

# Fostering inclusivity in education: Addressing challenges for trans pupils' pronoun choice in Swedish schools

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**Abstract:** The article delves into the critical issue of integrating pronoun awareness in Swedish educational settings to cultivate more inclusive environments. Through a mixture of surveys and interviews, the research examines teachers' experiences and attitudes towards pupils who identify with new pronouns, illuminating the challenges that educators may encounter and assessing the extent to which schools are equipped to support transgender pupils. The findings indicate that while many educators recognize the importance of using the pronouns pupils identify with, recognizing it as a vital component of an inclusive educational approach, there is also resistance within the teaching profession. The study also uncovers significant obstacles stemming from school culture and administrative frameworks that hinder transgender pupils from fully expressing and developing their identities alongside their peers. Based on these insights, the article proposes actionable recommendations for school leaders, aimed at enhancing support systems and develop

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policies that better accommodate the needs of transgender pupils and foster a truly inclusive educational environment.

**Keywords:** inclusive language, pronoun use, school culture, transgender pupils

## 1. Introduction

Recognizing and validating young people's individuality is critical to their development. For transgender youth who do not align with binary notions of gender or who explore identities beyond it, affirming their authentic gender can involve significant effort that includes the adoption of new names and pronouns. In Swedish contexts, the traditional pronouns *han* (*he*) and *hon* (*she*) have been complemented by gender-neutral alternatives such as *hen*, *den*, and *dom*. Many schools regard honouring the names and pronouns students use to identify themselves as essential to fostering an inclusive, non-discriminatory environment, yet challenges remain. This article explores teachers' experiences and attitudes towards initiating the use of a new pronoun for a pupil, and examines the difficulties stemming from school culture and administrative systems in doing so.<sup>1</sup>

There is substantial new research dedicated to the analysis and discussion of the challenges inherent in adopting these practices. This body of work emphasises the argument that recognising the pronouns pupils identify with in educational contexts is not merely a linguistic formality, but a fundamental aspect of acknowledging and respecting the complex spectrum of gender identities. As such, the academic discourse around pronouns extends beyond semantics, framing inclusive language as a cornerstone for creating equitable and supportive learning environments. This article argues that the conscientious use of pronouns is an essential practice for educators and institutions committed to fostering inclusivity and respect for all pupils.

<sup>1</sup> The author designed the study, collected the empirical data, and conducted the analysis and interpretation. Additionally, an AI tool (ChatGPT, versions 4, 4o, 4.5) was used to edit the text.

Pronouns are the focus of this study, even though the choice of a new name may be the primary concern of the trans youth. In Sweden, honouring transpeople's right to decide which pronoun to identify with has emerged as a significant symbol in societal discussions, likely because singular personal pronouns in Swedish have traditionally adhered to the gender binary, and cis-normative perceptions are now being renegotiated.

This sets the stage for analysing evolving language norms. While there is an increasing body of research being published on the significance of names and personal pronouns for trans youth, there is less understanding of how schools, which are critical to the wellbeing of these youths, are addressing this issue within their institutional contexts.

## 2. LGBTQ+ pedagogy and pronouns

In Sweden, the integration of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* into everyday language, alongside the traditional feminine *hon* and masculine *han*, signifies a substantial shift towards linguistic inclusiveness. This change reflects wider societal efforts to respect and validate the identities of non-binary and transgender individuals.

There is a growing body of Swedish and Finnish research on the significance of names and pronouns in relation to gender and LGBTQ+-issues (Aldrin 2014; Rancken 2017; Wenner 2020; Leibring Svedjedal 2025) to which this study aims to contribute. Many organizations within the Swedish LGBTQ+ community are at the forefront of advocating for recognition and there is evidence of a growing interest in LGBTQ+-friendly pedagogy in Sweden (Björkman et al. 2021). Numerous guidelines and investigations into the conditions of transgender individuals in Sweden emphasize the importance of respecting the pronouns a trans person identifies with (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare 2015; SOU 2017; RFSL 2024). There are also specific guidelines for how school staff and others should handle the implementation of a pupil's new pronoun, including strategies for addressing potential misstatements and mistakes. These

guidelines are published on websites or in newly printed textbooks that address the latest curriculum requirements for including sex, consent, and relationships in education. Furthermore, the stance of the Language Council of Sweden underscores a growing consensus: the pronoun with which an individual identifies – be it *hen*, *den*, *dom*, *han*, or *hon* – must be recognized and respected (Language Council of Sweden 2023:51). Thus, respect for personal pronoun preferences is increasingly seen as an imperative, not just a courtesy, for fostering an environment of equality and diversity.

