

ARTICLE

Institutional cisnormativity and educational injustice: Trans children's experiences in primary and early secondary education in the UK

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Abstract

Background: Transgender children are known to face a wide range of barriers, difficulties and injustices at school. Few studies have focused on the educational experiences of trans pupils who socially transition at or before primary school, with no such studies in the UK.

Aims: To learn about the at-school experiences of transgender children who socially transitioned at or before primary school in the UK, listening to children's and parental accounts of navigating cisnormativity in UK primary and early secondary education.

Sample: The primary sample included 30 parents whose children had socially transitioned under the age of 11 in the UK. This sample was complemented with data directly from 10 of these trans children. The primary sample was accessed through six trans positive parenting groups in the UK, supplemented through snowball sampling.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews produced a rich and detailed qualitative data set, that was analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

Results: Three major themes are presented, highlighting experiences of (i) institutional cisnormativity in UK schools, (ii) a failure to protect trans children and (iii) evidence of educational injustice. The results demonstrate how institutional cisnormativity leaves trans pupils in unsafe educational environments, contributing to school drop-out and trauma.

Conclusions: Cisnormative attitudes normalize injustice, making it acceptable for trans children to lose access to education, or to experience trauma in school. Educators, schools and school leaders need to take action to protect trans children in our schools.

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KEYWORDS

children, cisnormativity, diversity, education, gender, inclusion, LGBT, primary, secondary, trans, transgender

INTRODUCTION

As increasing numbers of trans children are supported in childhood, a generation of trans children are socially transitioning at or before primary school (Durwood et al., 2017; Roche, 2020). Global literature has highlighted common challenges faced by trans children in education (Horton, 2020; McBride, 2020). Trans pupils are at risk of experiencing invalidation, problematization and stigmatization (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Marx et al., 2017; Pyne, 2014). Trans adolescents are known to face high levels of discrimination and violence in schools, experiencing bullying, de-legitimization or harassment from peers as well as from adults (Bradlow et al., 2017; Davy & Cordoba, 2019; Francis & Monakali, 2021; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018; Martín-Castillo et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2016). The cumulative stresses of navigating unsafe and trans-hostile environments is a significant risk to trans pupils' mental health and educational attainment (Case & Meier, 2014; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018; Snapp et al., 2015).

At a global level, research on pre-adolescent trans children's experiences in education has considered how schools can react with fear to a trans pupil in primary school (Payne & Smith, 2014). Trans children are too often left to advocate for their own inclusion within schools poorly prepared to welcome trans pupils (Miller, 2016b; Ullman, 2017). In the case of pre-adolescent trans children, or at least for those with supportive families, parents and carers often take on a significant role in advocating for school trans inclusion (Davy & Cordoba, 2019; Neary, 2019). Primary school inclusion is influenced by teacher attitude, knowledge and confidence (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017), with teachers noting structural and systemic challenges to trans inclusion (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016).

In the UK, trans children continue to experience a large number of areas of inequality, including within education (Children's Right Alliance for England, 2016). Trans children in England, Scotland and Wales are protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, although school approaches to welcoming trans pupils remain inconsistent and highly variable (Davy & Cordoba, 2019; Horton, 2020). Research on trans inclusion in UK schools has primarily focused on the educational experiences of trans adolescents, highlighting high levels of harassment, and challenges navigating schools ill-prepared for trans inclusion (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Bradlow et al., 2017; Leonard, 2019; Paechter et al., 2021). Some research has gained insight into younger trans children's experiences in the UK through parental interview (Davy & Cordoba, 2019), although not specifically focused on experiences in education. Younger trans pupils remain an under-researched age-group, with pre-adolescent trans children almost always excluded from UK research (Bradlow et al., 2017; Government Equalities Office, 2018). The exclusion of pre-teen trans children from existing datasets enables perpetuation of misinformation and ignorance about trans children, and arguably enables disenfranchisement of their rights.

This study provides an important addition to the existing evidence base, learning about the experiences of pre-teen trans children in UK schools, hearing from trans children and parents of trans children. It examines trans children's experiences in primary and early secondary education from an institutional and systemic perspective, through a lens of cisnormativity. Cisnormativity is the assumption that everyone is cis, that is, not trans, or should be (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). Newbury (2013) has discussed the ways in which structural or institutional cisnormativity permeates societies and institutions, invisible to most cis people, yet exacting harm on trans people in structures and systems that were not designed to include trans lives. Bartholomaeus and Riggs (2017a) talk about trans children needing assistance to ensure their inclusion in cisnormative systems, putting trans children in a position of having to ask for support from schools. Research has started to consider the ways in which cisnormative school cultures contribute to pupil stress (Ingrey, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). McBride and

Neary (2021, p. 1) emphasize the ways in which ‘cisnormativity permeates all aspects of school life’, legitimizing harassment, invalidation and discrimination. Cisnormativity is embedded within educational environments, sustained by ‘surveillance and self-surveillance’ (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018, p. 42). Literature has called attention to the cisnormative roots of policies, attitudes and practices that may not aim to cause harm, but nonetheless contribute to making schools unsafe environments for trans children (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017a; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Institutional cisnormativity in schools can be invisible or un-noticed by cis educators, while placing trans pupils under a ‘constant state of alert’, experiencing perpetual stress (Newbury, 2013, para. 2).

