INVITED TEACHING ISSUES

The Hidden Curriculum of Gender Identity in L2 Classrooms: Considerations for Teachers and Textbooks

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Abstract

In this Teaching Issues contribution, we explore what we refer to as the hidden curriculum of gender identity in second language (L2) classrooms. We begin by introducing the concept of the hidden curriculum and situate it within the current sociopolitical and educational climate surrounding issues of gender identity in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and applied linguistics. We then discuss two key considerations through which the hidden curriculum manifests: teachers' pedagogical practices and the use of textbooks as instructional materials. As possible pathways forward, we propose the integration of social–emotional learning (SEL) and the adoption of critical questions. The aim of this manuscript is not to provide an exhaustive review of existing literature; instead, our objective is to draw attention to the urgent need for deeper, more meaningful conversations about how the hidden curriculum of gender identity in formal educational settings—including L2 classrooms —contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities within and beyond the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

■ The concept of the hidden curriculum can be traced back to the 20th century, or even earlier, depending on interpretation (see Portelli, 1993). Originally, the hidden curriculum was understood as the way schools prepared students through their particular approaches to producing and valuing knowledge, an orientation that, as Anyon (1980, p. 67) notes, "has profound implication[s] for theory—and practice—in education." In a later reiteration of this concept, Lavoie (2005), in his work with children with learning disabilities, defined the hidden curriculum as unwritten, unspoken rules that determine each school's culture, including "shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, rituals, and customs" (Lavoie, 2005, p. 253). Under this purview, the hidden curriculum is understood as the unvoiced norms and expectations that school personnel value from students, and to which students are expected to adhere without forthright instruction. Anything that teachers do not explicitly explain, teach, or address in the classroom is part of the hidden curriculum.

For example, in a speaking activity in the second language (L2) classroom, a teacher might routinely call on more outspoken male students to present their ideas to the class while quieter female students are asked to read prepared sentences or assist with materials. These participation patterns are rarely intentional or verbalized, yet they send powerful messages about who is expected to take on public, leadership-oriented roles and who is positioned as a supporter. Over time, L2 learners, particularly those navigating new cultural contexts, may internalize these unspoken expectations, aligning their classroom behavior with perceived norms rather than their own interests or abilities. The teacher's lack of explicit discussion about equitable participation allows these dynamics to persist unchecked.

Whether we know it or not, as participants and contributors to the school community, we—teachers and students—are influenced by the hidden curriculum. As formulated succinctly by Auerbach and Burgess (1985):

> No curriculum is neutral: Each reflects a particular view of the social order, whether implicitly or explicitly. This "hidden curriculum" generates social meanings, restraints, and cultural values which shape students' roles outside the classroom. The choices that educators make reflect their views of the learning process, the social context for learning, and the students' place in society. These choices have a very real impact on students. (p. 476)

Apple (1993) further complicates the concept of the hidden curriculum by arguing that schools—and the teachers and principals who

represent them—operate as traditional institutions in which covert knowledge is granted legitimacy and thus often remains unquestioned. Through this legitimization, the status quo is reproduced yet obscured in the transmission of what he terms "official knowledge," which students absorb and enact as they develop into active participants in society. However, Apple (2012) later revises this perspective by cautioning against portraying students and teachers as mere "passive internalizers" (Apple, 2012, p. 13) of hidden curricular objectives since not all policies are duly implemented by those actors, given competing and sometimes contradictory ideological biases and institutional mechanisms.

In the fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and applied linguistics, early work by Auerbach and Burgess (1985) critically examined "survival" English as a second language (ESL) materials, highlighting how these resources often perpetuate hierarchical social roles through their content and structure, thereby revealing aspects of the hidden curriculum in adult ESL instruction. For instance, they cite lessons in which workers are taught to understand imperative commands from supervisors but not to give them, reinforcing a one-way power dynamic in which learners are positioned as subordinates rather than equals in the workplace. In a similar vein, Pentón Herrera, Custodio, and O'Loughlin (2022) discussed how the hidden curriculum can create cultural dissonance for refugee students and students with limited or interrupted formal education, as unspoken norms and expectations in formal school settings often conflict with these students' prior educational experiences. For example, a learner who is accustomed to community-based, oral, and collaborative approaches in their home country may feel confused or alienated when suddenly expected to work silently at an individual desk, complete timed written tests, or compete for grades. Despite these foundational contributions in the field, the application of the hidden curriculum as a lens to explore gender identity issues in L2 classrooms remains notably limited.

