

A comparative analysis of non-binary youths' school experience and mental health in four European countries

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Abstract

While recent legislative advancements have improved rights for trans* individuals in Europe, the specific school experiences of non-binary youths remain under-researched. This paper addresses this gap by analysing data from the FRA 2024 LGBTIQ Survey (N= 981) to investigate the impact of school climate on the mental health (feeling depressed, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts) and educational inclusion of non-binary youths aged 15-18 in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. By comparing diverse governance models and their implementation in school settings, the study reveals significant cross-national disparities: France, characterised by centralised protective policies, exhibits the lowest risk of dropout and identity concealment, whereas Italy, relying on discretionary measures, presents a significantly higher probability of considering dropping out or changing schools. Germany, marked by fragmented federal policies, generally occupies a mixed middle ground. In contrast, Spain, despite recent legislative progress, shows polarised outcomes. Crucially, logistic regression models identify that active hostility at school is the most consistent predictor across all three mental health outcomes, while problems in gendered spaces are significantly associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts and that interpersonal support and allyship alone are insufficient to prevent the most severe outcomes. The most alarming finding is the link between educational exclusion and distress, as students who consider leaving school are over four times more likely to have attempted suicide (OR 4.27). These findings suggest a phenomenon of school pushout driven by structural cisnormativity, highlighting the urgent need for gender-neutral facilities and spaces, and mandatory teacher and staff training.

Keywords: Non-binary, trans, education, mental health, Europe.

1. Introduction

The last decade has been transformative in understanding trans*¹ identities and their nuances, with increasing knowledge and recognition of non-binary identities in the West. These changes have also affected education, highlighting the need for recognition and support for non-binary pupils, whose experiences remain distinct and under-researched. In the European Union (EU), approaches to supporting trans* students vary significantly. Each member state employs different strategies regarding legislation, school policies, action plans, and teacher training (IGLYO, 2025), resulting in a fragmented landscape of rights and protections. While some countries have adopted comprehensive national or regional guidelines, others rely on federal discretionary measures or lack specific policies entirely.

Research on trans* pupils mostly focused on binary trans* boys and girls, subsuming the experiences of non-binary youths to those of their binary counterparts, often without accounting for specific vulnerabilities linked to binarism within educational systems (such as gendered spaces and sports) and societies at large (Johnson et al., 2020).

This paper aims to fill a gap in the existing sociological and educational literature by analysing data from the 2023 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey of the LGBTIQ² population in the EU (FRA, 2024). Specifically, it investigates the school experiences of non-binary students aged 15-18 in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Through the comparison of their diverse policies and the students' experiences, the study also explores the relation between school climate (operationalised through dimensions of hostility, support, access to gendered spaces, identity and gender expression concealment), and the mental health outcomes of non-binary youth, with a particular focus on feeling depressed, suicidality (ideation and attempts). Additionally, the study investigates school dropout risks as a key indicator of educational exclusion and its strong association with severe distress.

¹ In this paper, the word “trans*” (Halberstam, 2018) will be used to describe all people whose gender identity is not congruent with their gender assigned at birth. This includes both binary (trans* men and trans* women) and non-binary individuals (people whose gender does not adhere to the strict gender binary). Trans* is a community-led term, which is preferred to imposed terms such as non-conforming, gender variant, or gender diverse, as these can be considered pathologising as they establish a cisnormative benchmark relative to which trans* individuals are deviating.

² The acronyms most frequently used for the community are LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer) and LGBTQIA+, which includes Asexual individuals. The plus indicates that the list is not exhaustive and that other identities are within the community. Other variations of the acronym may be used when relevant.

2. Policy frameworks and institutional approaches for trans* students' recognition

The Council of Europe (CoE) has historically provided recommendations to member states on guaranteeing the recognition of trans* students' chosen names, pronouns, and usage of bathrooms and changing rooms, students' education and teachers' training, as well as the monitoring of transphobic bullying (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2010; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2015; Council of Europe, 2018). Most recently, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reinforced these calls in its General Policy Recommendation No. 17 (2023). ECRI explicitly urges states to ensure that students have access to educational services and facilities "in accordance with their gender identity" and to adopt policies to prevent bullying (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023, p. 34).

These measures are of the utmost need, as literature indicates that trans* students' school experiences are often characterised by transphobic bullying, marginalisation, victimisation, systemic microaggressions and macroaggressions, and the presence of a cisnormative³ and binary school environment (McBride, 2021; McBride & Neary, 2021), which are often reinforced by a lack of operational pedagogical knowledge regarding trans* identities (Mayo & Blackburn, 2019). In particular, non-binary students face unique challenges because of the invisibilisation and non-recognition of their gender identity, which is often considered as non-authentic and "real" (Johnson et al., 2020; Santambrogio, 2022; Lorusso et al., 2024). Non-binary students' experiences are also deeply affected by the linguistic environment, particularly as the languages spoken in these four countries lack official neutral options⁴. Although grassroots inclusive strategies exist, such as modifying grammatical endings, these practices remain confined mainly to LGBTQIA+ settings and are often subject to public mockery or political backlash (Manera, 2021; Nöstlinger, 2021).

These experiences and lack of recognition can harm trans* youths' mental health (Scandurra et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Price-Feeney et al., 2021), academic performance, and classroom engagement (Council of Europe, 2018), leading to increased absenteeism and dropout rates (McGuire et al., 2010), among other issues.

³ Cisnormativity is the belief that all people are cisgender (*i.e.* not trans) unless proven otherwise. This belief also places cisgender people above those identifying as transgender, trans, or trans*.

⁴ The languages spoken in the four contexts (French, German, Italian, and Spanish) possess a grammatical gender system that requires speakers to designate referents as either masculine or feminine (affecting nouns, articles, adjectives and past participles). While some non-binary individuals may use binary pronouns, this linguistic binarism renders those who do not wish to use them invisible without the use of inclusive strategies. For instance, the neutral English term "the student" forces a binary choice in these languages: *l'étudiant* (m) or *l'étudiante* (f) in French; *der Schüler* (m) or *die Schülerin* (f) in German; *lo studente* (m) or *la studentessa* (f) in Italian; and *el estudiante* (m) or *la estudiante* (f) in Spanish (Castilian).

2.1. National policy frameworks in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain

In France, Germany, Italy and Spain, trans* students face different, but similar, issues linked to their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

The French policy framework is characterised by a centralised, top-down approach led by the Ministry of National Education. This regulatory framework is primarily defined by the Circular of September 29, 2021, titled “For a better consideration of issues related to gender identity in the school environment” (*Pour une meilleure prise en compte des questions relatives à l’identité de genre en milieu scolaire*) (Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale, 2021). The Circular provides national guidelines mandating the use of students’ chosen names and pronouns across internal, unofficial school documentation, such as class lists and digital platforms. This central directive ensures a degree of national uniformity in recognition. Additionally, the policy explicitly states that recognition of gender identity must not be conditioned on the production of a medical certificate or diagnosis of gender incongruence, ensuring support based on self-affirmation.

The German educational system is marked by federalism, in which responsibility for school policy lies with the individual Federal States (*Länder*), resulting in significant regional variation. Within this decentralised framework, there is no single national school policy for trans* students; support is based on guidelines and protocols issued by the 16 respective state governments.