RESEARCH AIM

This study aimed to extend our understanding of institutional cisnormativity in education, with a focus on the experiences of pre-teen trans children in the UK. It examines trans children's experiences in primary schools, as well as considering experiences during the first 2 years of secondary school, providing a unique addition to UK literature. In the UK, primary education typically runs from 4 to 11 years old, with this article capturing insights into experiences from ages 4 to 13 years old. The study draws upon data from 30 parents and 10 trans children, focusing on a specific, and under-researched cohort, examining the experiences of UK trans children who socially transition at school under the age of 11. This cohort has been chosen because it holds important experiential insights into navigating cisnormative primary and secondary education. Almost all of the children in this sample were the first known trans child in their primary school, a generation coming up against institutionalized cisnormativity in schools unaccustomed to welcoming or even recognizing trans pupils.

This research offers a novel and significant contribution to the literature in three ways: firstly, through accessing and listening to the voices of a unique sample of trans children who socially transitioned at or before primary school in the UK; secondly, through examining the ways in which cisnormativity manifests in schools; and finally, by exploring the link between entrenched cisnormativity and experiences of educational injustice. The research aims to fill an important knowledge gap, providing evidence to inform school policy and practice.

METHODS

Sampling methodology

The primary sample inclusion criteria targeted parents or carers who self-identified as having a child who socially transitioned prior to the age of 11 years old. Pronoun change in a majority of settings (i.e., home and school) was taken as the key indicator of what is known as a ‘social transition’ (Ehrensaft et al., 2018). Parents and carers were identified through six online support groups for families of gender diverse children. Recruitment of parents and carers combined purposive, opportunistic and snowball sampling. The researcher's insider–outsider researcher position as a non-binary parent of a trans child enabled privileged access to closed parent networks, helping overcome trust- and access-related barriers that are common in this cohort (Ashley, 2020).

The study included interviews with 10 trans children and 30 parents. The primary sample was formed of 30 UK-based parents of a trans child who had socially transitioned before the age of 11 years old. Their 30 trans children had socially transitioned at a mean age of 7 years old (range 3–10 years old), with the sampled families including 15 trans girls, 12 trans boys and three non-binary children. The 30 trans children were, at time of parental interview, mean age 11 (range 6–16 years old), enabling insights into educational experiences in the time since social transition (mean time since social transition 4 years, range 1–7 years). Further detail is provided in Table 1. Data drawn from parental interviews were supplemented

TABLE 1 Data on age and age of social transition of trans children of the interviewed parents

Trans children in the interviewed families	Age at time of social transition	Current age	Years since social transition	Gender
1	6	9	3	Girl
2	5	11	6	Girl
3	6	11	5	Boy
4	7	12	5	Girl
5	7	12	5	Girl
6	10	15	5	Boy
7	10	16	6	Boy
8	4	11	7	Girl
9	7	14	7	Girl
10	5	9	4	Girl
11	10	15	5	Girl
12	6	12	6	Girl
13	8	12	4	Boy
14	9	12	3	Non-binary
15	9	10	1	Girl
16	9	11	2	Girl
17	5	12	7	Boy
18	7	13	6	Non-binary
19	8	13	5	Girl
20	6	9	3	Boy
21	9	15	6	Boy
22	6	8	2	Non-binary
23	8	9	1	Boy
24	9	11	2	Boy
25	4	6	2	Girl
26	5	10	4	Boy
27	3	9	6	Girl
28	6	12	6	Boy
29	8	10	2	Boy
30	7	10	3	Girl

with data from a secondary sample of 10 children of the parents in the primary sample, children who had all transitioned at or before primary school.

Parental interviewees each completed a demographic questionnaire. Those interviewed were diverse in a number of ways, but precise details are obscured to avoid individuals being identifiable. 100% of parent interviewees were cis; 90% were white; 93% were female and 23% were disabled. 70% were aged 40–50 years old, and 10% were immigrants to the UK. In terms of sexual orientation, the cohort was diverse; 60% of parental interviewees were heterosexual, 7% gay or lesbian, 10% bisexual and 23% pansexual. A number of the trans children in the primary sample also experienced multiple axes of marginalization, including children who are trans and people of colour, trans and Black, trans and Deaf, trans and neurodiverse.

