



# “It’s Your Word Against Mine”: A Case Study of Gender Negotiation in a Spanish School

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## Abstract

Although a number of laws, protocols and plans have been passed in Spain in the last 10 years to support gender diversity in education, they still have not been fully implemented in schools. In this paper we describe the case of Arturo, a trans boy, and the various negotiations he went through in his secondary school for 2 years. We used a thematic analysis to identify the negotiations involving educational staff, teachers and students based on 6 themes: (a) naming; (b) compliance with trans students’ rights; (c) toilets and changing rooms; (d) physical activities; (e) gender disclosure; and (f) privileges. These experiences include the different micro and macroaggressions Arturo suffered at school. On the positive we describe various trans students’ inclusion strategies in this context, highlighting the social workers’ role in building inclusive and respectful spaces for this minority group. Inclusive strategies can help to create more positive experiences for trans students and help to expand even the current queer restrictive gender narratives circulating in schools.

**Keywords** Education · Inclusion · Transgender · Case study · Gender disclosure

More and more trans people -individuals whose gender identities do not match their sex assigned at birth- disclose their gender identities and initiate their transitions at an early age in and through educational contexts (Palkki, 2020). However, heteronormativity, defined “as a cultural understanding in which heterosexuality is the norm” (Maurer-Starks et al., 2008, p. 327) and cisnormativity, as a system of discourses, norms and beliefs that validate the binary gender order based on the sex assigned at birth (McBride & Neary, 2021; Shelton & Dodd, 2020), are still very present in educational settings. This cis-heteronormative system, (re)produced at the individual, institutional and cultural levels is oppressive and can hinder trans students’ processes of disclosure and transition. In Spain, Devís-Devís et al. (2017) and Devís-Devís et al. (2022) reported that education was one of the key contexts in which more trans people experienced harassment.

According to Devís-Devís et al. (2017), 46.2% of 212 trans people suffered this situation at school and Devís-Devís et al. (2022) suggest that trans non-binary students suffered the highest harassment rates (64.9%) among an LGBT sample. This transphobia, mainly committed by *other students*, is often ignored by the school authorities (FELGTB, 2019).

However, some Spanish regional governments have approved protocols, guidance, and/or integral plans to ensure attention to gender diversity (e.g. Law 8/2014 in the Canary Islands Autonomous Community; Instruction of December 15, 2016 in the Valencia Community; Educational protocol in cases of transsexuality by the Navarra Government; Protocol of action on gender identity in the Andalusian educational system; Law 8/2016 in the Autonomous Community of Murcia). These regulations, aimed at improving the trans people’s rights guaranteed by the national law, state that administrative, organizational and educational norms should be adopted to enable trans minors to freely develop their gender identities and prevent transphobia in the classroom. Although they do have differences, these regulations insist on four common compulsory norms: (a) schools are obliged to change administrative documentation to consider trans students’ names and gender identities, (b) teachers and other staff must address trans students by their chosen name, (c) the schools have

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to guarantee trans students the right to use clothing, toilets and changing rooms according to their gender identities and (d) sex-segregated activities must be avoided.

The increasing legislation on gender diversity should, however, be taken with caution since, in practice, the efforts are often unconnected with the regulations and the literature suggests that schools often adopt a reactive role in acknowledging trans people's rights (Formby, 2015; Morgan & Taylor, 2019; Warin & Price, 2020). As the educational system is deeply permeated by gender binarism and cis-heteronormativity, there is a risk of these schools committing and reproducing unnoticed forms of violence and oppression toward trans students. These more invisible forms of violence, such as micro and macroaggressions, greatly hinder implementing the mandatory norms (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Lewis & Sembiente, 2019; McBride, 2021). Caring for trans students' well-being requires attention to possible fissures and failures in implementing inclusive norms and creating more counter-hegemonic practices in classrooms.

Professionals in primary and secondary schools should ethically form an alliance with trans students against cis-heteronormativity and perpetuating the power dynamics and gender oppression (Markman, 2011; Shelton & Dodd, 2020). School social workers can especially promote social justice and challenge discrimination and institutional oppression based on people's gender identities (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Although school social work is still an invisible minority profession in Spain, these professionals are relevant in attending to diversity and inclusion. School social workers can give great support to teachers, informing them of trans students' realities and helping them to adapt their curriculums and/or by developing queer pedagogies. They can also foster diversity by creating new social intervention initiatives in educational contexts to assist trans students. All these professional responsibilities can help to improve the implementation of the inclusive proposals for schools laid down by law and compensate for its limitations (Valero et al., 2019; Van Soest & Bryant, 1995).

For social workers to do this correctly, they should be aware of trans students' experiences at school to be able to identify their difficulties and necessities. As Lewis and Sembiente (2019) have indicated, more qualitative studies that capture the realities of trans students are needed to create more inclusive schools and prevent transphobia. It is especially necessary to analyze trans students' experiences in gender negotiations and gender disclosure in schools with teachers, administrative staff, and peers, to identify the difficulties, violence and challenges these students face *within* the framework of the inclusive norms previously mentioned or even *despite* them.

## Literature Review

Trans students' experiences at school tend to be diluted within the broader LGBTQ community (Caudwell, 2014). The purpose of this scoping review was thus to present a broad overview of the evidence on trans students' experiences at secondary schools and identify any gaps in the knowledge pertaining to this topic (Tricco et al., 2016). The five-stage methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) were followed to carry out the scoping review: (1) identify the research question, (2) identify the relevant studies, (3) select the studies, (4) chart the data and (5) collate, summarize and report. In adhering to this framework, the research team identified a particular research question that guided our review: What are the experiences of trans students in secondary school?