Ongoing conversations about gender identity within TESOL and applied linguistics have explored issues of gender inequalities reinforced by language teaching materials and resources (Jones, 2016; Tajeddin & Enayat, 2010), the linguistic performance of genders and sexuality (Cameron, 2005), and the reinforcement of heteronormativity in educational aids and instruction (Cahnmann-Taylor & Coda, 2019; Paiz, 2018), to name a few. These and other publications have moved the field forward, reporting on how language teaching practices and instructional tools perpetuate ideologies of gender identities that are favored by Western, conservative societies, purposefully erasing identities "othered" as deviant (Jones, 2016) from language instruction. While these contributions have been instrumental in

advancing conversations about gender in language education, few have explicitly examined how the hidden curriculum shapes, reinforces, or silences gender identity in L2 classrooms.

In this Teaching Issues contribution, we open a dialogue about the hidden curriculum of gender identity in L2 classrooms. We approach this conversation from the perspective that the hidden curriculum in school and L2 classrooms may make female, queer, and non-binary students vulnerable. Further, we situate identity—and by extension, gender identity—as a matter of schooling. For us, gender identity encompasses more than sex and sexual orientation. While sex traditionally refers to biological characteristics, gender identity extends to how individuals understand and express themselves, which may not necessarily align with these biological distinctions. Additionally, sexual orientation, relating to patterns of attraction, interacts in complex ways with gender identity. These concepts are often intertwined in educational settings, including the L2 classroom, where school norms and curricula influence how students experience, express, and accept a spectrum of gender and sexual identities. One illustration of this is a textbook dialogue that depicts male characters exclusively in professional roles and female characters in domestic ones, while omitting any same-sex couples, thereby reinforcing both traditional gender-role expectations and heteronormative assumptions.

It is important to acknowledge that some gender studies scholars question the binary categorization of sex and gender, advocating instead for a more fluid understanding that reflects the full spectrum of human experiences (Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In this contribution, we understand gender identity as a person's sense of self, one that extends beyond biological classifications. We contend that acknowledging and respecting the diversity of gender identities within formal educational spaces directly impacts the inclusivity and effectiveness of teaching and learning (Higgins, 2010). Also, we do not limit our discussion of gender identity to identities within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) community alone. Instead, we aim to initiate a broader conversation that encourages the field to expand its current definitions and conversations to include all forms of gender identity, such as cisgender, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, and other self-defined identities that reflect the diverse ways individuals understand and express their gender. In the following sections, we examine the hidden curriculum of gender identity through two key components—teachers and textbooks—and how they affect language teaching and learning in the L2 classroom.

CONSIDERATION 1. TEACHERS' TEACHING PRACTICES AND BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS MAY BE STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Teaching is a deeply personal and moral practice that involves "setting up the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual environment in which people learn," and teachers are essential to this process (Schiro, 2013, p. 125). From instructional content to the implementation of rules within formal learning spaces, teachers often reproduce ideological preferences and norms that have been either explicitly conveyed through formal training or implicitly internalized through professional and personal experience. At times, this can take the form of avoiding discussion of culturally sensitive topics, such as a textbook story in which a couple marries after having a child because it conflicts with prevailing gender norms that expect women to marry before becoming mothers and to conform to traditional family structures. As shown by Mansouri, Pentón Herrera, Behzadpoor, and Nazari (2025) in their study of English language teaching within the highly conservative national context of Iran, teachers may omit or sidestep such content to align with societal expectations and prevent backlash. This example reflects a larger pattern in which teachers are often expected to promote ideologies deemed appropriate by institutions and society, "particularly in terms of the hidden curriculum that is concerned with values" (Schiro, 2013, p. 194).

In this sense, teachers are frequently positioned as obedient professionals who follow and administer the school's rules and regulations.[1] However, the ideologies carried by the hidden curriculum and formal schooling system have historically favored dominant values, misrepresenting or ignoring critical pedagogical issues such as gender and gender identity. These topics are frequently framed through conservative views that reinforce 'traditional' gender roles (Giroux, 1987; Jones, 2016). As a result, teachers become both recipients and enforcers of the hidden curriculum in their teaching practices and beyond.