However, an increasing number of studies also indicates that Swedish transgender people are experiencing problems, both at school and elsewhere (Schmitt 2023; Pastor Bravo & Linander 2024). The Swedish Equality Ombudsman has processed at least two cases where teachers have refused to use the pronouns with which the trans pupils identify.

Numerous studies from other countries report similar findings (Kennedy 2022; Bettcher 2014; Bhatt et al. 2022). Studies from the United States indicate that teachers lack the knowledge or will to use transgender pupils' preferred pronouns (Burnham 2020; Eckes 2020; Killelea McEntarfer & Iovannone 2022). There is also an international heteroactivist movement that employs freedom of speech arguments to oppose LGBTQ+ rights (Nash et al. 2019).

The struggle for trans recognition involves a significant aspect of language (Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert 2018:322). Sinclair-Palm (2024) examines how trans youth use names to strategically navigate gender norms, cisnormativity, and transphobia. Through interviews with trans youth in Australia, Ireland, and Canada, the study highlights how naming practices serve as tools for safety, access to resources and agency, while also enabling resistance against norms, creative expression and joy in being trans.

Linguistic practices can be used both to validate and invalidate a person's gender. Leibring Svedjedal (2025) shows that self-chosen names and pronouns play a central role in how trans individuals express and navigate their gender identities in Sweden. This study confirms that while these linguistic choices affirm agency within

trans communities, they are often contested in broader societal and media discourses. Pronoun use in particular becomes a site of both recognition and resistance, reflecting ongoing struggles over the legitimacy of trans identities. Leibring Svedjedal shows that many trans individuals experience how people around them often find it more difficult to adapt to and use correct pronouns compared to new first names.

Previous research has demonstrated the value of respecting the pronoun choice of trans children and youth. Articles (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick 2018; Ashley et al. 2022) suggest that pronoun use is a vital part of expressing identity, and other studies have found lower rates of depression and suicide among trans youth whose names and pronouns are respected (Russell et al. 2018), thus highlighting the importance of correct pronoun use. Sharing pronouns on social media has increased (Tucker & Jones 2023), which demonstrates support for and acceptance of gender diversity. Nevertheless, using a transgender person's birth name instead of their chosen name, known as *deadnaming* (Sinclair-Palm 2017; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly 2022), can deeply harm transgender youth.

Research indicates that schools often rely on short-term accommodations rather than addressing underlying inequalities affecting transgender pupils, though structural changes and specific supportive practices significantly improve school experiences. Horton and Carlile (2022) propose a staged model identifying four levels of how schools respond to transgender pupils: (1) *trans-oppressive*, actively rejecting or suppressing trans identities; (2) *trans-assimilationist*, allowing individual transgender pupils to fit into existing gender categories without broader institutional change; (3) *trans-accommodative*, making temporary or individualized adjustments for trans pupils without challenging underlying norms; and (4) *trans-emancipatory*, implementing lasting, structural changes to ensure equal conditions for all pupils regardless of gender identity. Feijo et al. (2022) identify three effective interventions to improve outcomes for transgender pupils: implementing inclusive policies related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; supporting the use of chosen

names and establishing Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). Their review suggests these interventions improve school safety, reduce bullying, and enhance transgender pupils' overall wellbeing (Feijo et al. 2022).

This body of earlier research underscores the importance of inclusive language practices in supporting the mental health and educational experiences of all pupils who do not conform to traditional gender binaries and offers guidance on how to address these challenges in practice. They provide a foundation for the current study's exploration of pronoun usage in Swedish educational institutions.

### 3. Theory

Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990; 1993) provides the foundational theoretical framework for understanding gender as an ongoing performance, constructed through repeated actions and language. This perspective aligns with the social constructionist view of gender (de Beauvoir 1949; Fausto-Sterling 2000), which posits that gender is not an inherent, biological trait but rather a socially constructed and culturally contingent concept. This framework allows for the recognition of gender fluidity and subjectivity, as reflected in the use of pronouns which aligns with trans youths' identity, thereby supporting a more inclusive approach in educational settings.

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting social realities, a principle central to sociolinguistics. In the context of pronoun usage, this perspective underscores how language can affirm individual gender identities while simultaneously challenging traditional gender norms. Research has extensively examined the role of names in identity construction. Pilcher (2015) argues that names and pronouns are instrumental in constructing and signifying an individual's sexed, gendered, and social identities.

