.<sup>71</sup>

Differences between human beings are not only natural consequences of the complexity of human sexuality, but they culturally signify as such into a cultural

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<sup>70</sup> Original text in Italian: “*soggettività multiple*, come un processo di costruzione e ri-negazione continua di significati, dove l’identità di genere si articola incessantemente con altre dimensioni cruciali nella costruzione del ‘noi’, quali l’appartenenza culturale, di classe, generazionale.”

<sup>71</sup> Original text in Italian: “Siamo [...] un crocevia di differenze che informano la nostra prospettiva sul mondo, ma che, allo stesso tempo purtroppo, si traducono in disuguaglianze che limitano la possibilità di una cittadinanza piena per coloro che si collocano al di fuori o ai margini della norma.”

environment which positions them into a hierarchical structure of power. Sex and gender, as Butler states (1990, 1993, 2004), are not only properties of individuals, some sort of transcendental aspects of identity, but are also discursively constituted in the social and cultural realm the body is embedded in. They are both present as irrefutable characteristic and comprehensible through the social institutions and signs which give the sexual body its cultural meanings.<sup>72</sup>

In her article *A critique of sex/gender distinction* (1983) Moira Gatens states that a perception of identity based on the combination of natural and cultural aspects leads to conceive the mind of either sex as neutral and passive, “a blank state, on which is inscribed various social 'lessons'” while the body becomes “the passive mediator of these inscriptions” (144). Indeed, according to Gatens, on the one hand to think sex and sexual orientation as natural aspects of identity ends up in seeing the sexual body as a fixed surface while, on the other hand, to conceive genders merely as cultural aspects that are stuck to pre-determined and unchangeable bodies fails to recognize the relation bodies themselves have with social and historical contexts (1983: 153). Among others Paul B. Preciado’s work (2013) demonstrates the malleability and potentiality of the body as a place of multiple transformations in which both masculine and feminine aspects are present in each other’s absence and in which the body is “a field of technical installations in which there can be multiple solutions” (12). In particular, Preciado sees not only gender but also the sexual body as a continuous plurality of aspects that can result into infinite shapes and open subjective outcomes. Other authors like Leo Bersani (1995), Bersani & Phillips (2008), Lee Edelman (2004); Berlant & Edelman (2014) and Jack J. Halberstam (2011, 2012) contest the ‘un-bodied’ vision of sexuality and propose, instead, a return to queer theory and to a materialist analysis of sexuality. In their point of view, differences between human beings are not only a natural consequence of the complexity of human sexuality, hence the risk to fix identity in

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<sup>72</sup> However, Butler is careful in drawing the line between culturally and naturally aspects of subjectivity and prefers to leave the question open and promising: “Sex is made understandable through the signs that indicate how it should be read or understood. These bodily indicators are the cultural means by which the sexed body is read. They are themselves bodily, and they operate as signs, so there is no easy way to distinguish between what is “materially” true, and what is “culturally” true about a sexed body. I don’t mean to suggest that purely cultural signs produce a material body, but only that the body does not become sexually readable without those signs, and that those signs are irreducibly cultural and material at once.” (2004:87)

terms of sexuality is to perceive people's sexual identity as naturally different sexual categories (homosexuals, heterosexuals etc.). On the contrary, human differences gain meaning within a particular structure of power present in society in which power is distributed unequally to human beings according to their gender, their race, their class, their religion, and their sexual orientation. As a result, when thinking diversities among human beings we must pay attention to power relations, otherwise we risk to simply be left with merely a list of differences (Cf. Zinn and Dill 1996).

### *Bringing Power In the Classroom*

A consequence of the tendency to teach that differences should be seen as equal examples of human complexity (i.e. to categorize human identity into fixed combinations of axes of significations like race and gender, sex and class) risks to naively teach that social inequalities and power relations are only a matter of the ways individuals relate to each other and that, correcting those behaviors would result in the consequential end of social discriminations. In other words, when teaching that gender inequalities derive from the way men treat women, homophobia derives from the ways heterosexuals treat homosexuals, racism derives from the way whites treat blacks, it implies that the solution of social discriminations lies in a process of unlearning oppressive codes in order to then re-learn politically correct behaviors and traits (Cf. Gatens 1983: 144). Such a vision fails to recognize the cultural, historical and social systematic aspect of inequalities between genders, races and classes and tends to perceive subjects as self-sustainable and self-responsible of their own well-being.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> I consider necessary here to highlight the importance of neoliberal studies in explaining why and how social discriminations' "individualist framework" (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) make subjects believe that her choices are made in furtherance of self-interest and self-actualization. In this regard, two authors I find particularly interesting for my thesis: Shelley Budgeon and Chaterine Rottenberg. Budgeon (2014; 2015) focuses on the "shift in orientation" that women's choices had within a capitalistic and neoliberal gender order by critically situating what has been called "choice feminism" (Hirshman 2010) within the context of postfeminist social conditions. In particular, she looks at the ways late modernity has reworked traditional gender norms while maintaining aspects of inequality between men and women and among women themselves through the rise of a new form of femininity characterized by self-determination, individualism and personal empowerment. In fact, as a result Budgeon argues that feminism starts to be seen as unnecessary in that gender equality between women and men has been already achieved. In this realm, feminism assumes women to be independent social agents who are both sexual empowered and personally responsible of taking care of their needs "despite their diverse