However, the German framework provides recognition for non-binary identities, as in 2021, as a federal amendment to the Eighth Book of the Social Code (Child and Youth Welfare) urged education services to “take into account the different life situations of girls, boys and transident, non-binary and intersex young people” (OECD, 2023, p. 108). Despite all German Federal States having adopted LGBTI+ inclusive school policies (e.g., in curricula and teacher training), implementation suffers from limited outreach. This is because the curricular mandate is not binding, and teacher training is not compulsory, leaving the effective implementation of inclusion in schools as voluntary (OECD, 2023; IGLYO, 2025).

Regarding the Italian institutional context, by contrast, there is a complete lack of laws, policies, and recommended practices from the Ministry of Education and Merit. Trans* students and their families may request a bottom-up solution named alias career (*carriera alias*), an agreement between the school and the trans* student, or, in the case of minors, their families, enabling them to use their chosen name in unofficial documentation, such as the online grade book and e-mail address. The alias career is not regulated nationally, and its adoption is left to the school administrator’s discretion under school autonomy laws (Benadusi et al., 2020). Indeed, most schools request a gender incongruence diagnosis⁵ (occasionally also gender-affirming hormone treatment) for its

⁵ In Italy, a diagnosis of gender incongruence is typically required to access hormone therapy within the public health system and is a prerequisite for the court ruling necessary for legal gender recognition (Legge 14 aprile 1982, n. 164). Requesting it for a school administrative procedure, which entails neither medical nor legal liability for the institution, constitutes an unjustified barrier that imposes a pathologising medical model on an educational setting.

activation, and most times do not address gendered spaces and teacher training (Bourelly, 2025). Additionally, the alias career primarily relies on a binary framework, changing students' gender markers from one binary gender to the other. Consequently, this measure often fails to recognise non-binary identities, as it forces students to choose a binary marker that may not reflect their lived experience, thus functioning as a further site of identity erasure. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Merit also issued a notice recommending against using inclusive language, namely the asterisk (*) or schwa (ə/ɜ), in official school communications, and to use the "official rules of the Italian language" (Ministero dell'Educazione e del Merito, 2025). While this notice follows the FRA 2023 survey, it is nevertheless a step back for non-binary inclusion in schools.

Lastly, the Spanish regulatory framework before the introduction of the so-called *Ley Trans* (Ley 4/2023) was characterised by a decentralised yet progressive framework to school policies, regulated by its autonomous communities (*comunidades autónomas*). While the majority of these communities (15 out of 17) had already implemented specific SOGI-based anti-discrimination laws (IGLYO, 2025), the new national legislation establishes a uniform baseline, mandating all regions to adhere to its directives (Ley 4/2023). This legal shift is deeply rooted in the principle of depathologisation stressed by the World Health Organisation in 2019 by removing trans* identities from the chapter on mental health, as the Spanish law removes the requirement for a medical diagnosis or long-term hormone treatment to access legal recognition. However, it is important to note that although the law explicitly guarantees the right to be treated in accordance with one's gender identity in education, this provision applies only to minors who have already obtained a legal name change in the Civil Registry (Ley 4/2023, article 60). Consequently, for students without legal documentation, protection remains dependent on regional communities' protocols. Additionally, because the survey was administered in summer 2023, it is unlikely that the law significantly affected respondents' school experiences.

2.2. Structural and ideological barriers to trans* students' inclusion

While some form of support for trans* students exists in all four countries, whether implemented bottom-up through school discretion (Italy) or top-down directives (France), significant institutional gaps remain (IGLYO, 2025). The most pervasive deficiencies across the studied countries concern teacher training and data collection, key components of the CoE's (2018) recommendations. Specifically, mandatory teacher training on LGBTQIA+ inclusion is lacking in France, Germany, and Italy. Likewise, systematic data collection on bullying and harassment is absent in Germany, Italy and Spain. The most significant inadequacies are found in Italy and Germany, which both lack explicit national anti-discrimination legislation applicable to education, inclusive compulsory-education curricula for teachers, and comprehensive policies and action plans for schools (IGLYO, 2025).

Countries with pathologising and medicalised practices, such as Italy, discourage students from seeking support, especially if unable to present their school with a diagnosis (e.g., due to economic issues, lack of gender clinics in their region, still exploring their gender, not needing medicalised gender-affirming care) (Bourelly, 2025). Additionally, the

dearth of clear directives on gender-based spaces and the institution of gender-neutral spaces available to all emphasise the invisibility and lack of regard (Johnson et al., 2020) for non-binary pupils within these regulations.

Although institutional policy gaps directly affect all trans* students, the limited recognition and training observed across the four countries (IGLYO, 2025) cannot be attributed solely to active political opposition. Indeed, even when policies are implemented, their outcomes ultimately depend on school administrators and teachers, whose attitudes and awareness directly shape the daily experiences of trans* students (McBride, 2021). This may occur through the hidden curriculum (Walton, 2006), in which educators' personal beliefs and normative expectations shape the classroom environment and students' behaviour towards their peers. Furthermore, adultism, the assumption that young people are unable to understand their own lived experiences, including their gender identity and sexual orientation, may lead teachers to dismiss their students' LGBTQIA+ status (Hall, 2021).

That said, across Europe, schools have become a key target for anti-gender movements, which often align with “pro-life” or “traditional family” rhetoric and aim to delegitimise SOGI-inclusive education (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018; Prearo & Scopelliti, 2023; Vanagas, 2025; Rocamora Pérez, 2024), whose membership may include admin, teachers and parents (Selmi, 2015). This dynamic has also been recognised by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Resolution 2417 (2022). The Assembly explicitly condemned the rise of “anti-gender” and “anti-trans” narratives propagated by government representatives and religious leaders. Notably, the Resolution warns that this discourse is leading to stagnation and backsliding in human rights protections.

In the studied countries, this opposition is highly organised, for instance, challenging state directives through legal action in France (Agence France-Presse, 2023) or by disseminating counter-narratives that frame inclusion as “Trans-Indoctrination” in Germany (Vanagas, 2025). In Italy, resistance frequently takes the form of threats and campaigns against school administrators to prevent the adoption of the *carriera alias* (De Falco, 2022) or attempts to ban the measure at the regional level (Buscaglia, 2023). Similarly, Spain faced intense political and cultural resistance, as the far-right party Vox launched an opposition campaign to repeal regional and state laws (Rocamora Pérez, 2024).

These dynamics of active opposition and institutional inertia can be interpreted through the lens of normalisation and (de)subjugated knowledges. Namely, rather than viewing gender as an intrinsic aspect of the youths' identities, the school environment often acts as a site where normative standards (Foucault, 1977) and binarism (Johnson et al., 2020) deny trans* students the right to have their identities understood, recognised and validated. This constitutes what Stryker (2006) describes as the disqualification of their lived experiences, in which trans* people's embodied self-knowledge is treated as insufficiently legitimate to warrant institutional recognition without external approval and validation. This disqualification of lived experience is operationalised through what Foucault (1978) defines as biopolitics, namely a set of strategies used by institutions to regulate and control populations by determining which identities are “worthy” of recognition. In the school setting, support is often contingent on coming out as trans*,

which may also rely on the assumption that the student is binary. Schools in countries, such as Italy, that require medical diagnoses or external validation of the students' gender identity exercise biopower, a specific form of control over students' bodies and autonomy, by acting as gatekeepers who determine who is "trans* enough" and able to earn institutional recognition.