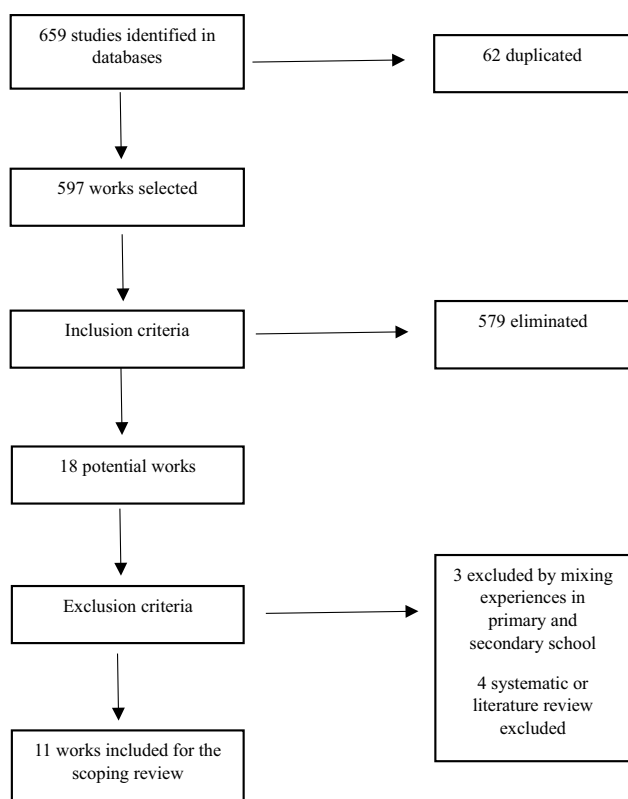
The literature searches were conducted in the Web of Science, ERIC and Scopus databases using the following search terms ((Transgend\* OR Transsex\* OR "Trans Persons" OR "Trans People" OR "Trans Youth" OR "trans girl" OR "trans boy") AND (secondary school OR high school) AND (Experience\* OR Percept\*)). All the studies were published in English, covering a period from 2000 to 2023 and no geographical limits were imposed (Fig. 1).

A total of 659 studies were found in the Web of Science (390) ERIC (193) and Scopus databases (76). After eliminating duplicated studies (62), reading the titles and abstracts of 597 records was carried out following three inclusion criteria: (a) the studies should follow qualitative methods; (b) the sample must be compounded exclusively by self-identified trans people; and (c) they must contain empirical information on their experiences at middle, secondary, high school or in school sports. Considering these criteria, 579 were eliminated from the potential works, when two further exclusion criteria were followed: (a) systematic or literature reviews; (b) mixed trans students from primary and secondary school. After eliminating 7 works, 11 highly relevant publications were finally included for the scoping review (see selection in Table 1).

The scoping review revealed relevant aspects of trans students' experiences at secondary school. Before coming out, trans students lived their gender identities with a mix of positive and negative emotions in which confusion and distress caused by their changing bodies were highlighted. They also pointed out the frustration and terrible experiences they went through in hiding their gender identities from others (Mackie et al., 2023). For some, coming out was positive, in that they were accepted, and their gender identities and pronouns were respected (Kelley et al., 2022). Others felt a reduction in their bullying experience (McGowan et al., 2022), although many felt their gender identities were not well accepted by their

**Table 1** Literature review

Authors and year	Data collection	Participants and identity	Location	Purpose
Bower-Brown et al. (2023)	Open-ended responses to a survey	74 adolescents (25 binary-trans, 25 non-binary, and 24 gender-questioning) aged 13–17 years old	UK	To explore the school experiences and navigation strategies of gender-diverse adolescents in the UK, examining the individual experiences of binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning adolescents
DeChants et al. (2022)	Open-ended responses to survey	294 transgender high school and adolescent girls between 13 and 24 years old	USA	To examine reasons why whether or not they chose to participate (or not) in high school sports
Devis-Devis (2018)	Semi-structured interviews	9 trans people (5 transwomen and 4 transmen) aged between 23 and 50 years at the time of the interview	Spain	To gather the memories and impressions of a group of adult trans persons on their experiences in secondary PE
Hillier et al. (2020)	Interviews	22 transgender youths aged between 16 and 22 years old	USA	To understand how risk and resilience simultaneously characterize the high school experiences of trans youth
Howell and Allen (2020)	Two focus groups of 5–6 participants and one interview	10 fa'afafine and 2 fakaleiti people with a median age of 26 years at the time of the study	New Zealand	This study examines participants' recollections of daily experiences of being fa'afafine and fakaleiti at an all-boys school
Johns et al. (2021)	33 in-depth interviews and two focus groups	41 transgender youths from 16 to 25 years old	USA	To examine in-school experiences of transgender youth to understand youth coping and to identify key opportunities for improving school environments for transgender youth
Kelley et al. (2022)	Interviews	12 trans students (two identified as trans girls, four as trans boys and six as nonbinary youths.) aged 15–17 years old	Canada	To understand how the experiences, gender affirmation and challenges encountered by TNB youths in the school setting affected their well-being
Mackie et al. (2023)	Individual semi-structured interviews	11 transgender young people aged between 12 and 17 years old	Australia	To explore transgender young people's school counselling experiences
McGowan et al. (2022)	Semi-structured interviews	10 transgenders aged between 11–16 years old	UK	To explore the views and experiences of transgender pupils at secondary schools, focusing on the factors the participants reported to support or frustrate overall positive school experiences
Palkki (2020)	Semi-structured interviews, observations and emails/messages	3 transgender students in American secondary school choral programs aged between 27–28 years of age	USA	To explore the experiences of trans students in secondary school choral music programs in the United States
Wilson et al. (2005)	Interviews with open-ended questions	6 MTF and 2 FTM between 14–17 years of age	UK	To develop an understanding of the interaction between young people with atypical gender identity organization and their peers