Scholars in the field have increasingly emphasized the necessity of recognizing issues of ideologies in L2 teacher education for pre-service and in-service teachers (Sah & Uysal, 2022; Thoma, 2022). However, despite growing recognition of the importance of identity and ideology in language education, L2 teacher education programs—and teacher education programs more broadly—have not traditionally

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[1] While making this statement, we would also like to recognize that there are contexts where teachers are supported to be agentic and critical, as pointed out by one of the peer reviewers of this manuscript.

been designed to promote sustained, critical reflection on these issues within the context of L2 teaching and learning. Scholars in the field widely acknowledge that this lack of attention may negatively impact teachers' pedagogical practices as well as students' investment and engagement in language learning. For example, Del Carpio and Ochoa (2022), exploring the effects of Spanish heritage language teachers' language ideologies, found that even teachers who received 'progressive' teacher education replicated colonial and racist ideologies in their teaching, shaping students' beliefs in the classroom and beyond. Similarly, Orr (2014), criticizing the lack of clarity in L2 teacher education programs, argued "that second language teacher education (SLTE) should include, as part of the second language teacher's knowledge base, an understanding of ideology" (p. 4).

Professionals in cultural institutions, such as schoolteachers, are deeply interconnected with the broader social and economic system, as the ideas they convey and the materials they create often serve to communicate and reinforce that system's values and power structures (Anyon, 1980). This underscores the need for teachers to receive preparation and be (made) aware of how the hidden curriculum replicates social power structures in the classroom space, where gender identity can be employed as a tool for inclusion or exclusion. In L2 classrooms, where teaching often "requires additional emotional investment and labor" (Martínez-Alba, Pentón Herrera, & Trinh, 2023, p. 31), given the strong emphasis on interpersonal conversations, relationships, and topics explored (e.g., identities), it is vital for teachers to evaluate their ideologies. These ideologies shape how they approach and address gender identity inside learning spaces.

We recommend integrating social–emotional learning (SEL) into teacher preparation programs as a crucial step toward helping educators critically engage with the hidden curriculum of gender identity (e.g., Pentón Herrera, 2024). By SEL, we mean teaching approaches that intentionally foster social–emotional development and awareness, equipping teachers to recognize and challenge unspoken norms and biases in their classrooms (Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). In language education, approaches aligned with SEL principles—though not always labeled as such—aim to humanize teaching and promote reflection on identity, values, and relationships. These include reflective practice (Farrell, 2019), narrative and identity work (Yazan, 2019), values and character education (Karam, 2021; Lickona, 1991; Pentón Herrera, 2019), and attention to affect in learning (Arnold, 2011).

To date, SEL continues to be widely unacknowledged in language (teacher) education; however, some studies are showing its potential to support language teachers' ideological realizations and

confrontations. For example, in a recent study, Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2022), examined the impact that a teacher preparation course focused on emotions, well-being, and language teacher identity had on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Poland. Through narratives, interactive activities, and in-class conversations, the participants (pre-service and in-service EFL teachers from diverse backgrounds) explored how emotions, identity, and well-being are part of the classroom and school culture. Participants also reflected on whether those elements were or should be prioritized in their past and future school settings. One of the participants, Akin, reported that in Nigeria, colonialist ideologies continue to permeate language teaching and learning, "turning teacher-student interactions in the classroom...into a slave-master relationship" (p. 20), where students are treated as emotionless producers of work, and teachers as depositors of information.

A practical example of how SEL could be incorporated into language teacher education for both pre-service and in-service teachers is the following prompt:

> I am going to ask a question, and do not answer; simply think about it. Who is a good language learner, and who is a good language teacher? Think about the first representation of a good language learner and teacher that came to mind, and reflect on why you have these representations in your mind. In your reflection, consider your prior formal schooling journey, your positionality in your current environment, and any other elements that might have contributed to it. Also, think about who would then be at the other end of the spectrum—that is, who would be considered a bad language learner and teacher, and why? Lastly, who determines who is a good or bad language learner or teacher? You? The school system? The society?

