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# Dangerous Education: The Occupational Hazards of Teaching Transgender

Author Copy

Ellis Morgan and Yvette Taylor, University of Strathclyde. Corresponding Author:  
[yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk](mailto:yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk)

School of Education, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Strathclyde,  
Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow, UK G4 0LT

## Abstract

This article sets out the ways in which primary schools have come to bear significant risks in making decisions over whether, how and when to reflect transgender issues. We examine press reporting that arose in relation to a recent incident in the UK in which a primary school in East Sussex was widely criticised for instigating such a ‘transgender education’ initiative. We argue that despite tacit indications that UK government supports ‘transgender education’ as a learning area for children as young as five years old, there is an ongoing risk to primary schools who implement such initiatives. The nature of this risk is located within the usage of equalities terminology within governmental discussions and official guidance that effectively acts to *gloss over* the enduringly controversial nature of transgender issues. The vague and non-specific nature of equalities terminology allows for both heteronormative and transgressive interpretation, thereby locating the risk of public criticism with primary schools, and headteachers in particular.

## Keywords

Education, Equalities, Gender, Teachers, Transgender

## Introduction

On 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016 news broke in the UK of a transgender equalities initiative that was planned to take place in a primary school in East Sussex under the headship of Emma Maltby. The initiative gave rise to an outrage from a selection of the media, with national press outfits including *The Sun* (2016), *The Daily Mail* (2016), *The Mirror* (2016), *The Daily*

*Star* (2016) and *The Telegraph* (2016) all featuring headline stories. An indicative headline from the period includes:

Fuming parents blast headteacher for organising ‘transgender day’  
which will help kids ‘explore’ sexuality

(*The Sun*, 2016)

The moral panic at the heart of the reporting is evident: parents are ‘fuming’, a head teacher is being ‘blasted,’ and ‘kids’ are under threat. That threat radiates from a ‘transgender day’ and a dangerous invitation to ‘explore’ the forbidden territory, as it is seen, of queered sexuality.

Only two months prior to this press reporting, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee had submitted a report to UK Government that stated several recommendations for progressing transgender equalities. Amongst its recommendations, the report stated that ‘Trans issues (and gender issues generally) should be taught as part of Personal Social and Health Education [PSHE]<sup>1</sup>’ (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2016: 75). In its response to the report in June 2016, UK Government concurred with the recommendation, stating that in fact to their minds, the opportunity to include transgender education in both primary and secondary schools was *already* in place, with curriculum topics including the words ‘gender identity’ (UK Government 2016: 27). In this article, we examine the features of both the newspaper reporting on Emma Maltby’s transgender education initiative and the UK policy context in which it occurred to explore how it was that this individual headteacher came to be publicly criticised by the UK press for implementing what was an apparently government sanctioned feature of the national curriculum.

At the heart of this examination are matters pertaining to the controversial notion of ‘transgender education’ that are playing out across Europe and the wider Western world<sup>2</sup>. As transgender issues gain traction within the national equalities agendas (Hines 2007, Whittle 2006), the question for educationalists is whether, when and how transgender issues should

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK PSHE is a subject that is taught as a non-statutory (and thus non-obligatory) subject in schools to develop a range of ‘life skills’ and knowledge. We expand more on this later.

<sup>2</sup> The Western focus of this exploration is not intended to erase the obvious and culturally specific unfolding of transgender issues within non-western cultures. Ethnocentrism that has been a common feature of transgender theory and research and indeed queer theory more broadly.

be reflected within school settings as an aspect of children's learning (De Palma and Atkinson 2009, Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2015).

The recommendation that was issued by the UK House of Commons Women and Equalities committee, to explicitly include transgender issues within the school curriculum, follows the first example of such a move to be made in Europe by the Maltese Government<sup>3</sup>. In 2015 Malta published their *'Respect for All Framework'* (2015) which includes a specific policy towards making schools more inclusive for transgender and intersex<sup>4</sup> pupils, including a commitment to providing mandatory transgender education, from primary level upwards (Maltese Government, 2015: 6). There is an important linguistic difference between the Maltese government's commitment to teaching about 'transgender and intersex identities' in the classroom, the UK Government's commitment to teaching about 'gender identity' within PHSE. The terminology of 'gender identity' is in common usage in the UK as diversity rhetoric to refer to transgender identities, but retains the function of referring to *any* gender identity. As such the UK guidance's lack of specificity leaves open to interpretation just *which* gender identities should be taught about at *which* stages of learning.