**Fig. 1** Flow chart for article selection

peers, who bullied and harassed them in different ways, both physically and verbally (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Howell & Allen, 2020; Johns et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2005). Being misnamed and misgendered by their peers was quite a common experience with subtle microaggressions, including e.g. receiving weird stares or being looked at differently, being gossiped about, hearing inappropriate cis-normative comments, or suffering their peers' or teachers' ignorance regarding transgender issues (Kelley et al., 2022; Palkki, 2020). These situations happened especially when they transgressed the gender norms and especially to non-binary and gender-questioning participants (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Devís-Devís et al., 2018).

Transphobia in secondary school affected the participants' mental health. The studies report isolation, loneliness and difficulties developing relationships with peers (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2005). In another research project, the students were worried about their safety and suffering maltreatment (Mackie et al., 2023) while those who had not disclosed their gender identities feared the potential negative consequences of disclosure (e.g. being judged, mistreated or bullied) (Johns et al., 2021). Those who had friends were especially afraid of losing them by coming out, placing them in a tense situation (McGowan et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2005).

The bullying generally went unpunished or ineffectively punished and negatively affected other areas in their lives, like school attendance and academic achievements (Kelley et al., 2022). In other studies, they found that school psychologists or counselors helped them to gain skills and knowledge to better cope with their difficulties (Mackie et al., 2023). For others, teachers and staff support was a protective factor for their wellbeing and some participants appreciated the schools' efforts to use the proper names and pronouns to refer to them (Palkki, 2020). However, most of the participants in the studies expressed feeling a lack of school support. The overrepresentation of cisnormativity and heteronormativity in school culture made trans students' inclusion difficult (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; McGowan et al., 2022). Some programs and policies did not consider trans students, who were ignored and kept out of school decisions (Kelley et al., 2022), and non-binary students also found a remarkable lack of knowledge about their identities, which impeded their recognition (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Some schools even had a set process for responding to trans students: there were reports of student confusion as they felt silenced (Johns et al., 2021; McGowan et al., 2022). Across the studies, the trans participants were often not consulted about their preferences and others were not allowed to use the bathrooms they wished to use (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Mackie et al., 2023). Bathrooms and locker rooms were especially defined as uncomfortable spaces that many trans and non-binary students tried to avoid, for instance, by not drinking liquids or trying to dress and undress without witnesses (Howell & Allen, 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; McGowan et al., 2022). Other participants could use alternative bathrooms, like the staff ones, but these spaces also generated a sense of otherness (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Uniforms also caused problems to trans students, expressing but also impeding their gender expressions (Howell & Allen, 2020).

Physical education (PE) was also recalled negatively, with wide reports of feeling out of place when sports activities were split into groups of boys and girls (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2022). Trans girls especially reported feeling ignored, frustrated and demotivated in this subject (Devís-Devís et al., 2018) and others found high school sports to be hostile contexts, deciding not to participate due to anxiety about the reinforcement of normative gender identities. In contrast, others reported being able to successfully perform their identities in high school sports (DeChants et al., 2022), while some subjects, such as choir-singing made it easier for some trans students to reinforce their gender identities (Palkki, 2020).

The studies selected for this scoping review show that trans students were not passive when dealing with cis-heteronormativity at school and used multiple strategies to navigate the school environment, such as acquiring knowledge

on their rights, defending themselves and other transgender students, engaging in activism and LGBT communities, arguing, fighting, expressing their gender identities as they wanted and queering their institutions with their performances (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Others also opted for educating and informing people about the pronouns and language that made them more comfortable (Johns et al., 2021; Kelley et al., 2022; McGowan et al., 2022) and some even used class assignments to teach their teachers. Some responders also sought support from queer teachers (Hillier et al., 2020) and teachers that stood up against anti-LGBTQ+ behavior and bullying (Mackie et al., 2023).

The trans students whose school contexts were unusually hostile decided to conceal their identities or select the time and people they wanted to disclose to. Others created relationships in class and in other possible safe contexts such as high school sports (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; DeChants et al., 2022). In the worst case, the participants avoided people or changed to a new school to protect themselves (Kelley et al., 2022). However, in most cases, avoiding and dropping PE and avoiding other school activities and spaces such as locker rooms and bathrooms were enough to safeguard them (Hillier et al., 2020; Howell & Allen, 2020). Some students also used humor and optimism and interpreted people's mistakes generously, while others used different cognitive strategies to reduce the impact of negative experiences, such as simple activities like sports that distracted them (DeChants et al., 2022; Johns et al., 2021). In short, most of the studies included in the scoping review include many relevant experiences of trans students in secondary schools. However, many of the participants had not disclosed their gender identities at the time of participating in the research study and few focused on how they negotiated their gender identities.

## Current Study

The purpose of our research was to describe the case study of Arturo, a trans boy, and the various negotiation processes that he went through in his 2 years of transitioning at secondary school. At present, there is little evidence on these gender negotiation processes with peers, teachers, and other staff from the perspective of cis-heteronormativity and micro-macroaggressions. The research questions that guided the study were: How did Arturo negotiate his gender identity in a cis-heteronormative school after coming out? And how did he deal with the transition in this context? A case study allows in-depth understanding and sheds lights on the application of legalistic inclusive policies. It is useful for revealing environmental micro and macro aggressions, i.e. aggressions in a particular domain such as schools (Chang & Chung, 2015) and reducing them to promote gender diversity and improve the existing trans inclusive policies and measures in education.