The concept of *trans technologies* (Haimson 2021) extends this discussion, describing the tools and strategies that trans individuals employ to navigate cisnormativity and oppressive societal structures. Julia Sinclair-Palm (2024) further expands on this idea, emphasizing that these technologies encompass creative methods for asserting

agency, challenging norms, expressing identity and experiencing joy in being trans. Sinclair-Palm specifically highlights naming practices as a form of trans technology used by trans youth to strategically navigate gender, illustrating how linguistic choices function as both an act of self-definition and a means of engaging with the social environment. In this study, I argue that pronouns should also be understood as a trans technology. Like naming practices, pronouns serve as a linguistic resource enabling trans individuals to articulate and negotiate their gender identities within social contexts.

The relational nature of identity is also crucial in this theoretical framework. Sociologists such as Althusser (1971) and Goffman (1959) highlight that identity formation is a reciprocal process. Identity develops in relation to others, and language is a key medium in this process. Through communication, individuals are interpellated into specific social roles and identities, emphasizing the role of language in identity formation and the importance of pronoun choice in acknowledging and respecting these identities. *Ally work*, as conceptualized by Broido (2000), involves members of dominant groups advocating for marginalized communities. In this study, it refers to the role of cisnormative teachers in supporting transgender pupils. Furthermore, the concept of *school-based social capital* (Behtoui & Strömberg 2020) recognizes the importance of social relationships and networks within the school environment. These networks, encompassing pupils, teachers and the wider community, significantly influence educational outcomes and the acceptance of diverse identities.

This study thus views gender not as an inherent biological identity nor an irreversible identity assigned by others, but neither is it something entirely controlled by the individual, but rather it is relational in nature. The theoretical understanding of gender in this study thus views gender as a collaborative construction between an individual and their environment, where language and other cultural practices play crucial roles. And just like the social environment can be helpful and supporting, it may act as an obstacle. *Administrative violence*, a concept developed by Dean Spade (2015), regards bureaucratic and systemic barriers that impede the lives and rights of trans people,

beyond overt acts of transphobia. *Structural ambivalence* (Schmitt 2023) in educational settings reflects the conflicting nature of societal structures. While schools may strive to support inclusivity, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ issues, they often simultaneously present challenges in implementing these inclusive practices, such as adopting new pronouns for pupils. This ambivalence highlights the complexities schools face in balancing traditional norms with progressive inclusivity efforts.

In conclusion, this study's theoretical framework integrates these diverse concepts to explore the implications of teachers' pronoun use in affirming gender identities and fostering inclusivity in educational settings. It highlights the complex interplay between language, social constructs, and educational practices in shaping pupils' gender identities and promoting an environment of equality and diversity.

## 4. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed in this study, encompassing both an electronic survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey targeted a diverse demographic of educators, pupils, and administrative staff across various educational institutions in Sweden. It was designed to assess the occurrence of pupils who request a change in their pronouns and pronoun usage policies, as well as to identify potential challenges to an inclusive school environment. The interviews provided qualitative depth to the data, allowing participants to share personal experiences.

The survey was conducted electronically and distributed using the snowball method. It consisted of twelve questions and was completed anonymously. The questions aimed to explore whether pupils requested a change in their pronouns, which pronouns pupils identify with, the occurrence of discussions among pupils and teachers and whether written guidelines exist on this issue. Responses were collected primarily from teachers in primary and secondary education, with the majority coming from Stockholm County and other large cities. A small number of responses also came from Finland.



Interviews were conducted with a selection of teachers recruited through the survey and personal contacts. These interviews took place either in person or online and lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the following themes: experiences with pupils who requested a change in pronoun use, which pronouns pupils identify with, possible conflicts and challenges, language use related to pronouns, teachers' attitudes, and school policies. The interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their perspectives and provide context for the survey findings. They were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. The interviewed teachers came from various regions. Several worked in the Stockholm area, while others were based in mid-sized Swedish cities, smaller towns, and large cities outside the capital region.

The results are presented under six headings: pupils changing their pronouns, mixed feelings, administrative obstacles, allies, icebergs, and school culture. These themes make it possible to analyse teachers' experiences and attitudes regarding pupils who adopt new pronouns and identify challenges faced by educators and schools in making education inclusive for all.

## 5. Ethical considerations

Survey participation was anonymous, although one question asked for email addresses for interview participation. These addresses were processed in accordance with data protection legislation and stored electronically in secure IT systems, accessible only to project members.