Paradoxically then, while Italian educational curricula by law aims at fighting gender discriminations and violence, they do it by trying to fight discriminatory and violent behaviors in students without framing them in the larger cultural environment which create the soil for these actions to take place. In her book *Bad boys. Public schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2000) Ferguson shows how African American boys are often taught “to learn not to talk back” and learn how “to not confront with power”, meaning that they are taught how to behave like white boys in order not to get into trouble outside and inside the school. As she points out, in this way, instead of allowing black boys to understand racism in order to be able to gain the tools to protect themselves from it (i.e. to teach the social aspect of racial discrimination at the core of individual racial actions), this pedagogical effort teaches them “to endure humiliation in preparation for future enactments of submission” (2000: 87). In a similar way, in their study on racial discrimination in a North American high-school, Hardie and Tyson (2013) point out how racism has been dismissed as an anomaly introduced by a specific group of people perceived as ‘racists’ by the rest of the school population. The authors came to the conclusion that this way of perceiving racism in terms of individuals (some people are racists while others are not) drew the “attention away from and helped mask racist structures within the school” (84). They call this tendency a ‘color-blind pedagogical approach’ which “guarantees that the structures from which racial tensions arose will remain in place and that the wounds inflicted from such practices will continue to fester” (99). Hence, race is not an inherently meaningful category, but rather a socially constructed one which links to relations of power and processes of struggles

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social locations and the material circumstances which shape their choices.” (Ibid.: 309). According to Catherine Rottenberg then, this new female subject is still feminist “in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women [but it is also] simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair” (2014:420). In other words, within a neoliberal feminist realm each woman is expected to estimate and find the right balance between working- and family-life, a task that, in case of failure, is perceived as being fully women’s own responsibility. Consequently, this neoliberal feminism’s concept of ‘self-responsibility’ produces the feeling that there is no more need for the state or government to intervene in that the whole question of social justice or gender equality is framed within an individualized framework: “The classic liberal feminist goals of fair treatment, equal institutional access, and women’s full integration into the public sphere” – Rottenberg writes (Ibid.:425-6) – “are expediently elided, while climbing the power hierarchy ultimately becomes the feminist objective.” Thus, in this thesis I consider the tendency to perceive subjects as self-sustainable and self-responsible of their own well-being as derived by the influence of neoliberal values.

and resistance. As Ellemers and Barreto claim: “fixing individual shortcomings does not seem to offer a satisfactory solution for the systematic inequality of outcomes achieved by members of different social groups.”<sup>74</sup> In relation to sexuality, a similar question can be asked: How can you convert a gender education programme in such a way that differences are not merely included into the norm but that sexual differences are valued in a non-discriminatory way because inscribed as parts of a broader structure of power?

In my point of view to teach to youth the variety of human sexualities, the cultural aspect of genders and the natural aspect of sexual attractions without taking into account the benefits these differences have in a hierarchical social order of power of our Western society risks to perceive gender and sexual inequalities in terms of personal incapacity or responsibility and, ultimately, this view fails to understand the role of the state in maintaining and recreating gender inequalities (Cf. Budgeon 2014). Similarly, to talk about gender in the schools by expressing its relational aspect either in dichotomical terms (there are different gender roles according to men and women) and about gender discriminations in terms of individual actions of particular ignorant people, leads to the tendency to teach students merely to not behave in discriminatory ways, instead of gaining the knowledge to see the ways in which gender inequalities are macro-social aspect of everyone’s daily life. In her book Michela Marzano (2015) justifies and explains the reasons why different subjectivities should find equal place in the school:

Let them do it, no? To deconstruct stereotypes does not mean not putting nail-polish on. Maybe it means just to let people put it on whenever they want and independently if they are men or women or trans. Heterosexual or homosexual. White or black. Isn’t this maybe what should also be taught and learnt at school?(138)<sup>75</sup>

Even though I agree that those subjectivities that manifest different sexual and gender behaviors should be included and respected in the school and in society at

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Ellemers, N., & Barreto M. (2015). Modern discrimination: how perpetrators and targets interactively perpetuate social disadvantage. Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com) p. 142