## Methods

### Study Design

We conducted a case study to achieve our aims focusing on Arturo's experiences, as we considered it an appropriate strategy to answer our questions on not only *how* or *why* but also to obtain in-depth information on the inclusion actions that work and those that do not in educational centers (Yin, 2018). According to Merriam, the use of a case study in education can help researchers to "uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (1998, p. 29). We chose a single case study as a comprehensive and intense approach (see Gustafsson, 2017) to situate the processes of gender negotiation at high school and the micro and macroaggressions that emerged in these processes. As the 'cases' can evolve over time in particular places (Starman, 2013), this method can provide a temporal dimension that is key to understanding how cis-heteronormativity is daily reproduced and installed in students, teachers and other staff in schools. The data we gathered consisted of four interviews with Arturo and 6 months' ethnographic work in the school, attending parents' meetings and in classes in different years to contextualize the case. The absence of a social worker at the school prevented us from access to more technical documents.

### Participant

This case study was a continuation of a research project on trans people's experiences in different social domains (e.g.: school) that emerged from the identification of a relevant case by the third author. While he was ending fieldwork in a high school, he met Arturo, a 15-year-old trans boy who had disclosed his gender identity just a few months before. As Arturo's case offered a unique chance to find out how the school dealt with his identity disclosure and transition, the researcher invited Arturo to take part in a series of follow-up face-to-face open interviews, which he accepted.

Arturo was studying in a middle-class public school attended by students between 12 and 18 years old, many of whom were Moroccan. His classes had between 6 and 28 students depending on subject and course and were composed mainly of females. His teachers were mostly white, middle-aged and always used the generic masculine when speaking Spanish, a gender-based language. Arturo's school was in a small region of Spain that had recently approved a gender diversity law that included the four compulsory norms previously commented in the Introduction of this paper. Although there is now a national law in



Spain that makes recognizing trans students' in schools, this law had not been approved when he participated in this research.

The third author shared Arturo's experiences with the other authors and these were the subject of extensive discussions, especially between the first and last authors at Strathclyde University during a research stay. This case study involved a collaborative effort between researchers from different universities, all with expertise in transgender studies and a shared interest in this particular research topic.

## Data Collection

Arturo took part in a total of four interviews with the third author, which took place between October 2016 and June 2018. They were recorded verbatim and lasted between 60 and 90 min. Raquel, his mother, also participated in two of these. The interviews were structured around three thematic blocks dealing with the advances and setbacks in Arturo's identity transition process in three different contexts: (1) legal; (2) health; and (3) school. The present paper focuses specifically on his experiences at school.

## Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed to both inductively and deductively identify patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), all the interviews were first transcribed verbatim and re-read thoroughly by the first author so as to be familiar with the data set. Due to the size of the project, this analysis used the traditional tools for printed data, such as pens and highlighters, instead of digital analysis software. Initial codes were generated, and cis-heteronormative micro-macroaggressions were recognized, with the literature used to frame the themes. Subtle forms of violence were very present in Arturo's negotiation processes. The data were classified into the relevant topics of negotiation to organize his experiences. The second and last authors reviewed and discussed this coding process and final classification as follows: (a) naming; (b) compliance of trans students' rights; (c) toilets and changing rooms; (d) physical activities; (e) gender disclosure; and (f) privileges. The topics and Arturo's reactions were organized according to the actions of the teachers, students and other staff. The first author wrote the first draft of the paper and the others critically reviewed the manuscript.

## Ethical Considerations

Different ethical considerations emerge in qualitative research during the research process and are mainly linked to the relationships formed in the field (Del Olmo, 2010).

Here we especially faced some unique ethical issues derived from focusing on a young trans person. Beyond the general ethical considerations in qualitative studies, such as respect for the participants, preserving their integrity or anticipating possible damage, we considered some additional ethical aspects related to the participant's identities.

As Arturo was 15 years old at the time of the first interview, his participation in the research process was characterized by the asymmetrical relationships with adults, which produced particular ethical concerns. One was the consent to interview Arturo, which included his own verbal consent and a written informed consent from his mother. We were committed to preserving his anonymity by not using real names and not revealing personal information (e.g. the place where he lived or the names of his classmates and teachers). As the case study took several years, Arturo also signed an informed consent when he reached 18 years of age (legal age). We also sent him the transcriptions to modify, expand, or erase anything he did not agree with, although he did not propose any changes and confirmed what he had stated in the interviews.

We also respected his self-determined gender at all times, addressing him by his chosen name, applying the appropriate pronouns and gender suffixes in Spanish. Arturo was especially sensitive to the way others addressed him, due to his dislike of being considered feminine. We were also conscious of our own research positionality, including gender and sexual identification and 'outness'. We followed Hale's rules (2009) for cis researchers, focusing on trans people's experiences, such as approaching the topic with openness, questioning our own positions, avoiding erasing the participants' voice or homogenizing this population. We also adhered to Morgan and Taylor's guidelines (2016) to adopt ethical practices with trans people, skipping harmful questions and making pauses when necessary. After writing the paper, the final version was sent to Arturo to obtain his impression and approval of the text and of the case study as a whole, in which he made comments and suggestions for the paper's analysis and results. We then democratized some parts of the research process and minimized the differences in the power relations between the researchers and the participant.

## Results

To organize the complexity of the negotiation processes of the different themes, we grouped Arturo's experiences according to the people involved in them: (1) Negotiating gender with the administration staff and school management team; (2) Negotiating gender with teachers; and (3) negotiating gender with students. The advantage of grouping the results in this way is that it facilitates the identification of

improvement strategies in the form of implications, particularly aimed at these different groups.