The interviews adhered to three ethical requirements: 1. Requirement for information, whereby participants were informed about the study's purpose and participation conditions both in writing and orally at the interview. 2. Consent, whereby interview participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw anytime without repercussions. Consent for the interview and recording was obtained beforehand and documented. 3. Confidentiality, whereby interviews were recorded and stored securely, accessible only to project members. Participants

were assigned pseudonyms, and transcriptions anonymized details to prevent identification of individuals, schools, or locations.

A key ethical challenge was ensuring that teachers felt comfortable sharing their views, particularly given the sometimes polarized nature of discussions about gender identity in schools. While the study sought to understand how teachers navigate the complexities of pupils' pronoun use, it was crucial to avoid placing them in a position where they might feel judged or scrutinized. To mitigate this, interview questions were framed in a neutral and open-ended manner, encouraging teachers to describe their experiences and reasoning rather than prompting them to take a stance for or against certain practices. Also, the survey was designed to be fully anonymous, allowing respondents to share their perspectives without fear of identification.

Another important ethical dimension was the balance between capturing diverse perspectives and avoiding potential response biases. Given that teachers who are more engaged in LGBTQ+ issues may have been more likely to participate, there was a risk that the survey results could disproportionately reflect supportive viewpoints. While this self-selection bias is a common limitation in survey-based research, it was important to acknowledge and consider its implications when analysing the results. The study tries to avoid making generalized claims about all teachers, instead emphasizing the range of responses and the factors that shape different attitudes toward pronoun use.

## 6. Main findings

### 6.1 Pupils changing their pronouns

Figure 1 displays the frequency with which teachers, according to the survey, encounter pupils who voice a desire to change their pronouns. The horizontal axis categorizes the frequency of these occurrences into four distinct groups: Never, so far, Seldom, Sometimes and Often. The vertical axis represents the number of teachers.

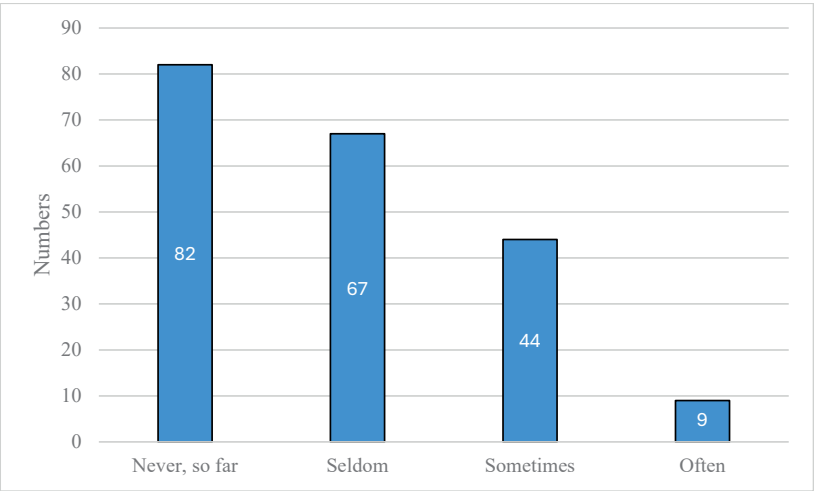


Figure 1: Reported frequency of meeting pupils who opt for a new pronoun among teachers.

The tallest bar corresponds to ‘never, so far, followed by ‘seldom’, indicating a smaller, yet significant, portion of teachers that have infrequently encountered such situations. The ‘sometimes’ category is represented by a shorter bar, denoting a lower number of teachers who have occasionally encountered this. Finally, the shortest bar in the ‘often’ category suggests that it is relatively rare for teachers to frequently meet pupils changing their pronouns.

However, these results should be interpreted with caution. They reflect the experiences of those who chose to respond to the survey, and this group may not be fully representative of the wider population of teachers. Since the survey was distributed through my own social media networks using a snowball sampling method, it is likely that it primarily reached individuals who are already engaged or interested in issues related to gender and pronoun use. Thus, the data may overrepresent teachers who are more open to discussing or noticing these matters in their professional practice. Moreover, the results do not indicate how many pupils *would like to* communicate their pronoun preferences but for various reasons do not. In a school context, many may choose to remain silent, as pupils may be unsure whether teachers are *allies* (Broido 2000) and their identities will be respected.

Therefore, the frequency with which teachers report encounters with pupils choosing new pronouns cannot be taken as a direct measure of how common such needs are among pupils.