Research trustworthiness and credibility were ensured by accessing research participants via parent support groups with existing robust safeguards and vetting processes as a requirement of

membership. Interviews with parents, lasting a mean time of 2h, were conducted remotely during Covid-related restrictions in late 2020 and early 2021. Semi-structured interviews covered a broad range of areas of experience related to education, family and healthcare. This paper focuses on a subset of the broader dataset, examining interviewee responses to education-focused questions including ‘What has been your experience with primary school’ or ‘Tell me about your secondary school’. An open-ended active listening approach was employed, supported by a range of prompts such as ‘How did that affect you/your child’, ‘What worked well in that school?’, ‘What do you think other schools could learn from your experience?’. Trans children were interviewed using a range of methods in order to accommodate specific access requirements and ensure interviewee comfort. This included a combination of 1–1 interviews, interviews with a parent present, response to written questions and interview by a parent. 10 trans children were interviewed, mean age 12 (median age 11, range 9–16), with children interviewed at a mean of 4 years since the time of social transition (mean age of social transition 7 years old).

Data analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded with consent of the interviewees and stored on an encrypted platform to safeguard participant privacy. Transcripts of interviews were anonymized, removing names and any information that could make individuals identifiable, recognizing the sensitivities of this cohort (Davy & Cordoba, 2019). Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for qualitative analysis, and coded for broad themes (including experiences in education). The data initially coded as related to education was then further analysed through inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to understand experiences and perspectives related to primary and secondary education, with data-driven development of codes and themes. In reflexive thematic analysis researcher knowledge and positionality is valued as a resource to enrich analysis, prioritizing ‘reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). A key principle was to reflect parental accounts ‘as faithfully as possible’, while prioritizing data that most meaningfully answer the study’s research question and ‘acknowledging and embracing the reflexive influence of my interpretations as the researcher’ (Byrne, 2022, p. 4). The analysis comprised re-reading each transcript to become familiar with the data; generation of initial codes, coding diversely without pre-conceived coding categories. The initial codes were then reviewed to identify broader themes, with all extracts for each theme collated and re-read. The initial themes were then reviewed, and themes and sub-themes revised to ensure they were internally coherent, consistent, distinctive and accurately capture the data set. The transcripts were re-read multiple times, and reflected upon, with quotes selected to illustrate key themes. A decision was made, in combination with research participants, to avoid use of pseudonyms and to avoid attribution of each quote to a particular pseudonym. This decision was taken recognizing the importance of privacy and security for this particular cohort, taking care to avoid patchwork identification.

Ethics

The research takes an explicitly trans positive approach, recognizing the harms of past pathologization of childhood gender diversity (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Research was informed by best practices on ethical research with trans communities (Bauer et al., 2019; ITHF, 2019; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020; Vincent, 2018), upholding a strong duty of care to trans children and wider trans communities. Research was also informed by ethical standards for research with children, ensuring research participants drove the research focus, ensuring children’s participation was informed and voluntary, applying informed assent for younger children and ensuring all interviewees were comfortable skipping any questions they did not want to answer (Lundy, 2007; Moore et al., 2018; World Medical Association, 2013). The presentation of a wide range of direct quotes in the research findings below is also linked to the research ethics, with research participants regularly conveying their invisibility in the wider discourse, their inability to personally speak up publicly, protecting their own or their children’s right to privacy and their desire to have their

voices shared with a wider audience. The research received ethics approval as part of a wider PhD at the author's university.

The research was framed within a feminist standpoint epistemology (Brooks, 2007), centring the views, experiences and insights of trans children and those families supporting them. The primary researcher's positionality as a non-binary parent of a socially transitioned trans child, provided an effective insider–outsider position from which to listen to the voices of those with relevant lived experience (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Paechter, 2013). The term 'trans' is utilized here as an umbrella term, to include transgender individuals who are binary-oriented as well as non-binary (Vincent, 2020).

FINDINGS

This paper explores the role of institutional cisnormativity in shaping trans children's experiences at school. The research findings are structured into three major themes with consideration of (i) institutional cisnormativity in UK schools, (ii) a failure to protect trans children and (iii) experiences of educational injustice. Each theme is explored, centring the voices of the trans children and families interviewed. Parental and children's quotations are highlighted as [P] for parental quotes and [C] for children's quotes.

Institutional cisnormativity in UK schools

This theme examines parent and child insights into how institutional cisnormativity is experienced in UK schools. The first sub-theme examines the impacts of cisnormative policy, where policies fail to consider the existence, needs or rights of trans pupils. The second sub-theme considers the impacts of cisnormative curricula, in schools that fail to acknowledge trans lives or represent trans experiences.

Cisnormative policy enabling transphobic action

The first sub-theme examines accounts of cisnormative policy and its impacts on trans children. Trans pupils and families reported a number of experiences of discrimination and segregation of primary-aged trans children that they traced to cisnormative policy frameworks that omitted consideration of trans children. Several trans pupils were denied access to appropriate facilities such as toilets or changing rooms throughout their time at primary school. Discriminatory treatment had direct impacts on trans pupils' well-being, sense of school belonging and, in some instances, their physical health. One trans boy reported:

The doctor said I had developed a kink in my bladder because I couldn't bring myself to go to any of the toilets in primary.