SEL prompts and activities like the one described above provide pre-service and in-service language teachers with the necessary space to begin exploring how ideologies influence their practice and dispositions. Other examples of practical SEL activities that could be implemented include asking teachers to reflect on issues of gender identity and expectations in the school and classroom. For instance, as part of an assignment, language teachers might observe a school and report on whether phrases used by the queer community are included in classroom/teaching practices. Two examples of commonly used and known phrases by the queer community that can be used for such an assignment are *spill the tea* (Johnson, 2008) and *we are family* (Weston, 1997). These observations could be supplemented by interviewing LGBTQ+ community members or allies about language specific to their contexts, ensuring a richer understanding of how such

expressions function socially and culturally. In addition, language teachers might analyze how different gender identities are represented in activities beyond the heterosexual/gay binary. They could investigate how schools approach students' moral and ethical development (i.e., character education; Lickona, 1991). Reflection on the visual and physical displays in the school environment (e.g., posters, bulletin boards, and other educational or aesthetic materials) can further reveal the messages conveyed by the institution. Finally, examining teacher-student interactions can highlight how communication and expectations are shaped by institutional values.

As a note of importance, we recognize that in implementing these SEL activities, teachers may also encounter students from religious and/or conservative backgrounds whose beliefs about gender and sexuality differ from inclusive perspectives promoted in class. The challenge is to respect those beliefs while ensuring that all students feel safe, affirmed, and equally valued. For example, a religiously conservative student might express discomfort when paired in a dialogue task with a non-binary peer who uses they/them pronouns. In this situation, the teacher can reaffirm the classroom expectation of respectful language, explaining that using someone's chosen name and pronouns is a matter of courtesy and belonging, not personal endorsement of an identity. If needed, the teacher might privately suggest an alternative way for the student to engage in the activity, such as using a fictional character or neutral example, while making clear that misgendering, disrespect, or exclusionary behavior is not acceptable. This approach protects the dignity of all students, upholds inclusive classroom norms, and still models how to navigate deeply held differences with respect.

These SEL activities help pre-service and in-service teachers deconstruct the hidden curriculum of gender identity by providing reflective tools to uncover subconscious biases and assumptions about gender. For instance, the 'good language learner' exercise can prompt teachers to examine their notions of a successful student and consider how these are shaped by traditional gender roles, heteronormative assumptions, and societal expectations. Reflection on students' moral and ethical development, school visual and physical displays, and teacher-student interactions can reveal how institutional values, including those related to gender, are subtly embedded in the environment. Such insights can help teachers identify whether classroom materials, displays, and interactions reflect diverse gender identities or reinforce binary, exclusionary norms. This awareness is critical to creating inclusive, affirming learning environments that support all students, regardless of gender identity.

CONSIDERATION 2. THE TEXTBOOKS AND MATERIALS USED IN THE CLASSROOM MAY BE STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Textbooks constitute an essential component in learners' socialization processes and, as Riazi (2003) observes, represent the most central pedagogical element only after teachers. As Ndura (2004) noted in her discussion of the hidden curriculum, textbooks significantly influence learners' perception of themselves and their social environments through the display of socially accepted norms and values in explicit and implicit ways. While not all teachers rely exclusively on textbooks, and many supplement them with authentic materials, textbooks remain highly influential, particularly in contexts where they are mandated or form the backbone of instruction (e.g., Mansouri et al., 2025). Even when supplemented, they often set the overarching narratives and norms that frame classroom learning. These materials are often perceived as official, institutionalized, and dogmatic documents, approved by Ministries of Education and designed to standardize content, objectives, and ultimately, learners themselves (Becker, 2023).

Although in some contexts, such as recent high-profile debates and policy changes in places like Texas, United States, textbooks are contested and revised, in many educational settings, they are still rarely questioned by students, teachers, or parents (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020). Over the past several decades, an extensive body of literature has shown that textbooks frequently reproduce and reinforce gender stereotypes prevalent in broader society; for example, by portraying men predominantly in professional roles such as doctors or scientists, while depicting women mainly as caregivers or in domestic settings (Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Lee & Collins, 2009). In their recent study of EFL textbooks in Iran, Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found that teachers recognized these patterns and expressed a desire for materials that more accurately reflect gender equality, underscoring the need for educators to critically evaluate and, where possible, adapt the content they use.

These studies examining gender stereotypes in textbooks underscore the extent to which such considerations are heavily context-dependent and require a thorough knowledge of and experience with local cultures in which those textbooks are used and how representations of identities and gender are perceived and understood (Mustapha & Mills, 2015). As Mustapha and Mills (2015, p. 2) argue, "educational textbooks are inevitably about educating and challenging children and people in general, and it should not be assumed that

representations should necessarily simply reflect the status quo." We would extend this argument by asserting that all actors involved in the teaching profession, including students, should actively challenge textbooks and other similarly static materials. For instance, language teacher educators might encourage pre-service teachers to question prescriptive grammar rules presented in teaching materials; an exercise that can be met with resistance despite its pedagogical value. We consider the active and critical questioning of textbooks and other static materials to be particularly salient since changing textbooks can take a very long time and can prove inefficient and insufficient to profoundly change education, attitudes, and ultimately the status quo.

