Transgender students in UK secondary schools

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Abstract

Background: Some research indicates that transgender students in the UK have more difficult experiences of school compared to LGB cis-gender students [1]. However, less is known about the intricacies of young trans people's time at school.

Methods: Fieldwork took place online from April – November 2020. Using a purposive sampling strategy, 83 teachers took part in an online survey. 22 teachers and 15 young trans people aged 16-29 took part in semi-structured online interviews. Data was analysed thematically and ethical approval was granted by The University of Manchester.

Results: Transgender students engaged in complex negotiations in several aspects of school including teaching and learning, coming out as trans, school uniform and seeking privacy in toilets and changing rooms. The findings offer a unique insight into the everyday lives of transgender secondary school students in the UK, illuminating how cis-normativity operates in school and how young trans people and their teachers negotiate this in active and profound ways.

Key Takeaway

Trans students and teachers had to negotiate the absence of information about transgender identities in school whilst also maintaining the status-quo. The challenge, then, is about improving the 'nothingness' of trans identities [2] [3] without disrupting the 'ordinariness' of school life [4]. These negotiations were relational, with teachers playing particularly key roles.

Recomendations

❶ **Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) [6]:** More detailed guidance for teaching about trans identities in ways which do not position trans identities and trans students as extra-ordinary.

❷ **School Uniforms:** Should not be explicitly gendered.

❸ **LGBT Groups in school:** Should be available as they integrate LGBT identities and students into ordinary school life.

❹ **Teacher Training:** How to support trans students in school, the importance of not outing students , using non-gendered pronouns when needed and how to identify and limit gender policing.

❺ **Toilets and changing rooms:** Non-gendered, open-plan spaces with individual cubicles would be beneficial for all students but renaming 'disabled' toilets to 'accessible' is a good start.

Themes

Learning about trans identities

- Very little was taught about trans identities, and even less so about non-binary identities.

- Whilst young trans people and teachers wanted this to improve, there was a key tension: how to teach about trans identities without making a spectacle of trans identities and students.

> "[...] having such a few, such a tiny insignificant amount of like conversation around LGBT identities, it just opened it up for people to make fun of it [...]"
> (Daniel, he/him)

Coming out

- When at school, not every young trans person knew that they were trans but some did.

- Those who did managed this by not coming out, or by being 'stealth' (living as their identified gender without disclosing their experience of transition). However, in school, being stealth was difficult due to existing relationships.

> "[...] if they [school] did the name change quicker [...] that would have made a heck of a lot of difference not just at school but for the rest of my life because I'd have been me a little bit sooner [...]"
> (Aaron, he/him)

Uniform

- Trans students' appearance, and the clothing that they wore in school was shaped by two key factors: school uniform policies, and informal 'gender policing' [5].

- Some young trans people made small adjustments to their uniform, whilst others waited until they had left school to dress how they wished.

Toilets and Changing Rooms

- Alternative spaces included accessible toilets and staff toilets.

- However, requesting or gaining access to these spaces could draw attention to trans students and so were not very private in practice.

> "I just didn't want to rock the boat at all in high school [...] I wanted to just like get on with it [...] I felt like if I'd come out [as trans] er while I was still wearing uniform it would have caused a big problem [...]"
> (Callum, he/him)

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