Given this difference, the UK remains without such an explicit transgender education policy. Given that education is a devolved parliamentary matter in the UK the policy context discussed here has specific applicability with English schools. However, the contexts in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland mirror this lack of explicit policy, and examples in Australia and America continue to demonstrate the great volatility of these debates. In Australia, there has been widespread controversy over the establishment of a federally funded organisation that seeks address school bullying towards 'same sex attracted and gender diverse' students (Safer Schools Coalition, 2016). In North America, the extent of virulent public sentiment towards transgender issues, especially where children are concerned is even clearer. The infamous *'Bathroom Bill'* has made it impossible for many trans students to even go to the toilet, indicating that it is unlikely that the more controversial question of transgender education will be high up the US agenda anytime soon.

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<sup>3</sup> Since the passing Malta's Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Bill on 1 April 2015 the Maltese Government is now considered to be one of the most transgender inclusive countries in the world in terms of public policy (TGEU, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The grouping together of trans and intersex issues is politically contentious (Butler 2004, Davidson 2007) and as such inconsistently applied in different national and organisational policy contexts. To be clear, in this paper, whilst we refer to policies that are inclusive of intersex issues, our own focus remains specifically on transgender.

Whilst acknowledging a wider international context, this article examines the features, and precarious nature of one contextually specific instance of press reporting about a proposed transgender education initiative in the UK. In doing so we hope that there is learning that might contribute towards the evolving policy contexts in both the UK and beyond as these issues increasingly surface and demand political attention. Our examination concludes that whilst national contexts may differ in respect of both public and political sentiment towards transgender, it is clear that any committed effort towards offering transgender education needs to effectively counter whatever public discourses operate against it. We argue such a ‘counter’ must take the form of explicit and specific intent within policy; in the absence of such intent individual schools, and the people who run them, can be heavily exposed to press and public criticism when attempting to implement the otherwise tacit policy intentions.

### Orientation and Approach

Ordinary meaning making sits at the heart of public, discursive exchange; as Plummer has influentially observed ‘everywhere we go we are charged with telling stories and making meaning – giving sense to ourselves and the world around us’ (Plummer, 1995: 20). The work of Lawler (2002, 2008) and Ricoeur (1980, 1991) further demonstrates how multiple and complex threads of narrative run through these stories – including within their silences, presumptions, and proximities. These narratives come to operate as rich resources through which we, as researcher-social agents can weave our own stories, interpretations and commentaries. In a constructed commentary such as ours offered here, there is the important background assumption that ours is only one production of possible meanings; given that always, in any case, meaning is not ‘inherent to action but the product of interpretive strategies’ (McNay 2000: 244).

To construct our commentary, our examination focused on the press reporting that occurred on the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016 concerning Emma Maltby’s transgender education initiative. The press reporting of this incident was selected for analysis for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, the incident related to a specific, stand-alone initiative that provided a ‘snap-shot’ barometer of media and public debate at a particular moment in time. Secondly, that moment was extremely timely in relation to UK political debates on transgender issues in schools; the press reporting on the Emma Maltby transgender education initiative occurred only two months after guidance from the Women’s and Equalities Select Committee had published guidance for trans education in schools.

The retrospective sourcing of the newspaper articles necessitated location through internet archives. In the week of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016 there were a total of five media articles published in national papers about Emma Maltby's transgender initiative. In addition, there was a huge array of opinion pieces that appeared online, e.g. on social media and within news sites focusing on Christian and LGBT interests. We limited our analysis to the national press reporting that occurred, firstly to delimit a manageable data set but also to keep a focus on the treatment of the story as a matter of 'generic' public interest, warranting a large-scale print media platform. Four of the articles were published by large tabloid media groups; *The Sun* (2016), *The Daily Mail* (2016), *The Mirror* (2016) and *The Daily Star* (2016), all published on the same day, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The fifth article was published by the broadsheet media group *The Telegraph* (2016), published the following day. These publications collectively have an average daily circulation of over five million copies, with *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* occupying the top two grossing positions of newspaper sales in the UK (*Audit Bureau of Circulations*, 2016). The four tabloid articles were written as editorial pieces and all carried sensational headlines that were similar in shocked tone;

Parents pull children out of Primary school in outrage at planned 'transgender day' for children as young as FOUR (The Daily Mail)

Parents Fury at school's 'sexuality exploring' transgender day for kids as young as FIVE (The Daily Star)

Parents threaten to remove children from primary school after it organises 'transgender day' to 'explore their sexuality' (The Mirror)