One of the most persistent forms of stereotyping found in textbooks pertains to the underrepresentation of female characters. In some instances, as Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2020) found, this underrepresentation is intentional in order to align materials better with the actual situation in society. In other cases, such exclusion occurs without any discernible rationale. Furthermore, even when women are included in dialogues, activities, or texts, they are frequently portrayed through stereotypical lenses, as the 'weaker sex,' primary caregivers, or individuals with limited participation in public life (Lee, 2014; Lee & Chin, 2019). This underrepresentation also manifests at the lexical and syntactical levels. For example, similar to Uzum, Yazan, and Selvi's (2017) study on the inclusivity of pronouns, the use of masculine generics to refer to all possible genders excludes learners who do not identify with those forms and may be exacerbated by how they are employed by teachers in class. Similarly, Tainio and Karvonen (2015), in their study on Finnish teachers' language practices and textbook usage, concluded that both instructional materials and teacher discourse continue to promote a binary conceptualization of gender as a feminine-masculine dichotomy.

This underscores the urgent need for heightened critical awareness at the textbook implementation stage—specifically when teachers employ curricular materials in the classroom—and ideally, within teacher preparation programs as well. Pre-service and in-service teachers must be equipped with the analytical tools necessary to identify and interrogate the ideological assumptions embedded in curricular content. As articulated by Uzum et al. (2017, p. 645), "teacher educators should design class activities in which pre-service teachers analyze and deconstruct examples of . . . exclusionary discourses in textbooks." Although various checklists exist for evaluating English language textbooks (e.g., Miekley, 2005; Richards, 2017), these tools predominantly emphasize academic and structural components, such as organization, vocabulary, presentation, grammar, and other technical elements, while largely neglecting dimensions related to the

hidden curriculum of gender identity. In response, we advocate for the integration of reflective, equity-oriented questions in textbook evaluation processes within teacher education, particularly given the extent to which instructional materials shape learners' academic, social, and psychological well-being. Such questions can help teachers identify problematic representations and critically reflect on the broader role of textbooks, which often lag behind social change and risk reinforcing outdated or exclusionary ideologies.

Textbook Evaluation Questions Concerning the Hidden Curriculum of Gender Identity

1. In what ways are diverse gender identities represented fairly and equitably in the textbook's images, characters, and narratives?
2. How does the textbook explicitly affirm and celebrate diverse gender identities, including LGBTQ+ representation?
3. How are biases, stereotypes, and binary representations of gender reinforced or challenged in the textbook?
4. In what ways is inclusive language, such as gender-neutral pronouns and LGBTQ+ phrases, introduced and modeled effectively?

While such reflective prompts may be especially valuable for novice or pre-service teachers or for those who are unfamiliar or even uncomfortable with issues of gender diversity, we further endorse Paiz's (2020) dialogic approach. This approach encourages teachers and students to examine how queer identities are represented and lived in their own cultural and community contexts, and to incorporate those perspectives into lessons, examples, and classroom discussions so that marginalized and underrepresented identities are visible and valued. In a complementary way, Trinh and Tinker Sachs (2024) advocate for critically examining and adapting textbooks and other instructional materials to challenge heteronormative assumptions, broaden representations, and make space for diverse gender and sexual identities. Such practices can foster participatory, place- and action-based teaching that resists fixed meanings and dominant knowledge systems, thereby offering students and teachers new avenues for learning and understanding. Dialogue and critical inquiry thus become indispensable in confronting the heteronormative status quo often reproduced by textbooks. Where textbooks fail to include the whole spectrum of identities, teachers bear the responsibility to "teach *to* the tension to engage in uncomfortable, yet critical, conversations

with students and ask, *What will we do to provide…critical and queer perspectives to read between the lines to unfix the meaning and message in the textbook?*" (Trinh & Tinker Sachs, 2024, p. 149 [emphasis in original]).