<sup>75</sup> Original text in Italian: “Lasciamoglielo fare, no? Decostruire gli stereotipi non significa non mettersi lo smalto. Forse significa solo lasciarlo fare a chi ne ha voglia, poco importa che sia un uomo, una donna o una persona trans. Eterosessuale o omosessuale. Bianca o nera. Non è forse questo che si dovrebbe anche insegnare e imparare a scuola?”

large, I argue that it is not only a matter of teaching inclusivity and tolerance towards gender roles and the fact that discriminations affect certain people and not others. Moreover, it is especially important to teach the ways in which these inequalities are continuously reproduced and maintained through normative discourses of sexuality and gender, also, and especially, within the educational environment. In other words, to merely work on the effects of discrimination (change your behavior to be more inclusive) is not enough; if we really want to fight oppression we have to understand and teach how discrimination works and the mechanisms that are in place. Consequently, the school as an institution should not only be a place in which minorities are welcomed by normative subjectivities that are taught to respect those who are different in order to “promote [...] a society of tolerance and respect in which those young people and adults that express their gender in non-conventional ways can be welcomed” as Bernini argues.<sup>76</sup> Rather, the point is that those who embody normative positions of identity should understand not only to respect the others different from them, but especially to understand the way in which they themselves come to be positioned where they are, the way in which they become dominant subjects in a system that is structured by particular dynamics of power. We need to teach them their power, because the school is not a neutral place but a highly political one that mirrors the social structures outside of it, and in which subjectivities are constructed daily as either normative or non-normative. Therefore, a vision of the school as an inclusive space risks wanting to include in the realm of the ‘natural’ those ‘different’ sexualities or gender identities without reflecting on the complex system of values that creates ‘the natural’ and ‘the different’ in the first place.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#) pg. 13-4. Original text in Italian: “Ciò che promuovono i programmi educativi che traggono ispirazione dagli studi di genere è una società della tolleranza e del rispetto in cui possano essere accolti anche quei ragazzi e quegli adulti che esprimono il proprio genere in modo non convenzionale.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Teaching Power in the Classroom. Suggestions for a Pedagogy of Inequalities**

Throughout the previous chapter I demonstrated that the school is a highly heteronormative place in which sexual and gender identities are not only constituted but also reproduced through discourses of sexuality and gender. While anti-gender try to depict the school as a-sexual in order to protect its heteronormative aspect, pro-gender advocates represent the school as a place of inclusion and tolerance of those sexualities that are socially considered different from the heterosexual norm. In this chapter I argue that, instead of a school of 'inclusion', 'integration' and 'tolerance' of those 'minoritarian', 'different', 'other' subjectivities, what is needed is a school in which mechanisms of control and of production of normative subjectivities, discourses and practices are questioned, brought into light, analyzed and deconstructed. In fact, against the tendency to see gender and sexual identities in terms of differences outside of their hierarchical social position, the school should become the place in which social hierarchies are understood and de-normalized, in which new ways to relate to inequalities can develop, and where educational endeavors able to provide students with the tools to create healthy and free gender and sexual identities can take shape. In this regard, I focus on a number of pedagogical areas which could be rethought in order to make the classroom a more feminist and equal space. In particular, I primarily focus on the role the teacher has in creating such educational environment and argue that, in order to teach sexuality and gender, educators need to be willing to represent themselves as sexual and gendered beings. Secondly, I claim that in order to underline the social aspects of inequalities, teachers should not refer to differences among students in terms of fixed identitarian characteristics, but rather as open processes of development embedded in specific structures of power. Furthermore, I reflect on some methodological tools which help to promote a way to do gender and sexuality

education without limiting itself to an exposition of different sexual orientations and to the deconstruction of gender roles stereotypes, but that would use gender and sexuality as two broader social axes of signification for students' subjectivities, underlying the importance of teaching power relations. As Laura Fantone underlines (in Gamberi *et al.* 2010: 92), a pedagogical approach should teach gender without limiting it to a rigid, dualistic and pre-ordinate identitarian system.

### *Teaching the Social Aspect of Inequalities*

In an article that appeared on the blog *Il Lavoro Culturale (The Cultural Work)* during the most burning days of the Italian debate on gender education, Federico Zappino and Deborah Ardilli assume a quite challenging position when they write that “precisely as we had already done with ‘queer’, we believe in the transformative potentiality of the political assumption of the stigma and of its re-introduction in the order of discourse, as one of the prerequisites which open the space of every critique and every re-signification”<sup>77</sup>. In fact, contrarily to those who affirm the necessity to calm down the conservative panic by explaining what gender education is and what it is not, Zappino and Ardilli recognize the validity of this panic in fearing the innovative power gender issues have in reshaping the contemporary Italian social context and auspicate to queer the debate and “renounce of subordinate to the terms of the discourse as it is set up, since through this discourse heteronormativity tends to put a patch on the problem that itself creates in the first place”.<sup>78</sup>

In the realm of sexuality, the term *queer* can be used as an analytical tool that focuses not merely on the construction of homosexuality and homosexuals as deviant, but on sexuality as a whole and, in particular, on the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexuals as the norm (Cf. Namaste 1994). In education,

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. [www.lavoroculturale.org](http://www.lavoroculturale.org) Original text in Italian: “esattamente come già abbiamo fatto con “queer”, crediamo nel potenziale trasformativo dell’assunzione politica dello stigma e della sua reimmissione nell’ordine del discorso, come uno dei presupposti che apre lo spazio di ogni critica e di ogni risignificazione.”