All four tabloid articles were accompanied by 'factual' accountings of what had occurred carrying the same key quotes from invested parties (the parents and the headteacher) about the proposed initiative, which we include in our analysis. This sensationalist editorial pieces contrasted in content and tone with the piece that was published in *The Telegraph* the following Day under the headline 'The last thing we need is 'transgender days' for primary pupils'. This article was presented as 'liberal' commentary with in the paper's Education section and utilised a mocking tone as a way of undermining both the transgender initiative and the tabloid reporting that has occurred the day before. The five national articles used as data for this paper were analysed using content analysis, and exploring prevailing discourses (Fairclough 2003, Lovelock 2017, Kerry 2017).

Historically, readerships of tabloid and broadsheet press have carried strong classed cultural resonances of the kind depicted by Bourdieu in his work *'Distinction'* (1984), with working class readership anticipated of the former and a more middle-class, more 'elite' readership anticipated of the latter. However, these sharp distinctions have become increasingly critiqued as online readerships and social media have widely influenced the way that media is accessed and discussed. As Gripsrud (2000) has shown, even in instances where culturally anticipated classed readership is borne out, it is a mistake to imagine that broadsheets are necessarily more influential than their tabloid counterparts. Whilst the tabloid press is frequently cast as sensationalist and lacking in serious weight, its impact lies in its appeal as a posited straight-talking form of 'common sense' that lies beneath the politically correct or overly analytical reporting approaches of the broadsheet press (Conboy, 2008).

Alongside the analysis of press articles, we also turned to the documentary analysis of governmental exchanges and education guidance documents, including those produced in relation to the UK Transgender Equalities Inquiry (2015); this documentation included the resultant report published by the UK House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2016 and UK Government's response (7<sup>th</sup> July 2016). We further undertook documentary analysis of the guidance document produced by the Personal Health and Social Education Association (2016), which provides outline guidance to assist schools with the formation of PHSE curriculum content.

### Teaching Transgender: A Pedagogical Evolution

The idea of 'transgender education' is a relatively recent pedagogical evolution. The aim of informing children about transgender identities has been reflected variously in the development of children's literature featuring transgender characters (e.g. *I am Jazz*, 2014, *My Princess Boy*, 2011, *Jacobs New Dress* 2014) and in other school-based initiatives in which children are invited to discuss ideas of gender difference. One such experimental initiative was the No Outsiders Project (2006) that became the focus of research published by DePalma and Atkinson (2009) exploring the ongoing tensions experienced by teachers. DePalma and Atkinson reflected that the growing acknowledgement of gender diversity in the classroom should not mask the ongoing swell of resistance to children's 'exposure' to the topic; as they put it where children are concerned, transgender (and queer identities more broadly) resolutely remain 'forbidden territory'.

As Hemmingway (2008) notes, the nature of transgender education's controversy lies in its social casting as an 'intrusion' into nurturing and protected space. In this sense, it has come to hold a similarly precarious position to that of sex education in schools; in both instances the state seeks to carefully sanction the provision of information frequently cast as 'adult in nature'. Whilst sex education is now a long-standing fixture in the school curriculum, under the rationale of producing well-adjusted sexually active (adult) citizens, exactly what information is passed on and at what age remains a site of strict regulation and debate (Robinson 2012).

Whilst sex education and transgender education share a casting of being 'adult' in nature, the terms of these castings are at once quite specific to each topic and complexly related. In the case of sex education, there is a pervasive discourse at work around the asexuality of young children and a need to 'protect' this assumed pre-sexual state of being (Jackson, 1982, Meyer 2007). As a wide range of theorists have explored however, this conception of asexuality rests not so much on maintaining a child's lack of sexual expression *per se* but rather maintaining their absence of queer sexual expression (Hemmingway 2008, Atkinson and De Palma 2008, Reynold 2002, Taylor 2009, Hsieh 2012). For example, Robinson (2012) points towards the ubiquitous presence of playground mock weddings, kiss chase and 'mummies and daddies' play as familiar and acceptable displays of children's heterosexual sexual awareness; by contrast queer instances of sexuality emerge as strictly off-limits and inappropriate.