Consequently, the school environment becomes a disciplinary apparatus in which surveillance is also practised through the hidden curriculum (Walton, 2006) and adultism (Hall, 2021). This constant scrutiny of students' gender identities, which is also controlled by staff and janitors by gatekeeping gendered spaces (Ingrey, 2023), disciplines students who disturb the status quo (binarism and cisgenderism⁶), treating non-binary identities as an exception to be accommodated rather than a legitimate reality, which may lead to severe psychological distress and adverse mental health outcomes (Scandurra et al., 2017; 2020).

3. Methods

To analyse the school experience of non-binary students, the dataset was filtered by country, gender identity, and age. The decision to focus exclusively on non-binary respondents was driven by the need to address a gap in the literature, which frequently conflates trans* experiences, leading to the invisibilisation of the unique structural barriers faced by non-binary youths (Johnson et al., 2020; Santambrogio, 2022; Lorusso et al., 2024).

The non-binary sample was not constructed using the FRA's derived variable (RESPONDENT_GIE), as it does not fully account for the complexity of self-determination in non-binary identities. The selection process prioritised respondents' primary self-identification in question A2 "How would you describe yourself today?". Responses were subsequently cross-referenced with question A4 "How would you describe your current gender identity?", where some also selected "trans man" or "trans woman". Unlike the FRA, which recategorised these respondents as binary trans* individuals, this study retains them within the non-binary group. This choice was made to recognise that, for these respondents, non-binary remains their primary identity and that they may be more accurately understood as transmasculine or transfeminine non-binary youths rather than binary.

The sample was restricted to the 15-18 age range to ensure comparability, as the duration of upper secondary education varies significantly across the selected countries: typically ending at 18 in France and Spain, while extending to 19 in Italy and some German *Länder* (European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023). It is acknowledged that, as the survey was administered in the summer of 2023 (FRA,

⁶ The belief that cisgender individuals are superior to trans* people. Cisgenderism is ingrained in various institutions, such as language and law, and helps perpetuate discrimination against transgender individuals (Lennon & Mistler, 2014).

2024), some 18-year-old respondents may have recently completed their secondary education. However, youths who reported not being students (10.3% of the weighted sample) were included; this conservative approach was necessary, as restricting the sample to students would exclude, for example, those who left school due to bullying or a hostile school environment.

As described in the previous section, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain were selected because they offer a comparison of four diverse governance models on trans* inclusion in schools, while facing similar school-related challenges (e.g., teacher training) and political backlash. However, as shown in Table 1, the unweighted sample exhibited an initial imbalance, with a significant overrepresentation of respondents from France and Germany relative to those from Italy and Spain.

	Unweighted	% (Unweighted)	Weighted	% (Weighted)
France	427	43.53	360	36.70
Germany	386	39.35	249	25.59
Italy	100	10.19	217	22.12
Spain	68	6.93	153	15.60
Total	981	100.00	981	100.00

Table 1. Non-binary population (15-18) distribution by country

To accurately reflect the target population structure, the specific weighting variable (BENCHAFFW_2023TREU27) for the EU-27, provided by FRA (2024a), was applied. As detailed in the technical report (FRA, 2025, pp. 139-153), these weights incorporate two critical adjustments: the first to correct for the higher probability of survey participation among respondents closely affiliated with LGBTIQ organisations; the second, to adjust for deviations in the sample distribution regarding age and country population estimates, ensuring proportional balance across groups. Following this weighting procedure, these four nations account for 43.7% of the total weighted EU-30 sample for this demographic, providing a stronger, more robust statistical basis for comparisons.

The final weighted sample comprises 981 non-binary youths living in the four selected countries (Table 2). Most respondents were assigned female at birth (AFAB) (81.3%), compared to 18.7% assigned male (AMAB)⁷. Regarding gender identity, the largest group strictly identified with the umbrella term non-binary (40.5%), followed by genderfluid (19.8%) and agender (17%). In terms of sexual orientation, the sample is quite diverse: pansexual (26.4%) and gay/lesbian (23%) represent the most frequent orientations, followed closely by bisexual (22.4%) and asexual (20.5%) respondents.

⁷ The observed disproportion is also present among older respondents. Additionally, in the entire FRA 2024 sample (EU 30), non-binary individuals are distributed as follows: 79% AFAB and 21% AMAB (unweighted), and 72% AFAB and 28% AMAB (weighted). Similar trends are consistently observed in major international surveys of LGBTIQ+ populations (e.g., James et al., 2024, p. 13).

Variable	Category	Weighted N	Weighted %
Age	15 years old	165	16.80%
	16 years old	200	20.40%
	17 years old	272	27.70%
	18 years old	344	35.10%
Sex Assigned at Birth	Female	798	81.34%
	Male	183	18.66%
Gender Identity	Non-binary	397	40.50%
	Genderfluid	194	19.80%
	Agender	166	17.00%
	Genderqueer	145	14.70%
	Other	79	8.00%
Sexual Orientation	Pansexual	259	26.40%
	Lesbian/Gay	225	23.00%
	Bisexual	220	22.40%
	Asexual	201	20.50%
	Hetero/Other	76	7.70%

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (Weighted %)

3.1. Mental health outcomes, negative school experience indices and indicators

The three dependent variables selected for this study are the three mental health-related variables present within the survey, namely “Have you been feeling downhearted or depressed over the last two weeks?” (H2), “In the past year, did you think of committing suicide?” (H3) and “Have you ever attempted to commit suicide?” (H4). To isolate distress for the logistic regression models, H2 and H3 were dichotomised: for H2, “More than half of the time”, “Most of the time”, and “All the time” were grouped against the rest; for H3, “Always” and “Often” were grouped against the rest. Variable H4 was maintained in its original binary form (Yes/No).

To provide a comprehensive overview of school experiences, the key dimensions of the school environment were operationalised as three composite indices, derived by averaging relevant items. For their construction, particularly for items with high rates of non-applicability, responses marked “Does not apply to me” were recoded to 0 before calculation. This approach ensures that individuals for whom a specific item was not relevant (e.g., those who do not practice sports) are included in the analysis rather than treated as missing data, and that their frequencies are combined with those of individuals who did not have negative experiences. All indices were categorised into three levels: “Low”, “Medium”, and “High”, where “High” indicates a high prevalence of negative

experiences at school. Moreover, the internal consistency⁸ of the three indices was verified using Cronbach's Alpha (α) (Tusini, 2024) for multiple-item scales and Spearman-Brown (ρ) (Eisinga et al., 2013) for two-item scales:

1. Identity Concealment Index ($\alpha = 0.78$) combines four items related to concealing one's LGBTIQ status: "Avoid being out as LGBTIQ for fear of assault, threats or harassment" (B5_C), "To how many classmates they are open as LGBTIQ" (B6_E, reversed), "If they do not openly talk about being LGBTIQ at school" (C9_A, reversed) and "If they hide or disguise their LGBTIQ identity at school" (C9_B). Variable B5_C required recoding from a binary to an ordinal scale, thus introducing a degree of measurement heterogeneity.
2. Lack of Support Index ($\rho = 0.72$) aggregates two reverse-coded items measuring the absence of support from peers or school personnel: "No one supported, defended or protected you and your rights as a LGBTIQ person" (C12_A, reversed) and "Never heard or seen anyone supporting, protecting or promoting the rights of LGBTIQ persons" (C12_B, reversed).
3. Gendered Spaces Index ($\rho = 0.77$) measures the frequency of problems encountered in gender-segregated spaces such as bathrooms, changing rooms, and sports: "Have problems when going to bathrooms and changing rooms" (C9_E) and "Have problems being accepted to play on a sports team matching your gender" (C9_F).