But even if the specific share of teachers meeting with pupils communicating their pronoun preferences remains unclear, the bars indicate that trans pupils in Swedish schools indeed at least *sometimes* find it possible to do so.

## 6.2 Mixed feelings

The current study unveils a dichotomy of resistance and support regarding the use of gender-neutral pronouns. Notably, very few participants in the study explicitly expressed negative feelings towards the issue. This may be attributed to an inherent bias in participant recruitment, as teachers who are supportive may be more inclined to participate in the survey and agree to a research interview.

Some teachers view the issue of pronoun usage as straightforward and uncontroversial. For instance, Aksel, a teacher at a progressive school, stated, ‘It’s only natural to use the pronoun that the pupil wants... I’ve never heard anyone question it at all’. One informant from the electronic survey describes the sentiments as such: ‘We use the pronoun the pupil wants. The headteacher notifies the staff and that’s it’. This perspective is echoed by Olivia, a teacher at a study-focused school – one where academic results and performance take priority over pupils social and emotional development – who commented, ‘No one would oppose it... it’s a non-issue’. Such sentiments suggest that for many educators, respecting pupils’ pronoun choices is an integral part of their professional responsibilities, akin to any other aspect of classroom management and pupil interaction.

Some teachers are also deeply engaged in the issue, emphasizing its importance; ‘It’s heartening to observe pupils’ relief when they can be themselves’, one interviewee, Izzy, remarks, highlighting the importance of supporting transgender pupils and ensuring that procedures are in place for this support. Informants recount instances of

supportive pupils who correct teachers on pronoun usage and advocate for their peers.

The study thus supports existing research that has indicated a growing interest in LGBTQ+-friendly pedagogy within Sweden (Björkman et al. 2021) by revealing that there are teachers in support of respecting the pronouns transgender pupils identify with. Furthermore, none of the participants reported major discussions or conflicts.

However, the study also highlights that there are teachers in schools who, for various reasons, are not fully on board with these practices. Some informants report that certain colleagues perceive the issue as trivial, silly, or misguided on the pupil's part. According to these accounts, some colleagues view pupils communicating pronoun preferences as attention-seeking behaviour and believe that young people demand too much when expecting adults to learn new pronouns. Informants also suggest that some colleagues regard the process of gender affirmation as a private matter that schools should not be involved in. Additionally, older teachers are described as sometimes being entrenched in traditional practices, finding it difficult to adapt or resistant to changes, particularly regarding the use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. Religious beliefs are also mentioned as a source of resistance among certain educators. A couple of responses further point out that male colleagues may display greater resistance and question the issue more frequently.

It is also possible that some participants may have overstated their willingness to respect pupils' pronoun choices to align with what is perceived as the expected stance. In anonymous surveys, participants often seek to present themselves in a positive light, particularly when addressing sensitive or potentially controversial topics. This is especially relevant in the case of teachers, who may perceive their professional identity as tied to values such as inclusion and respect. As a result, the reported levels of compliance and support may not fully reflect the complexity of teachers' actual attitudes or practices in everyday classroom interactions. Consequently, while the surveys and interviews suggest that acceptance exists, it is important to recognize

that this acceptance may be more superficial or situational than the responses signalled.

### **6.3 Administrative obstacles**

The study sheds light on various administrative challenges that impede the recognition and implementation of pupils' pronoun choices, highlighting the necessity for more inclusive and adaptable systems in educational institutions.

One of the primary issues identified is the absence of a formal policy at school level. This lack of policy leads to inconsistent practices among educators and staff. The survey revealed that a mere three per cent of teachers were aware of any local policies pertaining to pupils' pronoun choices and their administration. This lack of awareness and standardization creates an environment where pupils' pronoun preferences are not uniformly respected or acknowledged.

Furthermore, the rigidity of existing record-keeping systems presents a significant obstacle. These systems often do not allow for the recording or updating of pupils' chosen pronouns, leading to persistent discrepancies between pupils' identities and the information held by the school. Such misalignments can result in miscommunication and can contribute to a sense of alienation among pupils.

A salient example of this issue is evident in the generation of class registers. These registers, created automatically by electronic systems using names from the population registry, often do not reflect the current identities of transgender pupils who have not changed their names officially. This situation becomes particularly problematic in classes led by substitute teachers or educators who have infrequent interactions with the pupils, as they rely on these outdated registers. The conflict between a pupil's current identity and the outdated information in these registers is further intensified in digital platforms like Teams and Zoom, where pre-set names are often unchangeable.