<sup>78</sup> Cf. [www.lavoroculturale.org](http://www.lavoroculturale.org) Original text in Italian: “rinunciare a fare atto di sottomissione ai termini del discorso così com’è impostato, poiché attraverso questo discorso l’eteronormatività tenta di mettere una pezza ai problemi che essa stessa ingenera.”

especially, a queer approach to sexuality can help to look at how sexual practices and discourses constitute masculinities and femininities in heteronormative ways within the classroom, the relations of power they presuppose and the different subjects who embody them (Cf. Pascoe 2007). Therefore, to claim for a queering of education means to claim for a theory of sexuality that takes into account, analyzes, understands and deconstructs the system of power which creates the “categories that name us and that we use to name ourselves” (Gilbert 2014: XXIII). Following a vision of identity as complex and plural, what do children need to learn about their own identity? How to explain differences and inequalities to a child? How can this educational strategy not re-produce essentialist unequal standpoints?

In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) bell hooks hopes for a pedagogical effort that starts from the experience of both students and teachers in order to transform the classroom into a democratic setting, a communal place of critical thinking. She calls this a feminist pedagogy, which aim is the ‘practice of freedom’ which she describes as the way of teaching that anyone can learn (Cf. 1994). In her point of view, critical thinking is always the primarily element towards the possibility of change; that tool through which it is possible to move forward, to change, to evolve, to grow. A first stage of transformation is, according to hooks, “that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstance” (47). It is, in fact, that moment in which teachers and students in the classroom start to critically think about discriminatory behaviors and practices beginning from their own personal positioning in society as gendered, sexual, racial, classed individuals. Thus, the goal of a feminist, holistic gender pedagogy is not only to expand students’ knowledge about gender, sexuality and other axes of social signification (Cf. Crenshaw 1991), but to offer them tools to critically understand how these axes work in their own lives and how they can contribute to de-construct them. According to Gamberi *et al.* (2010) such a pedagogical effort defines itself not as *about* gender and sexuality but *on* gender and sexuality, being not only a project aimed at giving students the tools to understand them both as identitarian elements, as roles or as expressions, but as an education that proposes the tools to students in order for them to reflect on what gender and sexuality are, how they function in society, what

these functions imply in theirs and others people's lives.<sup>79</sup> This pedagogical strategy would not hold back and contain its potentiality, but rather be "educative stimulus" (Lamberti cited in Gamberi *et al.* 2010: 116) which will *drag outside*, especially from ourselves, the hidden treasures of our complexity, individual and social".<sup>80</sup> In this way, gender and sexuality are taught as being relationalities and transformations, performativities and complexities, rather than two aspects of an immutable identity.

But who should be teaching this pedagogy? What is the role of the teacher? In the next paragraph I explore these questions by relying on hooks' (1994) and Gilbert's (2014) theories.

### *The Role of the Teacher*

As hooks underlines (1994: 21), "students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. [...] Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process." In fact, for hooks educators "must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit" (21) as a way of "challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutional space" (137). Due to the predominant idea that sexuality should not be part of the educational curriculum, teachers tend to represent themselves and students as a-sexual (Cf. Irvine 2002) and to conceive the classroom as "a safe space" (Cf. hooks 1994). In fact, as also Hardie and Tyson affirm, "teachers and school administrators see their roles as primarily academic [and] they prefer not to address issue of [power and discrimination], which they view as 'political'" (2013: 86). This belief that the school is not the place where to deal with emotions, politics and social life struggles rests on the tendency to privilege the development of the mind over the one of the body as one of the basic principles in education (Cf. Alldred & David 2007; Epstein *et al.* 2003). As hooks underlines: "by reinforcing the idea that there is a split between theory and practice or by creating such a split, [we] deny the power of liberatory education for critical

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Zbonati in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#) pg.19

<sup>80</sup> Original text in Italian: "trarre fuori, innanzitutto da noi stesse/i, i tesori nascosti della nostra complessità, individuale e sociale."

consciousness, thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression” (1994: 69) On the contrary, teachers must transform the classroom into a democratic place where everybody feels the responsibility to intervene and participate, where student learn to hear each other to each other voices, to listen to one another, to recognize one another; where pain and emotions and freedom of expression can happen.<sup>81</sup>