[C]

Another parent described their child 'holding in her wee' [P] at primary school. The parent emphasized 'she was doing it because she didn't want to use the boys' toilets' in a school that had said she could not use the girls' toilets. One pupil was segregated to a room by himself on a year six (age 10) residential. The parent remarked that this treatment at primary school 'singled him out. At secondary school he hasn't been on any residential, even though I've wanted him to – I think that might be why' [P]. One trans girl was denied access to appropriate changing facilities at secondary school, required to change on her own in a remote location away from other children. The parent referenced their child 'not really understanding why she can't get changed with the girls in the girls' space' with the child describing the segregated space off on their own as 'creepy' [P].

In these cases, families pointed to an absence of effective trans inclusion policies, poor understanding of existing legal protections, and a lack of explicit consideration of trans children's rights in educational policy at school, county and national level. An absence of trans-inclusive policy left trans pupils vulnerable to decisions informed by individual prejudice. One primary school head teacher denied an 8-year-old trans girl access to girls' toilets, reportedly stating, 'I'm worried what she would do in the girls' toilets' [P]. The parent perceived this statement as clear indication of ingrained prejudice towards their trans child by school leadership, an example of how individual prejudice mixed with an absence of inclusive policy enabled transphobic practice. Across the data set, examples revealed a number of situations where transphobic practice was not explicitly mandated in policy. Instead, cisnormative policy that failed to consider the needs or rights of trans pupils was open to being interpreted to enable transphobic action.

Cisnormative curricula

Cisnormativity was observed to cut across a number of areas of the curriculum, in particularly education on human bodies, education on puberty and gender divided sports. Parents referenced their knowledge of cisnormative educational materials, for example, simplistic depictions of 'boy's bodies' or 'girls' bodies' in lessons that reinforced messages of trans pupils being illegitimate, inauthentic or not belonging. Several parents described how such lessons at primary school could prompt, legitimize or intensify invasive and inappropriate questioning of trans pupils, with one parent noting the consequences for their child:

(Then) he had to walk a lot further through the school to get to a private toilet, just so that he could pee in peace, without (anyone) asking him about his genitals.

[P]

In this case, the parent traced a direct causal link between an upsurge in harassment of their child, and cisnormative primary school lessons on human bodies. Other areas of primary school curriculum exclude and harm trans pupils, with a parent describing their child as finding mainstream puberty education 'triggering' [P]. Schools commonly allowed trans pupils to drop out of specific trans-exclusionary lessons, while continuing to teach their peers from a cisnormative curriculum that marginalizes and stigmatizes trans people. One parent commented on her 10 year old being allowed to miss primary school on the days of lessons on puberty or reproductive health so that they 'didn't get affected negatively by cisnormativity and the hetero-centric way it was being taught'. She emphasized 'that's not inclusion, is it?' [P].

In the absence of proactive trans-inclusive curricula, education and visibility about trans people fell on the shoulders of young trans pupils. Some pupils initially took on this role with enthusiasm, for example, through educating their own peer group. However, enthusiasm waned when they met the same questions year after year. A parent highlighted the burden this placed on their child at primary school:

When people asked questions ... she'd quite happily answer them. But the novelty very rapidly wore off ... By the end of year four (age 9) ... it started to bother her more ... people would just bug her with questions about it all the time.

[P]

School inaction left young children to self-educate their peers and other year groups, a task that trans pupils found stressful. For the youngest trans pupils, answering questions from older children who were five or more years older than them was intimidating and overwhelming. A parent reported the burden placed on their child in a primary school without a proactive approach to trans-positive education:

She's having to carry and shoulder the burden of educating her peers about her transgender identity. I mean, she does a lot of that. I think we've seen at times the wear that's put on her,

talking to people, answering questions. It's kind of an additional onerous requirement to put on her when she's young.

[P]

It was exhausting. I had a panic attack at school once.

[C]

Another parent emphasized the immense pressure on their child at primary school, 'every single day, going to school, explaining himself' [P]. A child recounted the ongoing strain they were under at primary school: An 11-year-old reported getting questioned 'a lot' when they were younger, finding it 'very tiring' and wishing primary school teachers could have done more, 'maybe like, them explaining, instead of me' [C]. These pupils reflected on the negative impacts of being left to educate other children and even adults at primary school. A number of schools asked their young trans pupils to be the ones to formally present to and educate their primary or secondary school on the existence of trans people. Many of the trans pupils did not want to do this, with a parent recalling their child being asked to educate their peers at the start of secondary school:

(Child said to them) I don't want to do that. That's my worst nightmare. And I think the school just thought that would be so much easier.