In cases where teachers use email communication, they have the flexibility to use pupils' new names and pronouns. However, this is not a systemic solution, as the pupils' names and pronouns in official

records and digital systems often remain unaltered unless the pupil undergoes the formal process of changing their name in the population registry. This requires the teachers to spread the information informally, through word of mouth rather than formal channels, which is unreliable and does not guarantee universal recognition across different platforms and documents.

Some schools have attempted to address these challenges by developing specific procedures. For instance, pupils are encouraged to write both their *deadname* and their chosen name on tests, and information about new names and pronouns is recorded in a separate documentation system, accessible only to schoolteachers. However, these are isolated practices and do not represent a systemic solution. According to Horton and Carlile (2022), the described practices exemplify a *trans-accommodative* approach, as they involve isolated, temporary adaptations aimed at individual trans pupils. Such practices address immediate concerns but do not challenge underlying structural inequalities, leaving the broader cisnormative framework intact.

The survey also highlights issues with electronic systems where pupils are forced to choose between binary gender options without the possibility of selecting a non-binary option or opting not to specify their gender. This limitation reflects the broader issue of binary gender assumptions embedded in many administrative systems.

The findings from this study align with previous research and theoretical frameworks that underscore the critical role of inclusive language practices in educational settings. As noted by Sinclair-Palm and Gilbert (2018), the struggle for trans recognition in schools is deeply entwined with linguistic practices. The study highlights the absence of formal policies and the rigidity of record-keeping systems, reflecting the broader issues of *administrative violence* described by Spade (2015). These systemic barriers create environments where pupils' pronoun preferences are inconsistently respected. The research further supports the work of McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) and Ashley et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of correct pronoun use in reducing mental health issues among trans youth. This aligns with Butler's (1990; 1993) theory of performativity, which posits that

language acts, such as pronoun usage, continuously construct and validate gender identity.

## 6.4 Allies

Despite administrative hurdles, many teachers have emerged as *allies* (Broido 2000) in the pronoun awareness movement. The survey results indicated that a substantial number of educators actively seek to create an inclusive atmosphere. They use their role as facilitators to encourage respectful discussions and educate pupils about the importance of pronoun accuracy as a matter of personal identity and dignity.

The ally work requires some effort, especially among teachers who frequently interact with transgender pupils. These educators understand that while the concept may seem simple, the practical implementation involves continuous learning and adaptation. They must stay informed about what pronouns the pupils identify with, correct their own mistakes, and ensure that substitute teachers are aware of these changes. This process also involves intervening when colleagues do not respect pupils' pronoun choices. Aksel, for example, has taken it upon himself to handle such situations: 'The form teachers were a bit slow in ensuring that they got a new email address that matched the new name and so on, so I... I just fixed it'. This proactive approach reflects a deeper commitment to allyship, where teachers not only respect pronoun preferences but also take tangible steps to address systemic shortcomings. Nina, another teacher, described her dedication to this cause: 'This is kind of my passion, you know... I try to stay updated on these things... as someone interested in languages, you see... So, for me, it becomes quite natural, and I think that if we had a pupil, I would probably take up the reins, as it were'. Nina's enthusiasm highlights how individual teachers can drive change within their schools, fostering a more inclusive environment through their personal commitment and actions. One teacher reported using a coded system in written communications to protect pupils' identities, stating, 'When writing at work, we use a coded system to protect the



identities of pupils, and we use the “hen” pronoun for everyone’. This approach, though not perfect, shows an attempt to navigate and circumvent the limitations of current administrative systems.

In summary, the teachers quoted above illustrate how proactive efforts and personal dedication can significantly contribute to creating inclusive educational environments. By addressing systemic barriers and fostering respectful discussions, these educators play a crucial role in supporting transgender pupils and promoting gender inclusivity in schools. However, as Horton and Carlile (2022) point out, these actions primarily reflect a *trans-accommodative* approach – individual adaptations that, while valuable, leave broader cisnormative structures largely unchallenged.

## 6.5 Icebergs

The term ‘icebergs’ in the context of this study is a metaphor intended to conceptualize the underlying challenges and complexities that lie beneath the surface of pronoun usage in educational settings. These include deeply ingrained societal norms, resistance to change, and the emotional labour required by individuals who often must educate others about their identity. The results from both the surveys and interviews revealed that while visible efforts, such as educating and informing colleagues and staff, are essential, they represent just the tip of the iceberg. The larger task is to foster a broader cultural shift towards acceptance and understanding of gender diversity, which requires sustained educational efforts, policy changes, and community engagement. In the terms outlined by Horton and Carlile (2022), this broader shift aligns closely with a *trans-emancipatory* approach, as it emphasizes the need for lasting and structural changes to ensure equal conditions for all pupils, irrespective of gender identity.