The terms of debate around transgender education are complexly related to this. Whilst transgender is not a queer sexual orientation (or indeed any sexual orientation) it has long been culturally associated with queer sexual perversions, particularly for male to female trans people (Davy 2011, Serano 2007, Meyerowitz 2002). Indeed, these cultural associations with illicit and kinky sexual desire have left a legacy of struggle for many trans people today who seek for their genders understood as clearly distinct from such illicit sexual mores (Hines, 2007). One resultant aspect of this sexual association is the way that trans issues are perceived as a taboo topic when it comes to children; as the headline of *The Sun* made clear when news broke of Emma Maltby's transgender education initiative, it was not the children's exploration of gender that they saw as problematically taking place, but rather their exploration of 'sexuality'.



However, the grounds of debate for transgender education extend further than matters of queer sexual overtone; there is a far broader challenge that transgender poses to conceptions of the sexed body and its associated gender designations as matters that are fundamentally ‘natural’. As West and Zimmerman (1987) have demonstrated, gender categories provide the very framework upon which human beings are made culturally meaningful and upon which social hierarchies, norms and practices become shaped and lived out. Despite the limited successes of feminist movements to challenges such social orderings, it remains the case that the fixity and naturalisation of (cis)gender categories remain stubbornly in place.

What is pertinent is how the conception of transgender as that which deviates from, or disrupts nature, meets with another powerful conception of children as a *tabula rasa*, a symbol of the ultimate natural state of humanity. Arguments against transgender education thus become framed by conceptions of childhood ‘innocence’ and accordingly the protection of a ‘natural’ state of cisgenderedness.<sup>5</sup> We now turn to an examination of the ways in which this discourse operated through the press reporting that occurred in relation to Emma Maltby’s education initiative to establish both explicit and implicit charges of personal wrong-doing.

### The ‘Innocent Child’ and the Threat of Transgender

The conception of children as ‘innocent’ and in need of protection has been traced back by scholars as far as Greek civilisations (Jackson 1982), with the idea of childhood innocence being persevered and indeed crystallised as a key feature of contemporary understandings of childhood. This crystallisation has led to what Meyer (2007) has described as a ‘moral rhetoric of childhood’. Within this rhetoric, the need to protect children has become unequivocal and resistant to challenge; it is a taken for granted, commonsense discourse, ‘that can legitimise anything [to do with children] without actually having to explain it’ (Meyer 2007: 99).

In the press reporting that occurred in relation to Emma Maltby’s transgender education initiative, the operation of the discourse of childhood innocence is unmistakably evident. One key quote from a parent is used in all the tabloid articles that were published on that day;

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘cisgender’ derives from the Latin pre-fix *cis-* meaning ‘on this side of’ and has been widely adopted within transgender scholarship to describe individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies and their personal identity.

I don't want my daughter being exposed to all this nonsense. Kids need to be left alone when it comes to things like this, they just want to run around the playground not be told they need to 'think differently' about gender issues.

Within this quote, the operation of the moral rhetoric of childhood, through a construction of innocence, is clearly apparent; 'thinking differently' about gender equates to a form of 'exposure' and a corruption of sorts is implied. What is noticeably absent however, is any rationale about what is undesirable about this 'different' way of thinking. The parents' statements that 'kids need to be left alone' is understood simply by an evocation of a more 'appropriate' preoccupation; running around the playground. What the statement rests on is a shared, taken for granted 'common sense' understanding of childhood innocence, evoked effortlessly and without need of qualification.

Alongside this lack of rationale is an accompanying sense that not only is exposure to transgender issues undesirable, it is also faintly ridiculous; the issues are 'nonsense'. However, such 'nonsense' is not to be understood as an innocuous waste of precious educational time and resources, revealed in avoiding such 'exposure' to transgender issues; the newsworthiness of articles, expressed in all the tabloid headlines, pivot on the action being taken by parents to remove their children from the school in response to the planned 'trans exposure'. A second key quote from a parent was used within all the reporting, to set in a place a sense of reasoning behind this response;

There is great unease among the parents and there have been complaints to the headteacher... [and some have] announced their intention to keep their children from school on at least one day. Parents have said they feel the welfare of their children is under threat.

The article in *The Telegraph* is particularly explicit on this construction of transgender issues for children as at once both ridiculous and dangerous. Written in tone as an opinion piece rather than as a reactive news piece, it is concerned to position the journalists' own views in relation to the initiative alongside the views of the parents. The piece opens with a direct construction of the matter as ridiculous;

Have you had The Conversation with your children yet? Not the one about the birds and the bees, but the one about how some bees feel they are

actually a bird trapped in a bee's body, or a bee trapped in a bird's body, or neither bee nor bird but somewhere in the middle of the bee-bird spectrum?