Similarly, when exploring these and other critical questions, it is essential for language teacher educators and language teachers to foster and engage in candid and courageous conversations (see Gómez Portillo, Trinh, & Pentón Herrera, 2022) that interrogate the ideological frameworks and values that underpin textbook representations. Through these conversations, language teachers and language teacher educators can collaboratively explore ways to resist and counterbalance the hidden curriculum embedded in textbooks that promote heteronormative values and contribute to the erasure and marginalization of LGBTQ+. One promising approach is the co-creation of instructional resources by both teachers and learners. Language teachers may also draw inspiration and resources from organizations such as the National Education Association (https://www.nea.org/resource-library/nea-lgbtq-resources), GLSEN's network (https://www.glsen.org/resources/educator-resources), and Welcoming Schools (https://welcomingschools.org/resources/lesson-plans-lgbtq-inclusive), all of which offer inclusive, practical resources aimed at fostering equity and affirming diverse identities in educational settings.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND MOVING FORWARD

Just as anti-racist teacher training has increasingly emphasized the importance of critical awareness and the rejection of colorblind ideologies (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba 2022), comparable frameworks can and should be applied to address matters of gender identity. It is crucial that educators approach such topics with intentionality and clarity, openly addressing the challenges students and teachers may face in relation to gender identity, rather than evading or downplaying them. Although some political and public discourses have framed the inclusion of gender identity in curricula as ideological or even indoctrinatory (e.g., Perez & Wilkes, 2025), we have argued here that the failure to address such topics instead serves to reinforce dominant ideologies, harmful stereotypes, and exclusionary practices that marginalize those who fall outside normative gender expectations. Importantly, even when students are otherwise highly motivated to learn a new language, they may not be invested or interested in being part of classrooms where sexist or homophobic practices are present (Norton & De Costa, 2018; Paiz, 2018, 2020). Emerging social movements, such as Fridays for Future or March for Our Lives, demonstrate that students are increasingly less complacent and more committed to

pursuing knowledge, justice, and meaningful change. This generation actively interrogates the 'imposed' reality and seeks to address the existential and systemic issues that shape their lived realities.

However, even with this growing commitment to change, not all teaching contexts are equally open to discussions of the hidden curriculum of gender identity. In politically or religiously conservative environments, which are becoming increasingly prevalent across the world, from the Americas to Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, teachers may need to employ alternative strategies. In recent times, gender identity has emerged as one of the most—if not the most—vulnerable areas of inclusion globally, often facing simultaneous pushback from both political and religious conservatism. This dual pressure makes it a particular flashpoint in education, with discussions more likely to be silenced, restricted, or framed as controversial compared to other aspects of diversity, many of which can be more readily negotiated or discussed in some contexts. These realities underscore the importance of strategic, context-sensitive approaches, which might include embedding inclusive perspectives within broader themes of respect, empathy, and human dignity; using literature, case studies, or examples that allow students to explore diversity indirectly; and creating classroom agreements that promote respectful engagement without forcing personal disclosure. In doing so, it is equally important for educators to safeguard their own well-being and safety, ensuring that efforts toward inclusion are balanced with awareness of local policies, institutional expectations, and potential risks. Such approaches can help maintain a safe and affirming learning environment while navigating institutional or societal constraints.

Navigating the political, religious, and institutional constraints that limit open discussion of gender identity is essential if we are to move from coping with limitations to actively transforming harmful gender ideologies, stereotypes, and indoctrination. Accordingly, teacher preparation and professional development programs must prioritize teacher self-awareness, beginning with the foundational understanding that all educators, regardless of discipline, engage with and teach gender (Stinson, 2011). In advocating for greater integration of gender identity discussion within L2 teacher preparation and professional development programs, we acknowledge that educators in many global contexts are being asked—sometimes forced—to teach within a very explicit curriculum that either rejects discussion of gender identity or restricts it in many ways. Although this manuscript does not explicitly focus on these policy limitations, we recognize their significance and encourage scholars to continue advancing this conversation in future research.

In conclusion, we call upon researchers in TESOL and applied linguistics to further investigate the hidden curriculum of gender identity in language teaching contexts. Building upon the arguments presented here, we invite future research to explore how the hidden curriculum operates in L2 instructional spaces, the role that institutions and stakeholders play in sustaining or disrupting it, and the broader implications for teachers, students, and curricular materials. Other equally important topics that remain underexplored include methodological reconceptualizations of gender identity as expressed through participatory action research conducted by teacher-scholars, the queer community, and in partnership between queer and non-queer communities. Such work is crucial for pushing the boundaries of how gender identity is understood, taught, and lived in language classrooms.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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