[P]

Many pupils in this sample wanted proactive education and awareness raising about trans people at primary school, and felt it was unfair that they were shouldering this burden as young children. Throughout their time at primary school, the vast majority of trans pupils in this cohort saw zero trans representation, and almost all were the only openly trans pupil in their school.

Failure to protect trans children

This theme examines parent and child insights into school failure to protect trans children. The first sub-theme considers the ways in which schools may tolerate abuse of trans pupils, with examples of bullying, violence, mis-gendering and transphobic abuse. The second sub-theme examines experiences of pupil isolation.

Toleration of abuse

School safety is foundational requirement for equality of opportunity in education, yet for many trans pupils school remains an unsafe institution. Within this sub-theme interviewees reflected on feeling unsafe in primary and secondary schools where persistent abuse was tolerated. Asked if they felt safe at school, a trans pupil responded 'No' [C]. Their parent, interviewed separately, emphasized the same point: 'They just don't feel safe, they never feel safe' [P]. Trans pupils experienced threats and harassment, both at primary and in early secondary school. A parent highlighted their child's experiences in the first year of secondary school:

She's been maliciously outed by a child repeatedly and we've had a real issue with bullying and with threats.

[P]

Another parent described their child's experiences of harassment at primary school:

She had a boy asking her when she was going to cut her [genitals] off. He kept saying to her things like that.

[P]

Many primary schools had told the parents in this sample that they were responding to their first out trans pupil. Parents felt such schools had access to limited training or guidance. A frustrated parent whose child had been negatively impacted while a primary school took time to learn about trans-inclusion said: 'I don't have the time for people to learn. I need them to be able to keep my child safe straight away' [P]. The transition to secondary school was difficult for many trans pupils, and in several cases transphobic violence became more pronounced as trans pupils entered into their first years at secondary school:

He "was physically assaulted ... he was pinned down; they punched his head (called him) [slur] [slur]."

[P]

Schools varied significantly in how seriously they dealt with individual incidents, and in several cases secondary schools only took transphobic harassment seriously once a parent escalated their concern outside of the school leadership:

Twice, I've had to report hate crime to the police, almost as a lever to get the school to do a bit more.

[P]

It was only then when the police went into school that they were like, okay, maybe we need to do something.

[P]

Several parents felt that schools had a lower expectation of school safety for trans pupils than for cis pupils, and were slow to respond to transphobic victimization. Parents were concerned that cis teachers and school leaders did not understand the particular dynamics or harms of transphobic harassment. One parent whose child faced a combination of racism and transphobia noted different school responses. Their secondary school had zero tolerance for racist abuse, taking swift action, but for 'the transphobic stuff they just excused it – they just didn't know how to deal with it' [P]. Several trans pupils felt their school underestimated the seriousness of transphobic abuse. One pupil, who experienced transphobic bullying at primary and in early secondary school wanted 'more sanctions for transphobia – at least (recognise) that it is a real thing' [C]. Some schools were proactive in tackling overt explicit transphobia, particularly abuse involving specific transphobic slurs, but were less willing to act on transphobia that was not overt. Some schools failed to tackle ingrained cisnormative or transphobic attitudes, with this manifesting as a continuous undercurrent of lower level abuse from a wide range of pupils. A parent highlighted negative experiences at the start of secondary school:

There was bullying from day one, and I don't think school necessarily see – it's micro behaviours and micro aggressions that he experiences.

[P]

Pupils recalled how misgendering was experienced as a persistent painful microaggression, with a child recalling their experience at primary school:

I remember crying a lot at school because of dead naming and the wrong pronouns.

[C]

Several pupils experienced persistent misgendering from adults, including from teachers. An 11 year old outlined emotions of ‘anger, sadness’ [C] at teachers taking nearly a year to get her name right when she was at primary school. Misgendering from adults was perceived as particularly threatening, seen as delegitimizing and leaving a trans child vulnerable to wider abuse from across the school community. One child with experience of misgendering from adults at primary and secondary school emphasized:

It is so much more scary when an adult misgenders you.

[C]

This sub-theme highlights the impacts of cisnormative cultures where transphobic abuse is poorly understood, tolerated and inadequately addressed.

Pupil isolation

In some primary schools transphobia manifested in more passive but equally damaging ways, with pupils ‘freezing them out’ [P]. A psychologist came to monitor one young trans pupil’s experience and ‘they described him, by the end of lunchtime, as emotionally and physically exhausted; he spent the entire hour trying to get someone to play with him’ [P]. This type of isolation at primary school was reported by a number of interviewees:

Because all of the rumours about me ... people stayed away from me.

[C]

He was being isolated at school in the playgrounds; comments made about him in the corridors.