A composite hostility index was not constructed as the direct discrimination indicators (C9_C, C1_E, C10_A, and C10_B) showed low intercorrelations. The only pair with acceptable correlation ($r = 0.63$), "Experience negative comments or conduct at school because of you being LGBTIQ" (C9_C) and "During your time in school, have you ever been ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened because you are LGBTIQ? - Yes, by my peers" (C10_A), were deemed unsuitable for aggregation due to conceptual overlap, as item C10_A is semantically included within C9_C.

Figure 1 reveals significant national differences across the three indices. For the Identity Concealment index, nearly half of the respondents in Spain (47.2%) are in the "High" category, indicating a strong tendency to conceal their identity at school. Following, we can find Italy (38.7%) and Germany (22.80%), while France shows the lowest percentage of youths concealing their LGBTIQ identity (18.5%). Italy stands out in the Lack of Support Index, with the highest percentage of youths reporting a severe lack of support and allyship (23.1%), compared to 16.0% in Spain and 9.9% in France. This suggests that in Italy, the perceived absence of active support from peers and staff remains a critical issue, as 45.3% also fall in the "Medium" category.

Lastly, issues with gendered spaces remain relevant across all countries. However, Spain still leads with the highest percentage of respondents in the "High" category (35.7%), followed by Germany (27.0%), France (21.3%) and Italy (19.8%). Spain emerges as

⁸ For both techniques, a coefficient ≥ 0.70 is generally considered the threshold for acceptable internal consistency (Eisinga et al., 2013).

the most problematic context, with two of the three indices showing the highest rates of student struggle. However, as noted in the limitations, these data must be interpreted with caution due to potential distortions introduced by the weighting applied to the smaller Spanish and Italian samples.

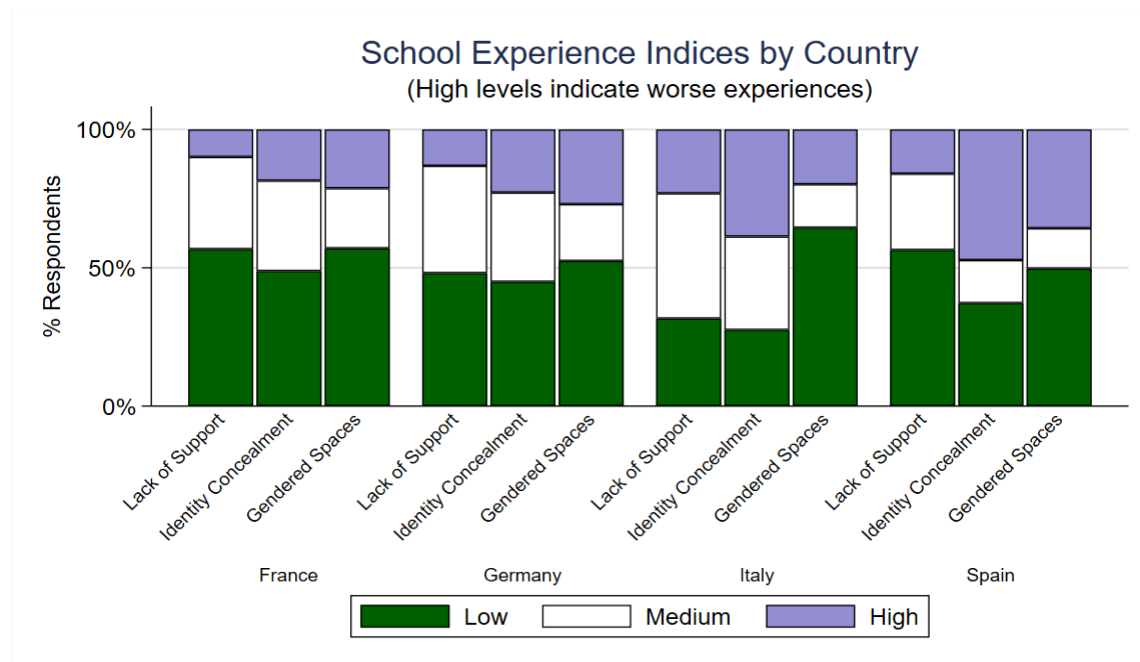


Figure 1. Negative school experience indicators by country (Weighted %)

In addition to the composite indices, three single-item indicators were retained for the multivariate analysis to capture specific, non-aggregable dimensions of school hostility and exclusion:

1. Direct school hostility (C9_C) “Experience negative comments or conduct at school because of you being LGBTIQ - Always”, to measure hostile school environment, potentially accounting for all individuals inhabiting the school context beyond just peers or teachers (e.g., janitors, principals).
2. Gender expression avoidance (TR5) “Do you avoid expressing your gender (or your desired gender) through your physical appearance and clothing for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed? -High avoidance”, used to measure the impact of binary disciplinary power on students’ bodies.
3. School dropout risk (C11) “Considered leaving or changing school because you are LGBTIQ -yes” to measure the push to exclude non-binary pupils from school.

3.2. Limitations

It is important to underline the inherent limitations of the FRA 2023 LGBTIQ survey, which uses a non-probability sampling method, as national sampling frames for the LGBTIQ population are absent in all EU-27 and EU-30 countries. Consequently, the respondents are limited to individuals who could be reached online, often through a community organisation, and who chose to complete the survey, thereby introducing potential self-selection bias.

While FRA's (2025, pp. 139-153) application of affiliation and benchmark weights corrects for identifiable imbalances, such as the over-representation of individuals affiliated with LGBTIQ organisations, it does not change the non-random nature of the sampling design. Therefore, the weighted results should be interpreted as estimates indicative of the reachable non-binary population aged 15-18, rather than as representative of the entire target population. Additionally, caution is warranted when using data from Italy and Spain, as the unweighted respondent frequencies are less than half those of their weighted counterparts (Table 1). Consequently, the necessary up-weighting may affect the precision of the estimates, as it relies on a smaller pool of respondents to represent the projected population structure.

4. Analysis

The analysis section is divided into two steps: the first presents descriptive statistics for all variables related to school experience and mental health present in the dataset (FRA, 2024), which are used to map the prevalence of hostile school experiences and adverse mental health outcomes across the sample. The second presents three multivariate logistic regression models and a bivariate logistic regression model to examine the association between school experiences and mental health outcomes, controlling for demographic factors (sex assigned at birth, gender identity, sexual orientation) and country of residence. For all analyses, weights were applied (BENCHAFFW_2023TREU27).