### **Negotiating Gender with the Administration Staff and School Management Team**

Before Arturo's gender disclosure, an LGBTQ Association gave a talk to the students at his secondary school about trans status and gender diversity. After talking to some LGBTQ members in private, Arturo felt encouraged to disclose his gender identity to both his family and to the school administrative staff and management team.

Transitioning at school required long negotiation processes. When Arturo disclosed his gender identity, he dealt with the head teacher, head of studies and administrative staff to agree on different aspects regarding his transition. From the beginning he and his family felt alone and neglected in this process and felt that the school should have given them more attention, something that Arturo found shocking: "The director did not approach my parents to talk about my issue at any time. To this day, he hasn't had the initiative to talk to them personally" (Interview 1). The staff's lack of training obliged Arturo and his family to find out for themselves about trans students' rights at school and search for support from LGBTQ associations. They also found themselves with the task of training school managers and teachers. As these professionals were not familiar with the school accompaniment law for trans students, which had been approved by their regional government few months before, Arturo and his family felt forced to explain the law to them to compel them to adopt changes in regard to his gender identity transition. They had to repeatedly contact the director about implementing this law and the proper managing of Arturo's gender identity at the school, as Raquel, Arturo's mother, describes:

[I'm going to write] another letter to the director, and I am going to make two copies of that, it is going to be backed with the [LGBTQ] collective's signatures to remind him, and already in writing, the articles that refer to transsexuality, the organic law of the minor (...) and to try to arrange an appointment with the management team, director, head of studies and guidance [service] ... (Interview 2)

These reminders continued, since the staff and teachers' lack of cooperation did not change and sometimes they were not given a good reception by the director, as Raquel explains, in recalling her talk with the head teacher: "[I said], 'Martin [director], I'll give you the document this week' and he answered 'It isn't necessary, it isn't necessary...we know what we have to do', but I preferred to give him the document to remind him what had to be done" (Interview 4). During the long process of navigating the transition, Arturo

and his family's relationship with him became strained by increasing tension and distrust.

In their meetings with the school management team, Arturo and his family expected to be listened to and their requests taken into consideration. However even when the staff took the initiative of asking Arturo for his preferences and options, they did not listen to him and opposed his wishes:

[They asked me] what name they should put on [an unofficial diploma]. I said that I'd like Arturo but not the other [assigned at birth or dead] name. And she said that if they did that it would generate a stir (...). She then said that she didn't advise that option and told me not to cause any trouble. And I said, 'well nothing...put the other name', and she asked, 'but which one do you prefer?' 'I want Arturo, obviously'. She said, 'we will put the name you prefer' and I said, 'no, whatever you say I will listen to you and that's it'. (Interview 1)

These situations involved names but were also related to access to sex-segregated facilities, such as bathrooms:

I said 'I prefer to go to the boys' toilet because in the girls' (...) I felt uncomfortable, [I] go in and out [of the bathroom] looking at the floor, I don't want to look at anyone'. And she asked me again which bathroom I wanted, boys or girls; I said, 'I can't go into the girls'. And she tells me [with a disgruntled plaintive voice], 'but in the boys' bathrooms ...' (Interview 1)

Additionally, when Arturo claimed his legitimacy and his wish to be seen and recognized as a boy by the whole school, the school thought his visibility would be risky for him:

I said 'if you [head teacher] want and you give me permission, I will speak publicly with all the students and teachers to explain my situation and make my life normal' (...). At the beginning, he said 'yes', but the next time we met he said 'no'. He talked to the head of studies and together they decided that it was better if I was not publicly exposed and told me not to make an exhibition of myself (Interview 1)

According to the school administration, becoming the focus of attention could have negative consequences for Arturo. The staff proposed that a teacher should explain his situation to the school, but this option was finally rejected. The erratic decisions adopted increased Arturo's vulnerability:

They said that a teacher could speak instead of me so that I wouldn't have to expose myself. I mean, that was fine with me but then they backed down and said no. They said that neither a teacher nor I could speak because, if someone had cancer, they were not going

to preach that they had cancer or was a gay or a lesbian (Interview 1)

The constant reconsideration of their decisions created confusion and impeded a solution to the problem. The final decisions of the administrative staff and school management team were made in Arturo's absence. Although he wanted to be open about his male identity and to use the boys' toilet, his wish was not complied with and his capacity to take actions was limited: "I said 'ok, but what bathroom do I go to?' And ... they didn't know what to say to me" (Interview 1).

Bathrooms were one of the most important topics of discussion with the school management team. Arturo commented that he had no problem in using the boys' toilet if the doors had locks to give him privacy. However, they discouraged him when they realized there were no locks in the boys' toilets: "Then they told me that, for reasons of hygiene the girls' bathrooms were cleaner than the boys' and I said 'I don't care about cleanliness, I want to go to these bathrooms, and I want them to have locks'. The school finally agreed to put locks on the toilet doors, however these were soon removed by some students. In this situation, Arturo was recommended to use them anyway despite possible conflicts and lack of safety he could face. He then warned them of the possible consequences:

'If they say something to me or they do something to me, I'm going to defend myself' (...). She [the school counsellor] said 'you won't go there with that aggressive attitude' and I said, 'but if something happens... They can say something or do something to me and will I not be able to do anything in that situation?' And she said again: 'with that aggressiveness of yours...'

As he kept his gender identity secret and as this space is dangerous at certain times, he was able to use the boys' bathroom only between classes. During the recess he could ask the teachers to use their toilets.