[P]

A number of parents felt schools did not recognize the ways in which ingrained cisnormativity and transphobia contributed to exclusion, with schools suggesting trans children were responsible for their own isolation. One parent, whose child experienced persistent isolation at primary school, commented that there is a ‘sort of victim blaming approach – if a child is literally hanging back and not sitting with the rest of the class on the mat. There’s a reason for that’ [P]. Parents and children noted their challenges in getting school leadership to recognize the strain experiences of bullying, misgendering, violence and isolation placed on trans children. School unwillingness to safeguard trans children’s well-being seemed to be linked to an overly narrow definition of transphobic bullying, with schools only confident to act where transphobic harassment was both explicit and individualized. Respondents also noted that schools were unaware of many problems or areas of invalidation. Parents and trans children limited the number of incidents and obstacles they formally raised as concerns, saving their interactions for the most egregious incidents and allowing a large number of individually less serious incidents or practices to go unreported. Only with hindsight did parents and children reflect on the chronic impact of incidents or trans-exclusionary practices on child well-being and ability to succeed and thrive at school.

Educational Injustice

This theme examines parent and child insights into educational injustices experienced in UK schools. The first sub-theme explores accounts of school drop-out, with pupils missing out on months or years of education, or leaving mainstream education entirely. The second sub-theme examines experiences of institutional trauma, exploring the harms trans pupils have experienced in UK schools. This section comes with a trigger warning for accounts of trauma and attempted suicide.

School drop-out

Trans children are at a high risk of losing access to education. A number of trans pupils were taken out of school when it became clear their primary school could not meet their needs. One UK primary school had asked to take a young trans pupil for conversion therapy, to make them conform to gendered expectations. The parent was worried whether the school would apply at-school conversion efforts despite parental objection, and instead pulled their child out of school. For other pupils, harassment, microaggressions, bullying or violence resulted in school drop-out, with pupils missing months or years of schooling. One parent described their child dropping out of early secondary school:

There was about nine months when he was out of school.

[P]

Another parent gave an account of their child's unwillingness to continue attending primary school following months of bullying:

He dropped out of school ... he was a school refuser from like the end of year two (age 7).

[P]

For several trans children, school failure to ensure emotional and physical safety pushed them out of mainstream education entirely. A parent reported on their child being forced out of mainstream education early in secondary school:

She wasn't safe as far as we were concerned. So, we just said, she's never going backShe will not be going back to any mainstream school at all, because I cannot trust them.

[P]

Some schools actively pushed trans pupils out of school. A parent described a teacher advising them to leave a secondary school that was unable to keep a trans pupil safe:

She (a teacher) was like, 'I just think you should take him to a different school'. And I was like, you do realise it is illegal to tell – like that's - you can't do that. She's like, 'well, it's just not going well, is it, and it's not gonna end well for either of us so I just think you should just take him somewhere else.

[P]

Institutional trauma

Pupils wanted their teachers to understand the stress they can feel in cisnormative schools. One pupil felt their primary school did not understand the chronic strain they were under:

That it's difficult. It is difficult.

[C]

A parent considered how much harder life is for trans pupils than for most of their peers, reflecting on their child's experience of multiple years of strain at primary school:

This year, for example, is the first time that I've ever heard [Child] say, I wish I wasn't trans. Because I think he looks at cis kids and thinks, God their life is so much easier than mine. I think he gets exhausted by cisnormativity really.

[P]

Children and parents talked about the negative impact chronic stresses had on children's health. A child who had been forced out of mainstream education due to persistent bullying at primary school commented:

My mental health and emotional and physical health are all dropping at – not a slow pace not a fast pace, but a pace that is not exactly acceptable to me.

[C]

A parent reflected on the strain of a trans pupil who had experienced violence and bullying in early secondary education:

They constantly were sending her home because she was too sick to be at school because she was vomiting all the time because she was so – just an anxious ball of anxiety and mess.

[P]

Early secondary education was a time of acute trauma for a number of trans pupils, with a failure in school safeguarding of trans pupils having significant effects (trigger warning):

I think they're fairly deeply scarred by that experience.

[P]

It traumatised her entirely going there.

[P]

A parent recounted their child's experiences of acute trauma in early secondary education (trigger warning):

It was horrific, the school just didn't, they didn't understand his needs or how to support those like at all ... then he tried to take his own life.

[P]

Those with experiences of trauma in primary or early secondary education experienced ongoing impacts, experiencing ongoing anxiety and fear:

Unless he gets strong vibes to the contrary, he'll often assume that boys his age are homophobic or transphobic.

[P]

We got a report through that just said that she'd suffered trauma in (secondary) school, we were referred to CAMHS and she was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder.

[P]

At that time, [Child] then was so frightened of going (to school) ... [Child] was just so scared of most grownups.

[P]

A parent remembered a conversation they had had with their child on the injustices they had faced in early secondary education:

On [Child's] (school report) it said 'has an issue with authority'. And [Child] was like, I don't have an issue with authority, authority seems to have an issue with me.