In this opening the journalist evokes with intended sarcasm the matter at the heart of the debate that is only implied within the tabloid reporting; trans issues themselves are ridiculous because they are in defiance of 'natural laws'. The journalist goes on to heighten the ridiculousness of such 'law defiance' through making it so obvious that any child would already know this, referring to such a conversation she reports having with her own six-year-old son on the idea of gender change, where she quotes him as saying; 'But you can't change just like that!'.

The journalist goes on to reflect on why the parents at Maltby's school may have had such strong objections to something she sees as so patently ridiculous;

Perhaps they were afraid that the idea of transgenderism might be catching; that once their children's minds had been jemmied open, all sorts of dangerous proclivities might get in. One minute your wholesome little boy is into football, Ninjaro and thumping his brother; the next she's a pangender ceterosexual [sic] fighting to bring down the global patriarchy.

The mocking tone of this description positions the idea that children can be 'made trans' as equally ridiculous to the idea that 'birds can become bees'. In doing this she suggests that the parents are misguided in these imagined concerns. However, in place of this danger she posits another that she feels is more likely; the wrongful categorisation of children as transgender. She describes;

I want [my children] to have the run of the dressing up box, from Cinderella to Spiderman... as far as is possible in a world of stereotypes I want them to steer clear of pigeon holes. And right now, gender politics seem to be nothing but floor to ceiling pigeon holes. You can be agender, bi-gender, cisgender, demigender, graygender, intergender, genderless, genderqueer or third gender – but by God, you will accept a label.

In this description, the journalist constructs herself as a well-meaning liberal who is trying to avoid the agenda of those behind transgender education initiatives, who seek to foist pigeon-holing gender labels upon children:

Trans activists, like old-school misogynists are forever patrolling the perimeters of male and female behavior, making sure we all adhere to some kind of type. But children – especially the young ones – have no respect for boundaries.

The alignment of transactivists with old-school misogynists is akin to the kinds of problematic arguments suggesting that trans people reinscribe gender norms and fix patriarchal relations in place rather than opening up radical new gender possibilities as some trans theorists argue (e.g. Bornstein, 1998). Through arguing for such trans conservatism, the journalist constructs a perspective whereby the boundaries of normative gender only become manifest and policed when they are troubled. Implicit in such a perspective is the notion that cisgender categories of boy or girl do not count as pigeon holes, allowing a liberal stance on ‘dressing up’ in variously masculine or feminine coded ways without having been ‘patrolled’. In short, cisgenderedness appears as an un-labelled state that is neutral and without boundaries, and transgenderedness appears as a state that labels everything (not just itself) and thereby disrupting gender as a whole, creating boundaries where there were none before, and re-categorising neutral children as now something radically categorisable.

#### Corrupting the neutral cisgender child: Locating the blame

Whether transgender education is seen to hold the potential to ‘turn children trans’ or to ‘pigeon-hole children as trans’, in either case, what occurs is a construction of transgender education as misreading and mis-labelling the necessarily cisgender children as potentially *transgender themselves*; in more blatant terms, there is an implicit suggestion that something of a transgender recruitment drive could be at work within Maltby’s initiative.

The sense of a background ‘transgender recruitment’ agenda is further located within the tabloid reporting within references to an educational toolkit that was to be used within the initiative, produced by a Brightonbased LGBT organisation, the Allsorts Youth Project. What is highlighted is not the nature of the toolkit but rather the wider function of the Allsorts Youth Project in supporting transgender children. *The Mirror* reported that ‘The Allsorts Project states that it is designed to ‘empower young people under 26 who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or unsure’ – and *even* holds classes for under 11s called ‘Trans Kids’” (*The Mirror*, 2016, *our emphasis*). The incredulity expressed in the usage of the word ‘even’ laces the reporting with a conservative presumption that children under 11 are simply too young to identify as trans. The background inference then is that the naturalised innocence and thus

cisgenderedness of some primary school aged children has *already* been corrupted or pigeon holed as trans through ‘recruitment’ to the Allsorts Youth project, with the children at Maltby’s school potentially the next in line.

A notable feature amongst all this press reporting was that it was Emma Maltby’s decision making on behalf of the school that was suggested to be at fault. The letters from the parents are to her personally in her role as school decision maker, and as one parent is quoted as saying ‘I just hope the head gets the message and scraps it’. Many of the press outfits ran the story with an accompanying head shot of Maltby, and as the headline of the *Sun* explicitly stated it was the headteacher herself who was intended to be ‘blasted’ by the reporting.