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the school experience and mental health variables used in this analysis. Selected variables (C9_A, C12_A, C12_B, B6_E and H2) were reverse-coded so that higher values consistently indicate adverse outcomes.

Results reveal a widespread hostile school climate, as 54.4% of youths reported “often” or “always” not being openly LGBTIQ at school, and 47.2% “often” or “always” hid their identity. Furthermore, 64.7% of respondents reported being ridiculed by peers, and 14.5% by their teachers, and 45.5% were discriminated against by teachers in the last 12 months due to their LGBTIQ status. Additionally, a substantial majority (67.4%) “often” or “always” witnessed harmful conduct towards LGBTIQ people.

Variable	Never	Rarely	Often	Always	Valid N
Do not openly talk about being LGBTIQ (C9_A reversed)	11.70	34.00	37.40	17.00	978
Hide or disguise identity (C9_B)	21.30	31.60	32.10	15.10	971
Experienced negative comments/conduct (C9_C)	19.00	42.70	32.00	6.30	934
Witnessed negative conduct (C9_D)	7.70	24.90	49.80	17.60	971
Problems in bathrooms/changing rooms (C9_E)	38.25	23.73	21.66	16.36	886
Problems in sports teams (C9_F)	59.87	13.22	12.12	14.78	457
Did not receive support (C12_A reversed)	18.70	38.80	27.90	14.60	869
Not seen anyone supporting rights (C12_B reversed)	15.80	44.90	32.20	7.10	964
Thought of committing suicide (12m) (H3)	24.40	33.10	32.8	9.70	981
Avoid expressing gender (TR5)	29.90	38.90	22.00	9.30	979

Variable	At no time	Some of the time	Less than half	More than half	Most of the time	All the time	Valid N
Feeling downhearted or depressed (2 weeks) (H2_reversed)	3.38	24.71	16.48	17.2	21.50	16.73	981

Variable	None	A few	Most	All	Valid N
Not open to schoolmates (B6_E reversed)	16.06	26.94	43.35	13.64	937

Variable	Yes	No	Valid N
Avoid being out at school for fear of harassment (B5_C)	37.92	62.08	981
Discriminated by teachers (12m) (C1_E)	45.54	54.48	805
Ridiculed by peers (C10_A)	64.70	35.30	759
Ridiculed by teachers (C10_B)	14.45	85.55	759
Considered leaving school (C11)	15.80	84.20	981
Attempted suicide (Lifetime) (H4)	32.30	67.70	976

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of school experiences and mental health indicators (Weighted %)

Structural barriers remain significant in gendered spaces such as bathrooms and changing rooms. Indeed, approximately 38% of students “often” or “always” faced problems accessing gendered spaces. Regarding sports, the response rate was notably lower (N=457), as 524 youths responded “does not apply to me. This likely indicates that many non-binary students disengage entirely from gendered sports activities or that their schools lack such facilities. However, among those who do participate, 26.9% reported “often” or “always” facing issues.

Lastly, these adverse experiences are accompanied by alarming mental health indicators, as 55.4% of the sample felt downhearted or depressed at least half of the time in the last 2 weeks, 42.5% “often” or “always” thought about suicide in the past 12 months, and 32.3% have attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime.

4.2. Multivariate analysis: The impact of negative school experiences on youths’ well-being

Literature on trans* youths consistently reports that negative school experiences are significant factors associated with school dropout and adverse mental health outcomes (McBride, 2021). To investigate the extent to which these school-related factors affect non-binary youths specifically, three multivariate logistic regression models were estimated (Table 4).

The dependent variables of the models are as follows: 1) feeling downhearted or depressed over the last 2 weeks, using the item “Have you been feeling downhearted or depressed over the last two weeks?” (H2); 2) suicidal thoughts (ideation) measured through the item “In the past year, did you think of committing suicide?” (H3); 3) suicide attempts, using the item “Have you ever attempted to commit suicide?” (H4). The goodness of fit for the models was assessed using McFadden’s Pseudo R², yielding values of 0.122, 0.127 and 0.164 for the first, second and third models, respectively. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were all below 2.5 (mean VIF = 1.43), indicating no multicollinearity (Johnson et al., 2020).

The models regarding suicidality underline that being AFAB increases both the likelihood of having suicidal thoughts (OR 2.27, $p < 0.01$) and attempts (OR 1.81, $p < 0.05$) than AMAB non-binary individuals. This finding should be interpreted alongside the sample composition, which predominantly comprises AFAB respondents (81.3%), reflecting the broader demographic pattern in non-binary populations, where AFAB individuals are overrepresented (Table 2). Beyond sex assigned at birth, gender identity variations within the non-binary umbrella show that being agender is protective, compared to identifying only as non-binary, as agender individuals are less likely (OR 0.45, $p < 0.01$) to have felt depressed in the last two weeks. Moreover, genderfluid students are more likely (OR 1.57, $p < 0.10$) to have had suicidal thoughts in the last 12 months compared to those only identifying as non-binary.

Variable	Feeling Depressed (2 weeks) OR [95% CI]	Suicidal Thoughts (12 months) OR [95% CI]	Suicide Attempts (Lifetime) OR [95% CI]
Demographics			
Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB)	1.18 [0.74 - 1.89]	2.27** [1.34 - 3.86]	1.81* [1.03 - 3.19]
Gender Identity (Ref: Non-binary)			
Genderqueer	0.76 [0.46 - 1.27]	1.04 [0.63 - 1.71]	0.79 [0.43 - 1.46]
Genderfluid	1.08 [0.68 - 1.70]	1.57† [0.98 - 2.54]	1.33 [0.83 - 2.12]
Agender	0.45** [0.27 - 0.73]	1.05 [0.63 - 1.75]	0.96 [0.52 - 1.78]
Other genders	1.08 [0.54 - 2.16]	1.20 [0.63 - 2.32]	1.02 [0.50 - 2.08]
Sexual Orientation (Ref: Gay/Lesbian)			
Bisexual	0.66 [0.39 - 1.10]	0.87 [0.51 - 1.49]	1.22 [0.70 - 2.12]
Pansexual	1.03 [0.65 - 1.63]	1.04 [0.66 - 1.63]	1.11 [0.69 - 1.79]
Asexual	0.76 [0.45 - 1.30]	0.48* [0.28 - 0.84]	0.58 [0.29 - 1.14]
Straight/Other	0.61 [0.32 - 1.15]	1.02 [0.52 - 1.98]	1.13 [0.53 - 2.43]
Country (Ref: Italy)			
France	0.99 [0.58 - 1.70]	0.45** [0.26 - 0.78]	1.03 [0.55 - 1.91]
Germany	0.79 [0.46 - 1.34]	0.80 [0.46 - 1.38]	0.79 [0.43 - 1.46]
Spain	0.42* [0.20 - 0.90]	0.39* [0.18 - 0.83]	2.20* [1.01 - 4.80]
School Experiences (Indices - High Level)			
Lack of Support Index	2.00* [1.12 - 3.59]	1.33 [0.77 - 2.30]	0.80 [0.43 - 1.48]
Gendered Spaces Index	1.22 [0.79 - 1.90]	1.55* [1.01 - 2.38]	1.94** [1.21 - 3.13]
Identity Concealment Index	2.49*** [1.52 - 4.07]	1.77* [1.09 - 2.88]	1.04 [0.61 - 1.79]
School Indicators (High/Always)			
Avoid expressing gender	2.10 [0.92 - 4.76]	3.65*** [1.65 - 8.10]	1.45 [0.67 - 3.13]
Experiencing negative comments/conduct	3.04** [1.39 - 6.67]	3.50** [1.65 - 7.43]	3.61** [1.53 - 8.53]
Considered leaving school	1.60 [0.92 - 2.78]	1.75* [1.05 - 2.93]	4.27*** [2.52 - 7.24]
Constant	0.40*	0.16***	0.06***
Observations	934	934	929
Pseudo R ²	0.122	0.127	0.164
Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.10.			
Robust standard errors were used.			
OR = Odds Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval.			