### Negotiating Gender with Teachers

Arturo wanted to be addressed by his (chosen) name. In Spain, modifying names and genders in the national identity card makes it easier to modify them in other official documents. According to Spanish Organic Law 3/2007, underage trans persons cannot modify their gender in the civil register or the national identity card, so that Arturo's high school database could not be modified in his interest. However, according to current policies, his chosen name must appear in other public administrative documents and with a similar format and form to the rest of the students' name, including the rolls. Arturo's teachers thus had to use a modified roll instead of the electronic database if they wanted to use

Arturo's name during routine rollcalls. Despite this, many teachers did not bother to use Arturo's name verbally:

They said that the name was changed in the list and all the teachers knew about that and that I was not going to have any problem (...). However, my last year's class tutor, who was perfectly aware of my case, deliberately used the wrong name [publicly] when calling the roll (Interview 1)

Others made the same mistake when they checked the attendance in writing: "The list came to me, people signed it next to their names and I read the list and saw my [dead] name. It was [enough] to go directly to the inspection..." (Interview 2).

After some complaints, the school decided that the teachers must register the students in a printed list with Arturo's name placed on the teacher's desk in the classroom. This solution was agreed to by both parties and there were then fewer conflicts since this list contained Arturo's name. However, the problems returned when the normal teachers were replaced by substitutes: "I had to tell them that the students should be called by their names on the rolls [register]" (Interview 3).

Arturo's physics and chemistry teacher also forgot this procedure several times and used the electronic database to call the roll, projecting it onto the blackboard and publicly using Arturo's dead name in front of the rest of the students. Arturo again complained to the school management, which produced a defensive reaction from the teacher: "It is very unlikely that I plugged in the projector (...) it's your word against mine' (...). And I said to her, 'I said it because it happened, not because I invented it...'" (Interview 3).

This teacher also looked for support in the classroom by using her authority: "if we ask the students, they'll be on my side'. When Arturo tried to get support from some of his closest friends, he found himself fighting alone for his gender identity at school: [Arturo asked his friend] 'She did it, right?' [she answered] 'I don't know what to say...you're the only one that pays any attention to that...' Of course, they aren't affected by it" (Interview 3).

This careless attitude was reinforced by the attitude of other teachers who did not give any importance to this point, which Arturo and his family could not understand: "the teacher said [to my mum] that it wasn't a big deal to be given the wrong name because in the end it was only for a few seconds and that I did not want to understand their attitude, that I didn't empathize at all [with the teacher]" (Interview 4). The head of studies, who had to know the regional law for the inclusion of trans students and whose role was to coordinate the teaching activities, did not support Arturo either "[She] felt offended (...), she said that she could not understand why we had accused her colleague" (Interview 3).



The rollcalls were not the only problematic situation for Arturo. Some teachers also denied his gender identity by using the wrong pronouns, which forced Arturo to correct their mistakes. Again, some of them did not take kindly to Arturo's reprimands and demanded he be patient and understanding:

To this day, she continues to screw up [and she once said] 'you have to be more understanding and you must understand me'. And I said to her 'it is something that we also dealt with last year, it's not something new' (Interview 1)

Most of the subjects' activities and curriculums were not normally an impediment to Arturo's transition and the transition did not interfere with his learning process and skills. However, PE was challenging since it demanded a certain physical performance incompatible with his transition. This made it difficult for him to do physical activities and sport in the same way as his classmates. When he started to transition his teacher understood his situation:

'I wear a chest binder [I told him] that makes it difficult for me to breathe, and there are exercises that I just cannot do'. And I warned him there were exercises that I would have to stop, and couldn't do (...) And he told me, 'that's fine, you [can do the exercises] at your own pace and do what you can' (Interview 2)

The following year, Arturo and his mother sent a letter to the new PE teacher explaining his transition symptoms and his difficulties in doing physical activities due to wearing the binder. However, this new teacher told him "There wasn't any problem and that if he needed something she would support him", but then she demanded that he be like his classmates and get used to the standard sports outfit:

I couldn't do it [run] with the clothes I was wearing (...). The binder made it difficult to breathe (...) And the only thing the teacher could say was to tell me I couldn't go to PE in those clothes. I usually wear them to disguise my hips (...) If you complain when you don't even know why I'm wearing the sweatshirt, why I wear these clothes and the binder and you don't care, don't you realize? You need to consider everything, and you cannot remember it for a moment and then forget it (Interview 2)

Negotiating his gender identity and transition with the PE teacher was even more difficult for Arturo when he started the hormonal treatment. His priority of developing a more masculine body clashed with the PE teacher's wanting to evaluate him in the same way as his classmates:

I couldn't sweat with Testogel and I couldn't do PE (...) because if you start to sweat, it spoils the effect.

I told the [PE] teacher that I couldn't do PE, and she took it a bit to heart, and [said] 'but then how do I evaluate you?' I said as long as the doctor does not change the treatment, I cannot do it. A week later, she forgot this and included me in physical education (Interview 4)

His PE teacher's refusal to make concessions to him caused him difficulties in PE classes and negatively impacted his grades, which were lower than he expected:

I had a 7 [out of 10] in the PE assessment. It was a shock for me. It's true that there are some things I cannot do but I do all the activities that I can, even those I cannot... (Interview 4)

### Negotiating Gender with Students

Arturo got the help of an LGBTQ association to publicly tell his classmates he was a trans person. He decided to do it for fear of his classmates' reactions:

I didn't know how to say it and I needed a little support (...). some of my classmates were homophobic (...). And I was scared of doing it [alone] in case they started laughing or made nasty comments and I did not know how to do it. I was afraid of what they would say (Interview 1)