We now explore this situation of responsibility allocation for transgender as a topic within primary school environments. How is it that within a national policy context that apparently sanctions the provision of transgender education, can such an initiative meet with charges of personal wrong doing whilst policy makers remain unscathed? To explore this, we turn to an examination of the policy and guidance context and the evasive ‘glosses’ of equalities rhetoric.

### Behind the Glosses of Equalities Rhetoric

Various forms of sociology have attended to the functionalities of linguistic meaning-making and the way that impressions are made through language usage. The operation of linguistic ‘glosses’ is one aspect of this impression making, and refers to what is frequently left unsaid or left obscured using shorthand terminologies. *Telling Feminist Stories* details the glosses that operate within the retelling of the history of feminism, collapsing complex change in the retelling of feminist history. Glossed narratives of ‘the naïve essentialist seventies, through the black feminist critiques sex wars of the eighties’ have come to stand in for much more than the glossed referent can capture (Hemming, 2005: 116). The problem is that when such a gloss becomes seen as a common-sense referent, what is lost is the tendency to engage critically with its assumed contents. Hemmings attendance to the macro glosses operative within feminist history echo the micro concerns of Conversation Analysis. Jefferson (1985) describes how everyday language used by social agents relies on glosses to engage in basic sense making: glossing short-hands frequently stand in for conversational ‘detailing’ and thus take on the ability to be used to ‘cover over’ unwanted moments of specificity. Such

‘covering over’ through the use of rhetorical glosses in education policy has been interrogated as ‘discursive silences’ by Sundaram and Saunston (2016a, 2016b) who provide a critical analysis of how Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in England (Saunston 2012). They argue that discourses of pleasure are largely absent in SRE, with a singular focus instead upon risk and ‘appropriacy’ that works to construct highly gendered and heteronormative understandings of sexual agency. In the following analysis, we set out how a similar gloss can be seen to be at work within the policy context that surrounds transgender’s placement within Personal Social and Health Education (PHSE); a gloss that allowed for Emma Maltby to be held personally responsible by the UK tabloid press for a transgender education initiative whilst allowing for UK government to seemingly remain unaccountable.

### *The operation of the ‘gender identity’ gloss*

In the UK, the curriculum strand entitled Personal Health and Social Education (PHSE) has been in operation since the year 2000 in both primary and secondary education, and is described as a mechanism through which ‘pupils develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to keep themselves healthy and safe and prepare for life and work in modern Britain’ (PHSE, 2016). It is delivered as a non-statutory subject, which in effect means schools are encouraged to include it as part of pupils’ education but the content is ultimately at the discretion of school head teachers. There is, however age-specific government sanctioned guidance on what appropriate content might be and a framework is available for each individual year group from the first year of primary school (key stage one) to the last year of secondary school (key stage 5).

When the UK House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee submitted their report to UK government in January 2016 with recommendations for advancing transgender equalities, it was this PHSE guidance that pointed towards as a key route for schools to address this agenda. In June 2016 UK Government issued a response to the suggestion that transgender issues be included in the subject as follows:

[1] We trust schools and head teachers to know how best to meet the needs of their pupils in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner, and trust them to decide what specific issues they cover in line with the needs of their pupils.

[2] Transgender issues are included in the non-statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) Programme of Study produced by the PSHE Association. This suggested programme of study, produced by some of the leading experts in PSHE teaching, includes teaching young people about *diversity*, including *gender identity*.

UK Government Equalities Division, 2016: 27 (*our emphasis and numbered insertions*)

We see that this statement works to achieve two affects that we will examine in turn; [1] it establishes a firm allocation responsibility for interpreting PHSE guidance with head teachers, with an indication that trans issues are only *sometimes* appropriate for *some* children and [2] it indicates that the term ‘gender identity’ used with PHSE guidance is to be interpreted as equalities rhetoric that is inclusive of ‘diverse’ transgender identities.

[1] Allocation of responsibility of interpretation PHSE guidance

In the opening to the government’s statement it is made clear that transgender education is an issue which demands a clear allocation of responsibility, and that this responsibility lies with head teachers held in ‘trust’ by the government. This is a matter of ‘trust’ implies that there is an element of skillful judgement that needs to be used here; that one presumably must draw on an inferred stock of cultural common sense knowledge that their seniority, intelligence and educational training is expected to have equipped them with. Through application of their skillful judgement, head teachers are expected to be able to differentiate between those children who are safely old enough and free of other ‘sensitivities’ to broach transgender issues with, and those who are not.