Table 4. Logistic regression analysis of feeling depressed, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts among non-binary youth (Weighted)

In terms of sexual orientation, identifying as asexual appears to be a protective factor against recent suicidal thoughts (OR 0.48, $p < 0.05$) compared to the gay/lesbian reference group. Being asexual and/or aromantic often means being and feeling invisible, which leads to experiencing different kinds of mistreatment compared to allosexuals and alloromantics (*i.e.* not asexual and aromantic) (Mollet & Lackman, 2019). This invisibility can result in not being directly targeted at school, as 70.12% of asexual respondents reported “Never” or “Rarely” experiencing negative comments or conduct because of being LGBTIQ, compared to youths identifying as lesbian/gay (55.31%), bisexual (62.42%), pansexual (60.42%) and straight/other (53.62%).

As for country differences, with Italy as the reference country⁹, the models highlight that, for feeling depressed, living in Spain appears protective (OR 0.42, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, living in France (OR 0.45, $p < 0.01$) and Spain (OR 0.39, $p < 0.05$) is protective against recent suicidal thoughts. However, Spain emerges as a significant risk factor for lifetime suicide attempts (OR 2.20, $p < 0.05$), as its odds are more than double compared to the reference group.

Regarding the three indices, the Lack of Support Index is significant for feeling depressed in the last two weeks, as students reporting high levels of lack of support are twice as likely to feel depressed (OR 2.00, $p < 0.05$). This may suggest that the absence of allyship contributes to psychological distress but is insufficient to explain the most extreme outcomes in the presence of active hostility¹⁰. Additionally, the Lack of Support Index combines items measuring direct personal support and general visibility of allyship, which, while related, capture distinct dimensions¹¹ of the school environment.

High levels of problems related to gendered spaces increase suicidal thoughts by 55% (OR 1.55, $p < 0.05$) and attempts by 95% (OR 1.95, $p < 0.01$). Lastly, concealing one’s LGBTIQ identity more than doubles the odds of feeling depressed (OR 2.49, $p < 0.001$) and suicidal thoughts by 77% (OR 1.77, $p < 0.05$). These findings may indicate that exclusion from gendered spaces and activities and concealing one’s gender expression are the most consistent drivers of severe distress. Additionally, students who always avoid expressing their gender are 3.65 times ($p < 0.001$) more likely to report suicidal thoughts.

⁹ Italy was selected as the reference country because it is the only context without national legislation for trans* students (Section 2.1). The rationale is that using a country lacking national support as a baseline allows for a clearer assessment of the protective effects of inclusive policies and the predictive power of the selected indices and indicators across national contexts.

¹⁰ A stepwise approach revealed that the Lack of Support Index is no longer significant in the fully specified model, suggesting that its effect is attenuated by the inclusion of the other indices and indicators. This is consistent with the notion that negative school experiences do not occur in isolation. Students lacking support are also more likely to experience hostility and conceal their identity, reflecting the interconnected nature of adverse school climates for non-binary youths. Indeed, cross-tabulation analyses confirm significant associations between the Lack of Support Index and Identity Concealment Index ($p < 0.001$), avoidance of gender expression ($p = 0.042$), direct negative conduct ($p < 0.001$) and considering leaving school ($p < 0.001$).

¹¹ When modelled separately, neither of the variables composing the Lack of Support Index (C12_A and C12_B) reached statistical significance, suggesting that the index captures a combined dimension of social isolation that is more informative than the single items.

As defined in the methodology (Section 3.1), the school hostility indicator (C9_C) was selected to provide a less granular measure of hostile behaviour, potentially capturing the behaviour of the entire school community. For all regression models, always experiencing negative comments and harassment at school indicates severe levels of likelihood of feeling depressed (OR 3.04, $p < 0.01$), having suicidal thoughts (OR 3.50, $p < 0.01$) and having attempted suicide (OR 3.61, $p < 0.01$).

Lastly, the factor most strongly associated with suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts is considering leaving or changing schools because of one's LGBTIQ identity. In fact, students who considered dropping out are over 75% more likely to have suicidal thoughts (OR 1.75, $p < 0.05$) and four times more likely to have attempted suicide (OR 4.27, $p < 0.001$), highlighting severe outcomes for students who are thinking about dropping out of school. It is crucial to acknowledge the survivorship bias in these findings, as respondents who attempted suicide (32% of the weighted sample, Table 3) are survivors. The severity of these risk factors may be even greater among those who left school prematurely or whose experiences remain undocumented.

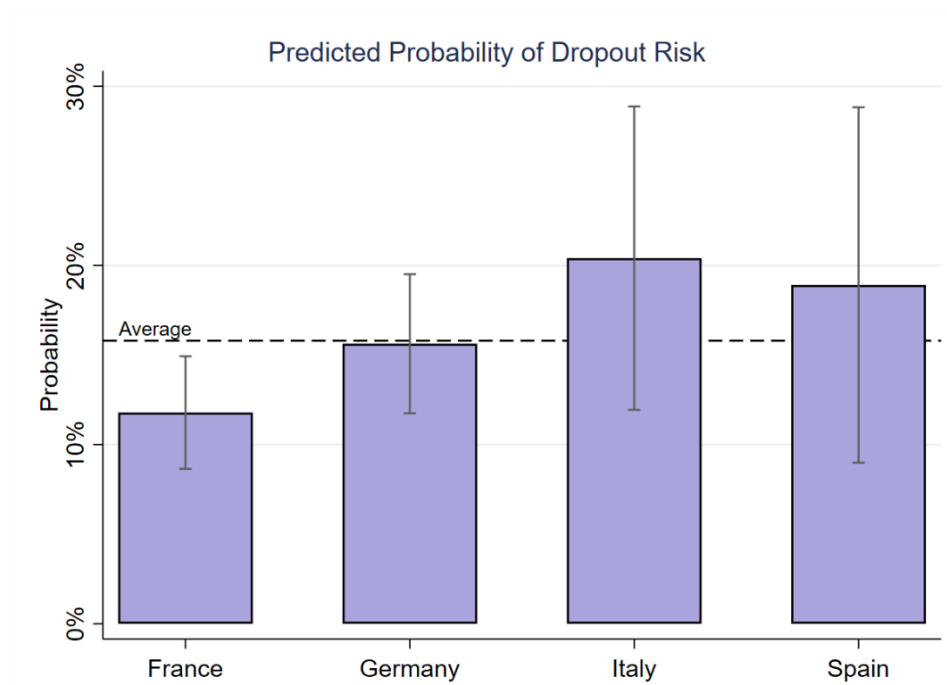


Figure 2. Adjusted probabilities of school dropout risk by country (Weighted)¹²

To further understand the impact of dropping out across countries, a bivariate regression model was conducted with the item “Did you ever consider leaving or changing school because you are LGBTIQ?” (C11) as the dependent variable and Country as the sole