They took it better than he expected, although it took a while to make them respect his name and gender identity: "They hugged me and said they supported me. But you don't get what you want overnight, either the masculine treatment or the name" (Interview 1). The girls were more sensitive than their male counterparts and easily changed their behavior to recognize Arturo's gender identity:

The girls took it very well. They took less time to treat me and call me as I wanted. (...) They did it quite fast. On the other hand, the boys, with whom I had little to do because they weren't mature enough treated me in the feminine and used the [dead] name (...) some of them were sexist and said they were not homophobes, but when you hear their comments... (Interview 1)

Boys were more careless and disrespectful of his identity. Arturo perceived hostility from many of the male classmates: "they cannot say anything to me, but I can see how they look at me" (Interview 2). According to Arturo, their hate for him was also motivated by his hegemonic masculine characteristics: "They don't like me being stronger than most of them, and this destroyed their masculinity" (Interview 2). The constant rivalry between Arturo and his male classmates meant he preferred to be with the girls all the time in the teams and groups. Even when his male classmates suggested he join their team, he responded by refusing: "One of the

immature boys said ‘do you want to join (...) us?’ And I said ‘no, thank you’ ‘but do you have a team?’ I said ‘no’ and they looked at me in disgust” (Interview 2).

Their negative attitude was also marked by Arturo’s relationship with some teachers and administrative staff. Constantly navigating his gender identity with the teachers made many students mistrust him for spending a lot of time with them:

[A friend of Arturo’s said to him] ‘You know they are sick of you’. I asked ‘who? These [he named some classmates]? ‘I get tired of them too, what did they say?’, [she answered that they said] That they are fucking sick of you, [some boys say] that you are always with the teachers and want to know what you are up to, that you are kissing their arse, that you are a snitch...’ (Interview 2)

This branded Arturo as false and made him feel that they thought he faked symptoms or his gender identity to get the teacher’s attention. He sometimes preferred to avoid these rumors and give up several concessions that the teachers gave him to facilitate his transition to worsening his relationship with them:

I am living a menopause and I need to drink a lot (...) At high school I could drink water whenever I needed it, but I was afraid of interrupting the class or that my classmates would say something about [the teachers] giving me preferential treatment, and I don’t do it (Interview 1)

In another similar situation he claimed:

‘[I don’t want any special treatment at PE] they [classmates] would have a problem with me, they are actually having a problem with me and they will have more problems with me, and I also feel a little excluded...’ (Interview 2)

These sacrifices hindered Arturo’s transition and prevented him from satisfying some essential needs in the classroom.

## Discussion

Educational institutions have—and are increasingly compelled to achieve—cultural competence and value diversity at all educational levels (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). However, cis-heteronormativity is still very present in schools embedded in the curriculum, interpersonal interactions and in the structure and roots of the educational system, affecting trans people from the micro to the macro level and through micro and macroaggressions (McBride, 2021; Shelton & Dodd, 2020).

Regarding microaggressions -defined as unintentional insults, invalidations, and prejudices- trans students experience them in everyday interactions because of their disrupting gender binarism (Thompson et al., 2021). Common daily examples include negative comments on their gender expression, the use of transphobic language and the assumption that everybody is cisgender and that binarism is the natural gender order (Kosciw et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2012). Conversely, macroaggressions are understood as more overtly abusive and offensive practices that occur on a large scale and are based on a set of beliefs and ideologies that justify the superiority of a dominant group (Awad et al., 2021). In educational contexts, cis-heteronormative macroaggressions symbolically and materially shape discrimination against trans people. The gender segregation practices and spaces, the imposition of gendered clothing, the use of gendered language, oppressive administrative processes and non-inclusive curricula are some of the most relevant macroaggressions reported in the literature by trans students in schools.

Throughout his transition process at school, Arturo was particularly involved in long and multiple negotiations of his gender identity with different people in which he experienced subtle forms of micro-macroaggression. Some examples of the microaggressions committed against him by some teachers, students, and other staff are: reacting negatively when Arturo and his mother reminded them that the law must be enforced, using disrespectful pronouns, branding him as exaggerating when he defended the recognition of his gender identity through language, denying his experience and invalidating his word and wishes while imposing their authority (see Chang & Chung, 2015; Nadal et al., 2012; Nordmaken, 2014).

He also experienced other types of microaggression by the teachers, such as mentioning his deadname in the classroom, hiding his identity or other overprotective attitudes (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). He also suffered microaggressions by other students when he caused hostility by adopting hegemonic masculinity, being unprotected in bathrooms, and being opposed by them, which negatively affected his daily school activities. Some of these microaggressions were also macroaggressions. According to Awad et al. (2021), this happens when a practice or action impacts interpersonal levels but also it “is embedded within institutions and organizations” (p. 2). This can be appreciated especially in Arturo’s experiences with teachers and administrative staff and the pressure they put on him to perpetuate cis-heteronormativity and maintain the traditional school procedures and practices, such as when they tried to convince him not to use the toilet or put his name on a diploma (see Chang & Chung, 2015). When he complained about the repeated mistakes made by a particular teacher, other staff members stood up for the teacher instead of supporting Arturo, the conflict stopped being individual and became more macro, with the

appearance of institutional aggression. The interaction of different environmental microaggressions and agents can therefore operate as macroaggressions that also create the right conditions for further microaggressions (Awad et al., 2021). A clear macroaggression detected in the interviews relates to the existence of sex-segregated toilets at the center and their lack of privacy. These toilets reflect an architecture rooted in dominant heterosexual and gender binary ideologies that are prevalent in our society. They cause the erasure of trans youth (Martino et al., 2022), can actively produce transphobia in high schools (Herrick & Duncan, 2020) and prevented Arturo from using the toilets. The strictness of the PE curricula and Arturo's PE teacher in its application took the form of macroaggressions that negatively affected his transition process, his performance in this subject. It could also affect Arturo's future engagement in physical activity and sport and harm his academic career, (López-Cañada et al., 2021; Pereira-García et al., 2022). In situations in which his PE's teacher gave him some concessions to support his transition process, his classmates' negative influence challenged or made these efforts useless. Fortunately, the approval several years previously of a regional law to facilitate trans students' inclusion in schools could have actually prevented Arturo from suffering other possible macroaggressions commonly reported in the literature (see McBride, 2021; Warin & Price, 2020).