Some of the problem lies in transgender pupil invisibility in the school setting. One survey participant noted, ‘Pupils who are questioning their gender identity often feel so bad that we don’t see them here at school. If they want to be called by a different pronoun, we have no problem with that’. This comment highlights how the visible

aspects of support are often overshadowed by the deeper, less visible struggles that transgender pupils face, including significant mental health challenges that keep them away from school.

Another teacher, Aksel, emphasized the importance of social media in these pupils' lives: 'A lot of it happens outside school, you know, those conversations, and many people find their community on Instagram and TikTok in a way that wouldn't have been possible without social media. And I think a lot of stuff gets processed there'. This insight further underlines how much of the emotional labour and identity exploration occurs outside formal educational settings, facilitated by online communities that provide support and validation.

Identity is fundamentally shaped through interaction with others and continuously constructed in everyday social practices, making linguistic recognition essential for wellbeing. The relational nature of identity, as highlighted by sociologists like Althusser (1971) and Goffman (1959), emphasizes that identity formation is a reciprocal process developed in relation to others. Judith Butler argues that gender, which is a vital part of a person's identity formation, is an ongoing performance constructed through repeated actions and language. Pairing this with Pilcher's insights (2015), names and pronouns are instrumental in constructing and signifying an individual's sexed, gendered, and social identities. Previous research by McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) and Ashley et al. (2022) suggests that pronoun use is vital for expressing identity, and establishes lower rates of depression and suicide among trans youth whose names and pronouns are respected.

Still, if young transpeople feel so bad that they stop attending school, the school is unable to participate in their identity formation, take active part in supporting them, and promote their wellbeing. The iceberg analogy thus reflects not only the visible efforts but also the deeper, systemic issues and the ongoing performative acts necessary for genuine inclusivity and identity validation in educational settings.

## 6.6 School culture

One critical factor shaping this metaphorical iceberg is the underlying school culture, which significantly influences how transgender pupils experience their educational environment. School culture varies significantly across institutions, affecting the experiences of transgender pupils. Some schools are more LGBTQ+-friendly, providing an inclusive and supportive environment, while others are less accommodating. A teacher from a less inclusive school remarked, 'If you identify as non-binary, then you don't go to this school... they check social media... they know which schools are relevant'. This statement highlights how pupils avoid schools perceived as unwelcoming, based on the prevailing school culture.

One teacher noted, 'I work at a vocational upper-secondary school with a large majority of male pupils. There are transgender pupils, but it's not pronounced. Either 'han' [*he*] or 'hon' [*she*] gets used'. This comment illustrates how dominant gender norms in certain school environments can suppress the visibility and recognition of transgender identities. The lack of gender-neutral pronouns and the dominance of traditional gender norms limit the ability of transgender pupils to express their identities fully but only represent the tip of the iceberg, concealing a far more pervasive and deeply rooted non-inclusive school culture.

Furthermore, the presence of homophobic and transphobic attitudes in some schools intensifies these challenges. One survey respondent observed, 'At this school, I've noticed strong homophobic and transphobic attitudes, including ignorance that leads to a reluctance to even learn and change attitudes about things like the pronoun "hen" [singular *they*]. At another high school where I've worked, there were no issues with this at all'.

This comparison highlights the stark differences in school cultures. The concept of *school-based social capital*, as discussed by Behtoui and Strömberg (2020), is particularly relevant here. School-based social capital refers to the networks and relationships within the school environment that can support or hinder a pupil's development.

In more inclusive schools, this social capital fosters a sense of belonging and support, enabling transgender pupils to thrive. Conversely, in less inclusive schools, the lack of supportive networks can marginalize transgender pupils, making it difficult for them to explore and affirm their identities.

Moreover, this indicates that the school environment and culture significantly influence pupils' decisions, often at the expense of their educational and career goals. The study highlights that school culture can create obstacles for young transgender individuals to explore and develop their identity on an equal footing with their peers.