¹² The bars represent the predicted probabilities of dropout risk from logistic regression, weighted. The vertical lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

predictor. Figure 2 shows that France has the lowest probability (11.8%), significantly below the sample average. Conversely, Italy and Spain present the highest probabilities (20.4% and 18.9% respectively). Post-estimation tests based on logistic regression confirm that the disparity between France and Italy is statistically significant ($p=0.034$). Consequently, we find that students in Italy are nearly twice as likely to consider dropping out as their French peers (OR 1.92). In contrast, the difference between France and Spain is not statistically significant ($p=0.126$), despite the high estimated probability, which, as already mentioned, is likely attributable to the smaller sample size.

5. Discussion

This study provides critical quantitative evidence on the inclusion of non-binary youths in secondary education across France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Aligning with extensive literature (McBride, 2021; Price-Feeney et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Santambrogio, 2022) and recommendations from the CoE (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2010; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2015; 2022; Council of Europe, 2018; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023), these quantitative models confirm the poor treatment, lack of recognition, and adverse mental health outcomes experienced by non-binary individuals. Given the distinct outcomes observed, these findings highlight the need to evaluate the efficacy of legislative advancements and, crucially, the implementation of universal training for teaching and non-teaching staff on trans* and non-binary recognition. Such training should not be contingent upon specific regional laws, policies, or school autonomy, or on the presence of students who have come out as trans*. Currently, when present, these programs are often framed (and tailored) around the needs of binary trans* pupils, potentially overlooking the specific issues faced by non-binary students, as they often fail to challenge the binary and cisnormative disciplinary power that regulates school environments through the surveillance of trans* bodies and gendered spaces (Foucault, 1977; 1978; Ingrei, 2023).

5.1. Lived experiences compared to policy

The results highlight a significant divergence between the formal and informal governance models described in Section 2.1 and students' lived experiences. A key contextual factor is the temporal gap between the survey's administration (summer 2023) and the actual implementation of some of the policies discussed. However, it is important to note that most survey items capture cumulative experiences rather than short timeframes, as most questions are preceded by the preamble "During your time in school...". Consequently, even if some policy advancements occurred during or after 2023, they would be unlikely to have substantially altered respondents' reported experiences. Moreover, the existence of regional or national legislation does not necessarily translate into positive school

experiences, as implementation depends on institutional willingness, staff awareness, and school culture.

Starting from France, characterised by a centralised, top-down approach (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2021) and the mandatory use of chosen names, consistently displayed the most favourable outcomes across the indices, with the lowest levels in the Identity Concealment Index. This suggests that state-level directives may lead to better outcomes for non-binary youths' school experiences and reduce the risk of dropout and adverse mental health outcomes (Table 4; Figure 2). The fact that students are less likely not to conceal their LGBTQIA+ status indicates that they often perceive their school environment, including their peers and teachers' behaviour, as safer than in the other three countries, which is supported by the higher percentage of pupils affirming they do not lack support (Figure 1).

Germany, meanwhile, illustrates the limitations of federal fragmentation, as guidelines vary across the *Länder*. Findings place Germany in an intermediate position, as it lacks a strong protective effect against feeling depressed, like France, or the reduction in both depression and suicidal thoughts as seen in Spain, when compared to the reference country (Italy), due to a lack of statistical significance (Table 4). Nor does it exhibit the extreme odds for suicide attempts like Spain (OR 2.20, Table 4) or dropout risk seen in Italy (Figure 2). However, it still recorded the second-highest percentage of students struggling with Gendered Spaces (27%), and 22.8% of students had "High" levels of concealment of their LGBTIQ status (Table 3; Figure 1). These outcomes may be linked to the non-binding, voluntary nature of LGBTI+-inclusive policies and teacher training in many German schools (OECD, 2023). Allowing training to be voluntary accounts for both specific biases among staff and their willingness to learn about the subject, leaving the presence of knowledgeable teachers to fortuity. Issues arising from the hidden curriculum (Walton, 2006), which in some cases may be intentional by educators, remain unaddressed; without mandatory, universal training, schools may remain willing to support students yet lack the operational knowledge to dismantle the binary structures that marginalise them (Johnson et al., 2020; Ingrey, 2023).

Italy remains the most critical country in terms of institutional and school support. Its reliance on the discretionary alias career, which by August 2023 was active in only 249 schools nationwide (Bourelly, 2024), combined with a lack of teacher training, leaves students vulnerable. Notably, Italy recorded the highest probability of students considering dropping out (20.4%, Figure 2) and the highest levels of Lack of Support (Figure 1). While this recommendation postdates the survey, the Ministry of Education and Merit's (2025) recent directive against inclusive language is likely to exacerbate these conditions, as they reinforce the invisibilisation of non-binary identities (Johnson et al., 2020).

Finally, the experiences from students in Spain illustrate that, despite most autonomous communities having adopted SOGI-based anti-discrimination laws prior to 2023, students in Spain report the highest levels of identity concealment and problems in gendered spaces. Nevertheless, the regression analysis illustrates a paradox as living in Spain protects against feeling depressed (OR 0.42) and suicidal thoughts (OR 0.39) but increases the risk of suicide attempts twofold (OR 2.20) compared to Italy, the reference country (Table 4). This suggests that while non-binary youths in Spain may experience

lower levels of recent psychological distress, the significantly higher prevalence of lifetime suicide attempts indicates that cumulative adverse experiences have already had severe and concrete consequences. Additionally, like Germany and Italy, the lack of mandatory teacher training may allow for continued victimisation due to binarism and cisgenderism, contributing to severe mental health outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020). Differences between students who were in school before and those who were in school only after the implementation of the *Ley Trans* (Ley 4/2023) may be observed in subsequent survey waves.

5.2. Active harm and exclusion

One of the most crucial findings of the multivariate analysis is that the Lack of Support Index was not significantly associated with suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, but only with feeling depressed (OR 2.0, Table 4). In contrast, always experiencing negative comments and conduct at least triples the odds of feeling depressed, thinking about suicide and having attempted. The limited predictive power of this index for suicidality implies that it is not the absence of allies that leads to severe mental health outcomes, but the presence of a hostile environment due to peers and educators, and the limited access to gendered spaces and activities. Indeed, descriptive data reinforce the pervasiveness of this hostility as 64.7% of youths reported being ridiculed by peers, and 14.45% by their teachers because of their LGBTIQ identity. Additionally, 45.54% reported experiencing discrimination by school personnel in the last 12 months (Table 3). The normative power of binarism and cisgenderism in educational settings, the hidden curriculum, as well as the lack of mandatory teacher training, further underline how hostile environments exacerbate the daily struggle of being both “invisible” as non-binary and simultaneously “hyper-visible” as targets of discipline, ridicule, teasing, insult and threats (Foucault, 1977; Walton, 2006; Ingrey, 2023; Johnson et al., 2020).