### Limitations

Some of the study's limitations are linked to the use of micro and macroaggressions as a framework. The clear distinction between both types of aggression cannot be easily made in practice and they are frequently confused. Additionally, as some scholars have highlighted, in relation to the use of the term *microaggressions*, there is a risk of underestimating the potential damage of the subtler type of microaggression (Awad et al., 2021). According to Lilienfeld (2017), a repeated series of microaggressions can be more harmful than one macroaggression and therefore should be taken seriously. Finally, even if the tensions and conflicts Arturo experienced at school are clear and vivid, it is difficult to decide whether some of the hostile responses Arturo received were motivated by being trans, i.e. a member of a minority group, or by being an 'annoying' adolescent that questioned adult centrism and made the staff's job more challenging. Despite the difficulties in distinguishing between micro and macroaggressions, this distinction can be useful to lay down action strategies that are more or less open to transformation in the educational field and point out the insufficiency of the measures approved by law. As Martino et al., (2022, p.755) have stated "the administrative mobilization and deployment of trans inclusive policies in schools does not necessarily ensure or result in a

more gender-expansive education". These laws may be relevant in reducing some macroaggressions, but they do not impede environmental microaggressions and the creation of hostile climates against trans students that at some point can become macroaggressions. Arturos' prolonged exposure to them made him feel alone and frustrated to such an extent that he even thought about leaving this high school.

We consider it is not enough to approach trans students' experiences using only the distinction between micro and macroaggressions and emphasizing the need to complement it by considering trans students' experiences of gender negotiation with different agents. This can help researchers to understand processes of exclusion and the creation of hostile climates that foment the appearance of micro and macroaggressions toward trans students and provide helpful insights to implement more effective policies addressed to the administrative staff, teachers, and students. Although in this paper the case study method has proved to be useful in moving between individual/social and micro/macro contexts and aggressions, further studies focused on trans students' transition processes are needed to go deeper into the dynamics of aggression and how they are interrelated.

### Implications

Social workers can play a key role in creating a specialized advisory team to help teachers, administrative staff and the school management team in the daily situations that occur in educational contexts in relation to trans minors. Teachers and staff cannot be left alone in the task of advocating and enhancing trans students' rights (Morgan & Taylor, 2019). More school social workers are needed to counteract cis-heteronormativity at Spanish schools, creating more reflexive and careful climates that help them to gain knowledge on how to identify situations of discrimination and micro-macroaggression towards trans pupils.

As peers have a great influence on trans students, school social workers should ensure they are respectful with different gender identities and expressions, promoting non-hegemonic models among them to reduce hostilities especially addressed toward trans boys and other students with non-normative gender identities. They can endorse non-hegemonic gender expressions and identities through the creation of counseling groups that help students to explore and express their identities. These professionals can also provide terms and unknown transgender role models to students to develop more empathic relationships. It is important for cis students to understand the relevance and effects of the process of gender transition on trans lives, interactions and bodies.

Social workers can apply and help others to apply a person-centered approach to support trans students' transition processes in schools. The heterogeneity of trans students and

the diversity of their gender identities make this intervention perspective the most suitable for supporting them. For this, it is essential these students can express themselves and freely take decisions regarding their gender identities. For those schools lacking experience of gender diversity, the presence of trans students in classrooms offers an opportunity to transform cis-heteronormativity and challenge institutional practices and everyday routines (Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2023). Social workers must accompany schools in this process to resist transphobia and cis-heteronormativity while counteracting the normative system that hurts trans students and students with non-normative identities (Goldberg, 2018). School social workers can play a key role in motivating administrative and management teams, teachers, and students to achieve this goal. These professionals can mobilize the community and other social institutions and involve them in the creation of networking spaces to face together complex social problems, such as the inclusion of minority groups in educational centers and in society in general. It is especially relevant to include LGBTQ associations in educational institutions to sensitize the students, teachers and other staff, potentially providing or generating educational material, presence and conversations that promote inclusion and diversity.

## Conclusions

Trans students experience difficulty negotiating their gender identities in schools. Subtle forms of aggression such as micro and macroaggressions committed by teachers, staff and students reproduce cis-heteronormativity and undermine their experiences. These aggressions can counteract laws and policies addressed to including trans students in schools. However, social workers can also play a key role in guaranteeing trans students' rights, working with teachers, staff, students, and communities to better achieve and promote gender diversity. A person-centered approach and other measures such as the creation of specialized advisory teams, counseling groups, networking spaces and awareness activities can be useful to expand, even queer, current restrictive narratives of gender circulating at schools. Further research is required to delve into trans students' experiences of gender negotiation to develop practices and policies designed to create more positive experiences for trans students while challenging cis-heteronormativity.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** Approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Universitat de València and the participant was engaged in a process of informed consent (see Ethical Considerations section of this manuscript for more details).

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