[P]

This sub-theme highlights accounts of institutionalized trauma experienced by trans pupils in UK primary and early secondary education. For a number of trans children, a lack of emotional or physical safety had profound impacts on their well-being, self-confidence and willingness to attend school. Within this sample, one-third of trans children had left at least one school, had missed a year or more of education or had dropped out of mainstream education entirely, due to school failure to create a trans-inclusive environment.

DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates how the absence of effective trans-inclusive school policy, combined with poor understanding of wider legal protections, can contribute to transphobic practice, enabling discrimination and segregation. Within the literature Payne and Smith (2014, p. 408) highlight how in the absence of clear policy teachers are left to navigate trans inclusion alone, with potential for responses grounded in 'fear' and schools entering into 'crisis-mode'. Where schools hold very basic trans-inclusion policies, such as just holding an anti-transphobic bullying policy, such limited policies can be interpreted as an upper boundary on school-endorsed inclusion (Ullman, 2018). Frohard-Dourlent (2016b) discusses how a lack of knowledge and a default assumption of transphobic policy can impede equality and action, even where discriminatory policy does not exist. Cisnormative policies risk excluding, disenfranchizing and harming trans pupils, and schools have a duty to ensure that clear commitment to trans inclusion and equality cuts across educational policy in a way that is explicit, and that centres trans pupil well-being.

Research findings on cisnormative curricula align with literature on the ubiquity of cisnormativity, and how it can be embedded across the curriculum in ways that may not even be noticed by (cis) teachers or school leaders (Martino & Omercajic, 2021; McBride & Neary, 2021). Payne and Smith (2014) consider how a lack of teacher training, knowledge or confidence impedes action to address cisnormativity in school curricula. Cisnormativity in schools can be enforced through a combination of invisibility and hypervisibility, where trans lives are not seen, and even limited trans representation can be perceived as excessive (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; McBride & Neary, 2021). Miller (2016b, p. 3) talks about the ways schools perpetuate 'identity erasure', creating cultures of ignorance and delegitimization, where prejudice and stigma can thrive. Ferfolja and Ullman (2021) examine how students are left to educate their peers in schools that discourage conversation on gender diversity. The burden of representation experienced by trans pupils has notable parallels to literature on the demands placed on queer teachers in cis-hetero-centric schools (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016).

Across theme two, accounts highlight the influence of institutional cisnormativity on pupil experiences of abuse and isolation. These findings reinforce existing literature on institutional cisnormativity and its role in maintaining unsafe school environments (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017b; Frohard-Dourlent, 2016a; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018; Martino & Omercajic, 2021; McBride & Neary, 2021). These findings also align with literature critiquing the limitations of a narrow focus on bullying (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Frohard-Dourlent, 2016b; Ullman, 2018). Where approaches to transphobic bullying are individualized, broader cis-supremacist hierarchies are left unchallenged (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021). Payne and Smith (2012) review how a narrow focus on bullying avoids a necessary focus on school cultures that legitimize and privilege cis identities.

Across the final theme we can see evidence of trans children being harmed by institutionalized cisnormativity in education, with these harms situated under an umbrella of educational injustice. Research

highlights examples where systemic failures left trans pupils in unsafe environments, contributing to school drop-out. The examples presented here highlight a reality that trans children in the UK cannot confidently rely on being able to uphold their right to education. This research resonates with literature on 'institutional betrayal', considering the way in which individuals are harmed when institutions act, or more often fail to act to protect them (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Other research has applied the concept of institutional betrayal to trans children's experiences at school, outlining the harms when institutions fail in their duty of care towards trans pupils and calling upon school leaders and individual teachers to show 'institutional courage' in creating safe schools for trans children (Smidt & Freyd, 2018). This present study evidences the trauma trans pupils can experience in primary and early secondary education. Several trans children in this sample were traumatized by negative experiences at school, with school-based trauma putting trans pupils at risk of short-term harms and longer-term health inequalities. These findings reinforce wider literature on the institutionalized marginalization of trans pupils (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). Ferfolja and Ullman (2021) talk about a lack of school accountability for the negative experiences of trans pupils in education. Frohard-Dourlent (2018) critiques a culture of reluctance to acknowledge the injustices trans children face in school. Miller (2016a) references how cisnormativity veils injustice, framing educational inequalities as expected and acceptable, concealing a crisis of inequality and injustice in schools (Miller, 2016a).

The examples above demonstrate the significant impacts of cisnormativity in schools. McBride and Neary (2021, p. 1) critique excessive focus on the negative impacts of educational cisnormativity, lest this produce a victim narrative that negates trans pupils' capacity for self-advocacy and for independently resisting cisnormativity. This research does indeed highlight and recognize the immense capability of many young trans children to resist and self-advocate. However, this research also demonstrates how isolated many young trans children are (within this cohort almost all were the only out trans child in their school), how many battles there are to fight, and how exhausting it is to combat and cope with institutional cisnormativity year after year at a young age. As educators, parents and child rights advocates, we can recognize and support trans children's agency, while also clearly standing by a basic tenet; that life should not be so hard for our trans pupils.