In her book *Sexuality in School. The limits of Education* (2014), Jen Gilbert investigates the controversial relation between sexuality and schooling and pays attention to the ways sexuality compels teachers and students to shape how they act and see the world. In particular, in her analysis she focuses on the tendency queer adults (homosexuals, transgender, transsexuals, bisexuals etc.) have of attributing to themselves a sort of queer childhood, namely to affirm their identity as authentic as proved by their pre-mature feeling of diversity from the norm. By narrating themselves as already during their childhood experiencing that they were ‘different’ they justify and reassure their adult-identity as non-(hetero)normative. In this respect Kathryn Bond Stockton writes that “the utterance ‘I was a gay child’ [...] retroactively creates a coming-of-age narrative that secures one’s experience in childhood to an always already existing identity” (Stockton 2004: 283). In other words, the tendency to describe adults’ queer identity in relation to the story of ‘naturally queer’, allows them to justify their identities as ‘naturally’ different from the heterosexual norm. As demonstrated earlier with the argumentation of pro-gender, in this way the theory of being stably, transcendently homosexual in relation to not being stably, transcendently heterosexual, is being validated through the idea of sexuality being something ‘natural’ and therefore fixed and unchangeable. As a result, a pedagogical effort that depicts sexualities as ‘naturally different’, as we have seen, presupposes the gay youth who then consequently becomes the target of these narratives.

On the contrary, to challenge the power relations present in the classroom as adults means on the one hand to avoid the tendency to portrait ourselves as gender-

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<sup>81</sup> However, this does not mean that they do not have to use their power, that students and teachers are equal, rather, as hooks argues (153), “that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context.”

neutral and a-sexual and instead acknowledging our own gender and our own sexuality in order to portray ourselves as 'in development', as a result of a specific gender and sexual socialization. Like Gamberi *et al.* affirms: "[I]t means to recognize the sexual character of the relationship between who teaches and who learns and to accept that the teachers themselves are embodied subjectivities bearers of stories, biographies, pasts signed by gender differences" (2014: 25)<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, as teachers it means to avoid picturing sexuality as something closed and unchangeable, but rather as complex and plural, "to risk [our] own sense of expertise, to remember [our] own feelings of helplessness" (74) so to construct "a community of learners *together*" (hooks 1994: 153).

In fact, teachers themselves become learners in the classroom, they become educators in front of their students, making the educational process, also for them, one which is transformative rather than the teachers having a pre-fixed identity that remains un-affected by the educational environment.

### *Methodological Suggestions*

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, schools are highly political, gendered and sexualized spaces wherein social inequalities are constantly produced and reinforced through unconscious and conscious discourses and practices that, due to an educators' inability to affirmatively incorporate diversity, spread in the school environment. As a response, teachers need tools in order to make them able to recognize theirs and society's responsibilities in shaping pupils' understandings of themselves and of others. As Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen affirm (2012), they need "to be able to interrogate the ways in which economic and social class relations in society [...] affect students' experiences of learning, as well as the ways in which performance and competence pedagogies [...] can serve to reinforce hierarchies and inhibit learning." In fact, to talk about LGBTQI issues or gender equality in the classroom can sometimes be ineffective if, for example, it follows the tendency to

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<sup>82</sup> Original text in Italian: "riconoscere il carattere sessuato della relazione tra chi insegna e chi impara e accettare che i/le docenti stessi siano soggettività incarnate portatori/trici di storie, di biografie, di vissuti segnati dalle differenze del genere".

teach gender and sexuality only in terms of gender roles and/or sexual orientation differences. This can lead to the maintenance of the dualistic heteronormative system, as these initiatives keep on seeing gender and sexuality differences outside of their network social power relations.

### *Attention to Language*

One way to deconstruct and resist the heteronormativity of the educative institutional space is the use of a new language that includes gender and sexuality discourse within the realm of every-day life (Cf. Gilbert 2014). In fact, it is precisely a wider attention to the words we speak that can have the potential to open up those spaces that have been discursively occupied by the heterosexual influence in everyday human representation and historicity. In particular, paying attention to language means to acknowledge how in our talking we value certain words instead of others through a process of gendering, meaning that we attribute a gender to words and consequently position them within a hierarchical scale of values.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, teachers should feel free to talk about a gay novel they have read, about being moved by debates for marriage equality, about having a transgender friend or about being transgender themselves. A new language should be used in the classroom where “the words ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’, and ‘transgender’ [are] spoken out loud, in many different contexts. We need chances to practice saying ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ with each other, so that the terms don’t feel like slurs” Gilbert argues (2014: 97). In this way, personal experiences and life outside the classroom of both students and teachers open the opportunity to create the classroom as a communal place surrounded by a social-cultural environment in which certain people more than others suffer from invisibility. This allows for the development of educational strategies in the classroom that are able to unsettle normative ways of teaching and living social discriminations and inequalities, such as

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<sup>83</sup> Think about a fork and a knife, picture them in front of your eyes. Which one is the female and which one is the male? Now think about a fork and a spoon, did something change in the way you perceive the gender of these two utensils? This example shows both that we tend to attribute a gender even to inanimate things and that gender perspective is not only relational (the fork changes gender according to the gender of the other tool) but hierarchical, since female gender is culturally more negatively connoted than masculine one.

the communal analysis of case studies and the pedagogical tool of *role-play*.