In conclusion, the variation in school cultures and the presence of supportive social capital are critical factors that influence transgender pupils' school choices and experiences. It is concerning that transgender pupils, or pupils questioning their gender identity, consider the LGBTQ+-friendliness of a school when choosing an upper-secondary school, rather than their interest in the school or career ambitions. Ensuring that all schools offer inclusive and supportive environments is a fundamental responsibility – not only to support the identity development of transgender pupils, but also to safeguard their right to intellectual growth, enabling them to pursue academic interests and career aspirations on equal footing with their peers. Unlike temporary or individualized accommodations, a *trans-emancipatory* approach (Horton & Carlile 2022) seeks to fundamentally transform educational environments by actively addressing and dismantling systemic inequalities. Such transformative efforts necessitate continuous education for teachers, inclusive policy development, and proactive involvement from families and local communities to create a genuinely inclusive school culture.

## 7. Discussion

This discussion aims to clarify the critical insights this study contributes to our understanding of the connection between language use and identity, the opportunities for trans youth to develop healthily

and thrive intellectually, society's capability to be inclusive, and the responsibilities of schools in this context.

Language is a powerful tool that shapes social realities, and this is particularly true in the context of pronoun usage in educational settings. A person's pronoun is not merely a linguistic preference but a significant aspect of individual identity, especially for transgender youth. Judith Butler's theory of performativity underlines how gender is continuously constructed through language and actions. Therefore, recognizing and using the pronoun a person identifies with is a performative act that validates their gender identity. The study thus contributes to the theorization of pronouns as a form of *trans technology* (Haimson 2021; Sinclair-Palm 2024). As shown in both the survey and interviews, pronouns are strategic and agentic resources that trans pupils and their allies use to navigate and resist cisnormative structures in schools.

This study also explores the complexities and resistance educators face when respecting and adopting the pronouns that pupils identify with. Although many educators support the use of gender-neutral pronouns and respect the pronouns trans youth identify with, significant challenges persist due to traditional gender norms, administrative practices, and school culture. For instance, the rigidity of record-keeping systems that do not accommodate non-binary pronouns or updated names creates a disconnect between pupils' identities and their official records. This misalignment or *administrative violence* (Spade 2015) can lead to experiences of alienation and invisibility.

Schools play a vital role in fostering inclusive environments where all pupils can thrive. However, schools differ significantly in their capacity to do so. Drawing on the concept of *school-based social capital* (Behtoui & Strömberg 2020), it becomes clear that the quality and nature of social relationships and networks within the school environment – among pupils, teachers, and the broader community – profoundly shape both educational outcomes and the acceptance of diverse identities.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of *ally work* (Broido 2000) among educators. Teachers who actively support trans-

gender pupils by respecting their pronouns and advocating for systemic changes contribute to a more inclusive school environment. This allyship is crucial for creating spaces where transgender pupils feel safe and valued, allowing them to engage fully in their educational experiences and develop their identities alongside their peers.

Drawing on the preceding analysis, the article concludes by outlining several key recommendations for how schools can strengthen their support structures and policies to better meet the needs of transgender pupils:

Firstly, there is a need for formal policies at the institutional level that standardize the recognition and use of pupils' chosen pronouns. This would ensure consistent practices among educators and staff and provide clear guidelines for supporting transgender pupils. The absence of such policies currently leads to inconsistent and often inadequate support.

Secondly, schools must address the rigidity of existing administrative systems. This includes updating record-keeping practices to allow for the recording of chosen pronouns and names, thereby ensuring that all official documents reflect pupils' identities accurately. The study provides examples of schools developing specific procedures, such as allowing pupils to write both their previous and new names on tests, as interim measures to address this issue.

Lastly, the study highlights the critical role of cultivating a supportive school culture. The influence of school climate on transgender pupils' decisions and experiences emphasises the need to foster inclusive environments across all educational institutions. It is essential that transgender pupils, like all others, can choose schools based on their academic interests and career aspirations, rather than based on their gender identity. Building such a culture involves educating all members of the school community on the importance of pronoun use and creating an environment in which diversity is actively embraced. Schools that proactively engage in these practices can become havens of inclusivity – spaces where all pupils are empowered to develop their identities as well as grow intellectually.

## 8. Conclusion

The role of language in affirming young people's identities cannot be overstated. As language evolves to become more inclusive, so too must our educational practices. This study contributes important knowledge about the intersection of language use and identity, the opportunities for healthy development of transgender youth, societal inclusivity, and the role of schools. It highlights the need for systemic changes in educational institutions to support both the identity development and educational ambitions of transgender pupils on equal footing with their cisgender peers. By adopting inclusive language practices and addressing administrative and cultural barriers, schools can play a pivotal role in creating equitable and supportive environments for all pupils. This, in turn, contributes to a more inclusive society where diversity is recognized and valued.

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