It is through such a positing of ‘readiness’ differentiation that this statement achieves the effect of subtly concurring with the sentiment evident in the press reporting on Maltby’s transgender education initiative. The message is that transgender issues are a topic that is generally unsuitable for children *under a certain age*. Meyer’s (2007) point about the self-justifying rhetoric of childhood once again becomes evident, where there is seen to be no need to explain why this is, and what the undesired effect might be on children subject to such ‘early exposure’.

In the second part of the opening statement, there is a further indication that the judgement of ‘child readiness’ is a highly contextual matter; head teachers must judge ‘what specific issues

they [need to] cover in line with the needs of their pupils'. What is achieved is a tacit understanding that *sometimes* circumstances dictate that the (unstated) ideal time for exposure to transgender issues must be deviated from.

With these points in mind it is clear that part of the media inferred wrong doing of Maltby, was not only that she had failed to apply her 'common sense' knowledge that these children were 'too young' to expose children to transgender issues, but also that there were no cited special circumstances that necessitated such 'early exposure'. In the absence of such special circumstances, the undercurrent of Maltby's judgement failure, or worse pernicious intent, is left as the inferred conclusion.

[2] The term 'Gender Identity' is to be interpreted as equalities rhetoric inclusive of transgender identities.

In the second half of the government's statement there is a clear positioning that to their minds transgender education is *already* included with Personal Health and Social Education suggested content. The government points to two key equalities terminologies used within the PHSE guidance that to their mind present this opportunity to cover transgender issues; 'gender identity' and 'diversity', first appearing in the key stage 1 guidance for children in the first years of primary school.

Ahmed's (2012) examination of the language of diversity in relation to race is useful in considering what such words achieve and what they avoid. Ahmed notes that 'diversity', is a word that 'does things'; it is a word that is used as rhetoric to become evidence of its own existence. To say that 'diversity' is welcome, or valued or to be reflected is to 'reify difference as something that already exists 'in' the bodies of others' (Ahmed 2012: 206). Here the very evocation of a 'gender identity' that might be 'diverse' is adequate to demonstrate that equalities have been embraced. Ahmed also notes what the word 'diversity' does not do; it does not 'stick' its unwanted specificity and blatantness to the diversity document that it is used in. In the PHSE guidance and in government's own statement where 'gender identity' is mentioned, the 'stickier' resonantly queer terminology of 'transgender' is absent.

Through avoiding the 'sticker' terminology of transness, the terms 'gender identity' and 'diversity' used together create a gloss that can have multiple interpretation. Cisgender people arguably have just as much of a gender identity as those who are transgender; it is



only by the common recitation of equalities rhetoric that we come to hear ‘gender identity’ as that which pertains to those to who are ‘gender diverse’.

This analysis leads us to ponder whether Emma Maltby’s mistake, if it is to be cast in such a way, was to interpret the instruction to reflect ‘gender identity’ in the schools teaching in exactly the way it was intended; as diversity rhetoric that fulfilled an equalities duty. This was a mistake perhaps, in so far that whilst this is how the guidance was supposed to be read, it was also arguably also supposed to be skillfully *misread* in certain circumstances; that is to say when you are a primary school head teacher. In such circumstances the looseness of the terminology is perhaps intended to simultaneously allow for the suggestion that some children are simply ‘too young’ for exposure to such ‘diversity’. Instead ‘gender identity’ can be read not as referring to transgender identity, but rather referring to less dangerous and less diverse cisgender identities.

## Conclusion

In the press reports of Emma Maltby’s transgender education initiative the background presumption of wrong doing was unmistakable. Inferences were constructed to guide a ‘common sense’ reading that transgender education is simply inappropriate within primary school contexts. Such obvious inappropriacy in turn constructed a backdrop charge, that at best there was a misplaced and ill-judged personal equalities agenda at work or at worst that a transgender recruitment or ‘labelling’ drive was in action, endangering the welfare of innocent cisgender children.

The point of a free press is of course to be able to make comment about such matters, and opposition to the idea of teaching about transgender issues in schools is not surprising or new. What is of note however is that the only counter to the charges of misjudgment or potentially harmful action that were made by the press – during or after the press storm - came from Maltby herself who was quoted as saying;

As part of the national curriculum, we spend time talking to the children about British values of tolerance, respect and celebrating differences... St Mary’s is an extremely inclusive school which embraces and celebrates difference and encourages children to be themselves. While some parents may have felt uneasy discussing a topic such as gender identity, our

priority is to give children a well-rounded education and help them become responsible independent people able to respect others.