### *Collective analysis of case studies*

The first, in particular, refers directly to the wish to educate *on* gender (gender roles) rather than *about* gender (the dualistic division of gender roles) in that it aims both at creating moments of collective sharing of experience and of their critical discussion. In fact, the collective analysis of case studies brings the outside social world within the school system through the presentation of real events in which gender and sexuality, as axes of significations together with race, class and religion, play an important role on the development of events (Cf. Gamberi *et. al* 2010). “This method simulates reality, it is linked to the experiences and knowledge of the people who are present, it engages them more actively in the learning process and it pushes them to apply theory to practice” writes Zabonati.<sup>84</sup> The most common examples are case studies in which gender differences easily transform in inequalities and limit the life perspectives of boys and girls, such as in the job market or examples of juridical cases and episodes of gender violence in which the gender aspect is particularly relevant.

### *Role-Play*

In the *role-play*, instead, students visually and materially learn social inequalities through their own embodiment of particular identities different in their constitution of gender, sexual orientation, class, race and religious aspects. This pedagogical method implies that at the beginning of the lesson every student stands at the bottom of the class and got assigned a specific identity (e.g. woman, lesbian, middle-class, white and Christian or, man, heterosexual, working-class, black and Muslim). They are asked to answer some simple questions about everyday life, freedom of movement, love-life etc. (e.g. can you hold your lover’s hand while you are walking

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Zabonati in [Chi ha paura del gender? 1](#) Original in Italian: “Questo metodo simula la realtà, si riallaccia alle esperienze e alle conoscenze dei presenti, li coinvolge più attivamente nel processo di apprendimento e li forza ad applicare la teoria alla pratica.”



in the street?) in order to, at every positive answer, make a step further towards the other edge of the classroom. At the end of the game, the goal is to spatially reproduce social inequalities in that those individuals with normative subjectivities will be positioned closer to the 'top' of the class than those with non-normative ones (Cf. Gamberi *et. al.* 2010). This example of a pedagogical strategy allows students to engage more fully with those ideas that seem to have no direct relation to their everyday experience (Cf. hooks 1994), especially for those who embody hegemonic subjectivities and have the right standpoint to critique dominant structures of power. Also, the visual imaginary aspect helps them, indeed, visualizing the effective distance different identities have in society. In this activity, the role of the teacher is to welcome and accept every student's opinion without judging or valuating them, sometimes proposing their ideas as one of the possible options about the issues and without losing sight of both contents and emotions derived by the debate (Cf. Gamberi *et. al.* 2010). In fact, teachers do not have to think for the students, or tell the students what to think, but encourage them to develop their capacity for thinking. As also Gilbert affirms: "[A] thoughtful [...] education would be less organized by what to think and how to act than by developing the capacity to think for one's self" (2014: 74).

### *Technology*

Another interesting opportunity to highlight power relations in society in order to reverse them is technology (Cf. Kinder 1991; Taylor 2007). In the Netherlands the most important Dutch organization active in sexuality education is *Rutgers*<sup>85</sup> and among its pedagogical methods are a wide variety of technological apparatuses such as online guides and toolkits for both students and trainers. In this way technology gives Dutch youngsters the possibility to learn while playing, it creates an innovative space in which they can learn reciprocally about theirs and others people's sexuality. As Laura Fantone (cited in Gamberi *et al.* 2010: 87), "digital technologies permit [...] to be open towards a experimentation of your own identity, at the exploration of

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. [Rutgers](#)

those settings and knowledge that in your concrete life are far and unthinkable.”<sup>86</sup> However, as Italian journalist and writer Christian Raimo points out: “Technology at school does not reduce the pre-existing inequalities, but it can instead nurturing them: teachers can differently relate with those well-off students that have familiarity with both PC and Internet from those who do not have it. Technologies are not only often a privilege for the best ones, but their use is conditioned by the social class structure.”<sup>87</sup> In fact, while it is true that technology can represent an interesting opportunity to insert in the pedagogical curricula, it can also end up in reproducing those inequalities that it is supposed to overcome. Moreover, an investment into new technological tools should engage not only educational settings but society as a whole, in order not to take the space of other, often more urgent, dynamics within the school and increase the gap between richer and poorer educational realities.<sup>88</sup>

Concluding, it can be said that these pedagogical methods help students activate their knowledge in terms of gender social dynamics with the purpose of identify prejudices and discriminations starting from their own experience. In this way, in fact, students are followed through the reconsideration of their own behaviors and beliefs, in a communal process of deconstruction of hegemonic systems of power.