The regression analysis confirmed that students reporting high levels of problems in gendered spaces are 55% more likely to report suicidal thoughts (OR 1.55, $p < 0.05$) and 94% more likely to have attempted suicide (OR 1.94, $p < 0.01$, Table 4). For non-binary youths, spaces such as bathrooms, changing rooms, and sports teams are sites of constant identity invalidation (Ingrey, 2023). Being denied access or being forced to choose between binary options that do not align with their gender has been shown to impact mental health outcomes severely (Price-Feeney et al., 2021). The index highlights that without structural changes to school infrastructure (e.g., gender-neutral facilities), anti-bullying policies and allyship may be insufficient.

The most alarming finding is the link between educational exclusion (considering dropping out or changing schools because you are LGBTIQ, C11) and life-threatening outcomes. The regression analysis identified the variable “Considering leaving school” as the factor most strongly associated with suicide attempts and thoughts, as students who considered dropping out are over four times more likely to have attempted suicide (OR 4.27) and almost twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts (OR 1.75, Table 4). This suggests that students do not merely think about leaving school; they are actively pushed out of education by a hostile environment (Snapp et al., 2022). The strong association between

considering dropping out and lifetime suicide attempts may indicate that educational exclusion and suicidality are manifestations of the same underlying experience of structural rejection, in which the school environment becomes unbearable for non-binary students whose identities remain unrecognised and actively targeted (Price-Feeney et al., 2021).

The data reveal that Italy has a significantly higher probability of dropout consideration than France ($p=0.034$, Figure 2), which closely aligns with the complete lack of national policies on the recognition of trans* students and mandatory training for teachers and non-teaching staff on SOGI. The increasing hostility by pro-life organisations, right and far-right political parties against trans* students and their schools also continue to be alarming (De Falco, 2022; Buscaglia, 2023).

Lastly, the absence of systematic data collection on transphobic bullying in Italy, Germany, and Spain (IGLYO, 2025) is particularly alarming when contrasted to this study's findings, as it prevents institutions from addressing transphobic bullying and preventing adverse mental health outcomes for trans* students. This data gap also suggests that this study likely does not fully capture the actual phenomenon, as institutional and peer violence often remain unrecorded.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to fill a critical gap in educational research by providing a quantitative analysis of the school experiences of non-binary youths in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. By examining students' lived experiences through multivariate statistical modelling, based on FRA 2023 LGBTQI survey data (FRA, 2024), and contextualising these findings within the diverse governance models and national policy landscapes (Section 2.2), the findings suggest that while legislative progress regarding trans* rights is essential, the specific needs of non-binary students require dismantling the binary nature of trans* school support and gendered spaces (McBride & Neary, 2021; Santambrogio, 2022; Lorusso et al., 2024). It is fundamental to distinguish between the presence or absence of national/regional policies. Indeed, policies and guidelines do not prevent trans* students from facing difficulties in educational settings, as outcomes are also contingent on compliance by teaching and non-teaching staff and on students' actual experiences in the four countries. Their experience may also vary depending on recognition by parents or guardians, especially in countries where support for minors at school is contingent on parental or guardian approval (Bourelly, 2025).

Students' experiences in France are associated with the lowest levels of identity concealment (Table 3) and dropout risk (Figure 2), suggesting that centralised, top-down mandatory policies (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2021) provide better recognition than fragmented and voluntary frameworks found in Germany or the discretionary measure adopted in Italy. The reliance on schools' goodwill may also explain why students in Italy report the highest likelihood of considering dropping out (20.4%, Figure 2) and severe gaps in support and allyship. Moreover, when schools provide the alias career, the

need for a gender incongruence diagnosis not only goes against their right for self-determination but also negates access to students not deemed trans* enough by the administration's standards by gatekeeping support and recognition (Foucault, 1977; 1978; Bourelly, 2025). Whereas in Spain, the diverse policies found in each *comunidad autónoma* and the subsequent Ley Trans (Ley 4/2023), implemented in early 2023, may be linked to the protective effect observed regarding depressive feelings and suicidal ideation (Table 4) compared to Italy, particularly as these mental health outcomes refer to specific timelines (respectively, last 2 weeks and last 12 months).

The regression models also reveal that being supported and having allies at school are insufficient in a violent, hostile school environment, as the Lack of Support Index is not statistically significant for these respondents for severe mental health outcomes (Table 4). Furthermore, always experiencing negative comments and conduct at school at least triples the odds of feeling depressed, having suicidal thoughts, and having attempted suicide, making it the most consistent predictor across all three models (Table 4). Additionally, experiencing issues in gendered spaces significantly increases the likelihood of suicidal thoughts and attempts (Table 4). This may be linked to the binary nature of these spaces, which function as sites of constant identity invalidation for non-binary pupils due to normalisation and biopower and the way in which binarism disciplines their bodies, leaving many without viable options (Foucault, 1977; 1978; Ingrey, 2023; Price-Feeney et al., 2021). Consequently, the implementation of gender-neutral facilities is recommended as a priority that might also function as a suicide prevention measure.

Considering these findings and the rising anti-gender rhetoric (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018), national-level protection for trans* students might be a necessary shield to ensure their well-being. However, as noted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2022), political figures and leaders are active participants in the harm towards LGBTQIA+ people. In the specific case of Italy, the boundaries between ultraconservative movements and political institutions have blurred; as analysed by Prearo and Scopelliti (2023), anti-gender narratives regarding the “threat of gender theory/ideology” have been intercepted and normalised by ruling radical-right parties. Consequently, while national guidelines are necessary to ensure uniformity, in contexts where “anti-gender” proponents are enmeshed with the government, legislative action risks becoming a double-edged sword. In such climates, the protection of students cannot rely on political goodwill but must be embedded in professional standards and pedagogy (Mayo & Blackburn, 2019).

To conclude, the strong link between considering leaving or changing schools and suicide attempts transforms the issue of dropout from an educational issue to a mental health emergency for this population. While legislative progress is necessary *de iure*, change is *de facto* primarily needed within the educational settings, by truly recognising non-binary pupils' right to exist in these spaces as themselves, by combating the hidden curriculum and dismantling cisnormative and binary practices (Foucault, 1977; 1978; Stryker, 2006; Walton, 2006; Hall, 2021; Ingrey, 2023). Consequently, it is recommended to implement mandatory training for teachers and non-teaching staff on non-binary identities across all countries studied, as recommended by the CoE (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2010; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

2015; Council of Europe, 2018) and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2023). Professional misconduct, such as deliberate misgendering or the promotion of exclusionary rhetoric by staff, must be met with formal disciplinary action, including removal from the classroom for severe or repeated violations. Similarly, training for students must be provided, ensuring that bullying based on gender identity and sexual orientation is recognised and sanctioned as a severe infraction. Lastly, as repeatedly urged by the Council of Europe, it is necessary to establish systematic data collection on transphobic bullying, to make visible the experiences of non-binary youths and to inform the development of inclusive national-level policies.

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