*The Sun, 2016*

Maltby's defense is heavily embedded with the same equalities discourse that articulates the very curriculum guidance that she followed; in evoking such discourse she attempts to point toward a much wider framework of acceptability and accountability for transgender education. The logic of her statement goes that if tolerance and respect are British values, transgender issues are part of what must be tolerated and respected. If such matters are to be reflected within the National Curriculum taught in schools, a reasonable interpretation of the National Curriculum is that which includes transgender education. Within her statement Maltby uses the same glossing short hand of 'gender identity' to refer to transgender identity as is used within the PHSE guidance. However, since at the time of her statement her initiative had already been named and recognised by the tabloid papers as pertaining to *transgender identity*, the terms functionality to gloss over this transgressive content is lost. As such the term affords her none of the covering shelter that it afforded to government in its own usage of the term.

The question of Maltby's interpretation of the National Curriculum has been left hanging, with government's statement three months later making no reference to her case, and stating only that they 'trust head teachers' to make such interpretations (UK Government 2016). Such 'trust' ensures not only that head teachers can choose *not* to teach transgender education, but also of course that the next time a head teacher *does* it will not have been the UK government that was at blame.

Mc Nay (2000) observes that meaning is 'never inherent to action but the product of interpretive strategies' (2000: 244). This is of course as true for the social agents we write about as it is for our own commentaries. It is abundantly clear as we think through the situated readings we have laid out – Emma Maltby's reading of the National Curriculum, the press' reading of her initiative, UK government's reading of equalities rhetoric and our reading of all of this - that whilst none can be said to have inherent truth, it cannot be said either that they are equal. They are not equal in their power, nor in their traction. The powerful purchase of some stories over others, the constant retelling and re-emergence of particular discourses have very real consequences in peoples' lives. What is *treated* as being true and important, the participation in particular discourses and not in others, is often vital

for maintaining social standing and being deemed to have observable social competencies that grant us rights to speak, act and hold position. When it comes to telling stories about children, about power and about queers the narrative gun, so to speak, is fully loaded.

As we have drawn out in this article, the discourses with which social agents are permitted to speak are so socially entrenched that they barely require repetition; that children are ‘innocent’ and in need of protection, that caution must be exercised in exposing them to the subversive and that those in positions of power must know and apply these rules (Hsieh 2012, Renold 2002). But, these implicit rules appear to be evolving, or at least they are becoming more complex, as discourses of equality across the Western World demand that ‘the subversive’ sometimes be considered as a safe variation on the agreed norm. These discursive formations are complex, and with the fully loaded narrative gun ready to shoot those who participate in the wrong discourses at the wrong time, educational landscapes are increasingly perilous places for decision makers.

When Hemmingway conducted her research around the ‘No Outsiders’ project (2008) she noted that central to the challenge of transgender inclusive education was for teachers to find ways to be ‘transgressively productive’. The situation that Emma Maltby found herself perhaps then marks a shift. Her job it seems was safe, thanks to the built-in flexibility with which the equalities rhetoric of UK national curriculum guidance can be read. However, a safe job did not ensure a safe reputation, and it was Emma Maltby and not UK Government that was held responsible.

As the policy context evolves in both the UK and the wider western world, if there is to be a real commitment to reflecting transgender equalities within children’s learning, it cannot be left to head teachers alone to bear the force of such counter discourses. Rather, the power, and traction of the voice of policy must also lend its weight to issues of transgender education, and take its part in being unequivocally accountable.

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### **Ellis Morgan**

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**Yvette Taylor** is Professor of Education, University of Strathclyde and has obtained wide variety of funding, including ESRC projects '*From the Coal Face to the Car Park? Gender and Class in the North East of England*' (2007-2009), '*Making Space for Queer Identifying Religious Youth*' (2011-2013) and British Academy mid-career fellowship '*Critical Terrain: Dividing Lines and Lives*' (2013-2014). Yvette has published four sole-authored books based on funded research: *Working-class Lesbian Life* (2007); *Lesbian and Gay Parenting* (2009); *Fitting Into Place? Class and Gender Geographies and Temporalities* (2012) and *Making Space for Queer Identifying Religious Youth* (2015). She edits the Palgrave *Gender and Education Series* and co-edits the Routledge *Advances in Critical Diversities Series*.