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<sup>86</sup> Original in Italian: “[I]e tecnologie digitali permettono [...] di aprirsi ad una sperimentazione della propria identità, e all’ esplorazione di ambiti e saperi che nella nostra vita concreta risultano lontani ed impensabili”

<sup>87</sup> [www.internazionale.it](http://www.internazionale.it) Original in Italian: “La tecnologia a scuola non riduce le disuguaglianze preesistenti, ma anzi può favorirle: gli insegnanti possono rivolgersi in modo diversi a queglii studenti agiati che a casa hanno familiarità con il computer e internet e quelli che non la hanno. Le tecnologie non solo sono spesso un privilegio dei migliori, ma il loro uso è condizionato da una struttura sociale classista.”

<sup>88</sup> This is particularly true in Italy where, according again to Raimo, to talk about school in Milan or in Palermo are two completely different things, since, as he writes, “there are deep differences, not only in regard of investments (especially in the construction industry, for example), but also on the political choices. The delay of the South’s development is not only compensated by the school, but also it is somehow fomented by the delay of educational policies in the South.” Original text in Italian: “Ci sono differenze profonde, non solo rispetto agli investimenti (soprattutto nell’ edilizia, per esempio), ma anche rispetto alle scelte politiche. Il ritardo di sviluppo del Mezzogiorno non è soltanto non compensato dalla scuola, ma viene in qualche modo alimentato dal ritardo nelle politiche educative a sud.”

## Conclusions

In this thesis I used the Italian contemporary debate on gender education as a starting point in order to reflect on the ways in which gender, sexuality and social inequalities should be taught in the pedagogical realm. Throughout this work, even though reflection on correlated topics arose, my main focus has been the classroom and the discourses that take place within it and the different pedagogies which can be introduced. Following authors such as Pascoe (2007), Allen (2005, 2007), Kehily (2002) and Youdell (2005, 2006) that work at the intersection of schooling and sexuality, I demonstrated that the students' gender and sexuality are constantly monitored and regulated at school through discourses which are based on normative visions of sexuality and gender. As a result, in this thesis I asked: if the school is a place in which students' identity is normatively shaped, what is the most efficient pedagogy to teach about sexuality and gender without re-proposing and maintaining this normativity?

In order to answer this question I analyzed what the oppositional and advisors discourses to gender education in Italy consider gender and sexuality to be and what the role of the school should be in discussing them. I reassume my findings here:

1. Anti-gender exponents see sexuality as naturally divided into females and males (biological sexes), sexual orientation as naturally heterosexual and gender as the natural consequence of one's own biological sex. Therefore, in anti-gender discourses, sex and gender are not only one consequent of the other but especially naturally complementary in their opposition. As a way to bridge opponents' understandings on gender and sexual identity to the educational realm, I used Irvine's book *Talk About Sex. The Battles over Sexual Education in the United States* (2002), in which the author suggests that fears against gender education arise more easily when a discourse about sexuality is connected to the education of young people, since these discourses rely on the idea that children are innocently asexual and that the school is not the place for them to hear about sexuality and gender.

Following Irvine's analysis, I argue that in the Italian debate on gender education Catholic conservative discourses aim at representing the school as an a-sexual place and the students as naturally hetero-a-sexual in order to depict gender and sexuality educational projects as dangerous for young people's development. In other words, I claim that by representing the educational environment and the youth that inhabits it as unrealistically a-sexual, anti-gender take advantage of common adult's fears that young people would learn and talk about sexuality prematurely and in inappropriate places. On the contrary, after demonstrating the power of the school in shaping students' subjectivities (Cf. Foucault 1980, 1990) and the presence of normative sexual and gender dynamics and discourses in the classroom (Kehily 2002; Pascoe 2007; Youdell 2005, 2006), I instead proposed that anti-gender oppose these pedagogies because, first of all, they depict gender as culturally linked to sexuality rather than naturally derived by it and, secondly, they aim at discussing other forms of gender and sexual identity different from the heteronormative one, perceived as 'unnatural' for conservatives' points of view. In this way I claim that, through the creation of an emotional discourse on cultural morality, what conservatives really fear is not that sexuality could enter the school system but that different sexual identities will.

2. Pro-gender advocates consider human sexual and gender identity as a combination of a cultural aspect (gender) and two natural ones (sex and sexual orientation), in which being masculine or feminine is independent from one's own body and more culturally influenced while, on the other hand, both sex and sexual orientation are natural in their being more physical and biological aspects of one's own subjectivity. Thus, pro-gender affirm that human beings are more complex than the heteronormative binaristic vision of anti-gender that wants males to be (heterosexual) men and females to be (heterosexual) women, in that there are various types of sexual and gender identities. As a result, the school they envision is a school where 'different' subjectivities are included and respected as part of a broader natural human sexual complexity, and a pedagogical effort on gender and sexuality would teach that, no matter the differences, all the various configurations of identity have to be equal.