Under each of the themes explored above, trans children and families shared personal experiences of injustice, inequality and trauma. Many of these parents and children had not shared these experiences previously, highlighting their isolation, their fears of attracting negative attention and their concerns for privacy and safety. Many of the families and children interviewed asked for their anonymized words to be shared with teachers, policy makers and leaders in education. The interviewees were united in wanting educators to learn from the difficulties they had endured, with parents and even young trans children expressing a strong desire for other trans children to be protected from the negative experiences they had endured. Many of the interviewees expressed frustration that genuine trans inclusion was still not commonplace, with low expectations for trans pupils and a perception that trans equality was seen by school leadership and policy makers as a step too far.

Serano (2016) has described cisnormativity as a societal 'double standard' that advantages cis people. The examples above demonstrate the ways in which cisnormativity in schools creates this double standard, putting trans children in a position that would not be tolerated for majority pupils. Cisnormativity is deeply entrenched in societies and institutions, with children assigned from birth into a rigid binary. This system is reinforced throughout the school ecosystem in cisnormative policies, approaches, assumptions and cultures, with particularly negative consequences for trans children. Interviews highlighted school acts of commission and, perhaps more often acts of omission, that demonstrated a lack of care, and a failure to protect trans children from harm, findings that align with literature on institutional betrayal (Smidt & Freyd, 2018; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Cisnormativity wields power in part through its invisibility, with institutional cisnormativity operating without active or conscious effort. To cis teachers, educators or pupils, cisnormativity can remain un-noticed; passive; unconscious; 'how things have always been done'. This ubiquity could make it seem unalterable, neutral and benign. Yet for trans pupils, as illustrated across this research, cisnormative systems, attitudes and practices can be experienced as active, enforced, oppressive and suffocating. Cisnormative attitudes normalize trans injustice, making it acceptable for

children to lose access to education and normalizing expectations of inequality or trauma in school. Cisnormative approaches can also individualize inequalities, veiling their structural roots, and obscuring systemic responsibilities.

Strengths and limitations

The accounts highlighted in this research provide important insights on how cisnormative policy impacts on younger trans pupils. The research provides a unique addition to the literature, centring trans pupils' experiences in primary (age 4–11 years old) and early secondary (age 11–13 years old) education in the UK. Accounts of discrimination and transphobic abuse at primary school and in the first years of secondary school provide important additions to existing literature that predominantly focuses on trans adolescents (McBride, 2020). A noted limitation is that the research did not examine why cisnormative policy enabled transphobic practice. This research did not explore teacher and school leader attitudes, and did not explore whether transphobic practice was driven by individual ignorance, fear or prejudice. Another recognized limitation is the inclusion of cis parental perspectives on trans children's experiences. Parents may misunderstand or mis-estimate the impacts of school cisnormativity on trans children. Importantly, parents only have partial insights into their children's life at school, limited to those experiences their children tell them about or that they hear about from other sources. Potential for accuracy in parental interpretation was enhanced by focusing on the school experiences and consequences children had shared with their (supportive) parents, avoiding parental speculation on trans children's feelings and noting the likelihood of gaps in parental knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided child and parental insights into the challenges faced by trans children within cisnormative primary and secondary schools, shining light on experiences and consequences of institutional cisnormativity. A large number of families reported experiences of discrimination and segregation, in schools where cisnormative policy enabled transphobic practice. Trans children were harmed and de-legitimized by trans-exclusionary curricula, growing up in environments of invisibility and hypervisibility, where a desire for equality and inclusion left peer education on the shoulders of young trans children. A number of trans children in this sample had experienced extensive and extended harassment, bullying and abuse, alongside rejection and isolation, with parents expressing concern that school leadership did not recognize the strain placed on trans children. Systemic failures left trans pupils in unsafe environments, contributing to school drop-out and trauma. For a number of trans children, a lack of emotional or physical safety had profound impacts on their well-being, self-confidence and willingness to attend school. Within this sample, a sizeable proportion of trans children had left at least one school, had missed a year or more of education or had dropped out of mainstream education entirely, due to school failure to create a trans-inclusive environment.

Implications for policy and practice

This research highlights the need for educators, policy makers and school leaders need to take transformative action to protect trans children in our schools. Such action can start with recognition of the educational injustices experienced by trans children; acknowledgement of school and sector-wide responsibility to address institutional cisnormativity; and commitment to genuine equality for trans pupils. Further research, including by this author (Horton, 2022; Horton & Carlile, 2022), can continue to examine what actions are effective in reducing institutional cisnormativity. Concerted effort is required to build

trans-emancipatory schools ready to welcome trans children, ensuring in-school safety and protecting children from trauma in primary and secondary education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Cal Horton: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data not available beyond the quotes published here due to privacy/ethical concerns including duty of care to vulnerable and potentially identifiable interviewees including transgender children.

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