Subsequently I connected pro-gender understandings of sexuality, gender and schooling to a reflection on the ways in which social inequalities and discriminations should be taught in the school. In this regard, it proposes two main arguments:

1. Even though progressive discourses make a step further from conservative ones in valorizing the cultural aspect of gender, by auspicing to a pedagogical effort that teaches the naturalness of different types of sexual identities (i.e. to teach that homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals etc. have to be treated like equals no matter their differences), these discourses do not deconstruct the dualistic framework that create identities as either normative or non-normative in the first place, namely heteronormativity. In fact, after a reflection on what gender and sexual identity mean (Braidotti 2006; 2011; Butler 1997, 2005), I argued that pro-gender fail to take into account the fact that human differences are not just differences able to easily become equal since they are placed into hierarchical positions within complex structures of power that are constantly produced and reinforced through public institutions like the school. Indeed, in my point of view identity is multiple, complex and in a process of continuous construction and re-negation of meanings which, instead, tend to be perceived as fixed and self-constructed.

2. The same tendency to perceive human identity as casts into homogenous essences of unchangeable naturally subjectivities then leads also to consider human beings as 'naturally different' and, as a consequence, social issues like homophobia, violence against women, racism etc. as the result of individual shortcomings which ultimately can be resolved through an education that aims at unlearning oppressive codes in order to then re-learn politically correct ones (Gatens 1983). In fact, a consequence derived from pro-gender categorization of human identity is that in this way they risk to naively believe that if different individuals are not yet equal or respected, this is because of individual ignorance, homophobic or racist actions and that, consequently, by correcting those negative behaviors social discriminations will end. On the contrary, I claim that in the school social inequalities must be taught as structural consequences of the hierarchical distribution of power in society, and that the school as an institution should not only be a place in which minorities are

welcomed by normative subjectivities that are taught to respect those who are different in order to promote a society of tolerance and respect, but especially in which those who embody normative positions of identity should understand the way in which they themselves come to be positioned where they are, the way in which they become dominant subjects in a system that is structured by particular dynamics of power. In particular, following hooks' understanding of "education as the practice of freedom" (1994), I opt for a school in which differences between individuals are contextualized within the cultural system which not only surrounds them but also constantly monitors, regulates and constitutes them. As a consequence, difference in people's sexual and gender identities are not merely included in the school but also approached together with the inequalities and discriminations that come from the hierarchical distributions of power these differences are embedded in. Furthermore, following Gilbert (2014) I propose to reflect on the role of the teachers in creating a more equal educational environment and argue that, first of all, in order to teach sexuality and gender, educators need to be willing to represent themselves as sexual and gendered beings. Secondly, I claim that in order to underline the social aspects of inequalities, teachers should not refer to differences among students in terms of fixed identitarian characteristics, but rather as open processes of development embedded in specific structures of power. Finally, relying on the manual written by Gamberi *et.al.* (2010) I suggest four methodological tools which help to promote a way to do gender and sexuality education using these concepts as two broader social axes of signification for students' subjectivities, underlying the importance of teaching power relations. These are: 1) attention to language and especially to talk about LGBTQI issues or gender equality in the classroom; 2) collective analysis of case studies which brings the outside social world within the school system through the presentation of real events in which gender and sexuality, as axes of significations together with race, class and religion, play an important role on the development of events; 3) *role-play* which allows students to engage more fully with those ideas that seem to have no direct relation to their everyday experience and to visually and materially learn social inequalities through their own embodiment of particular identities different in their constitution of gender, sexual orientation, class, race and religious aspects; 4) technology as an interesting

opportunity to highlight power relations in society and as an investment that should engage society as a whole.

In this thesis I analyzed the reasons behind the opposition to those politics and pedagogical projects that aim at introducing gender education in the schools as a way to prevent gender inequalities and discriminations. According to the *Global Gender Gap Report* of the World Economic Forum for the year 2015 Italy is ranked at the 42<sup>nd</sup> place among 145 countries, between Bahamas (41<sup>st</sup>) and Colombia (43<sup>rd</sup>).<sup>89</sup> Since the beginning of 2016 more than 75 women have been killed by men's hands, most often husbands and ex boyfriends.<sup>90</sup> In this scenario, education can make a difference in fighting gender violence, but it cannot teach gender without teaching power, hate, and domination. Understanding how discrimination works is the first step towards its overcoming.

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. [weforum.org](http://weforum.org)

<sup>90</sup> Cf. [www.corriere.it](http://www.corriere.it)

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