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Inclusive pedagogies for transgender and gender diverse children: parents' perspectives on the limits of discourses of bullying and risk in schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an Australian national investigation of parents of school-aged children attending government schools. The research objective was to ascertain what parents thought in relation to gender and sexuality diversity-related content inclusions in the curriculum, and how a subset of these parents who had a gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) child, experience the public education system for/with their child. Here, we particularly focus on the voices of parents with a transgender or gender-diverse (TGD) child. We examine how these young people are positioned in discourses of risk and safety and how discrimination is depoliticised through bullying discourse. We note how bullying is framed as individualised, leaving broader cisnormative discourses unquestioned. A pedagogy of containment places the burden of gender identity, relationship management and education on the TGD student and family, highlighting a need for more professional development of school personnel.

KEYWORDS

Gender and sexuality diversity; transgender; gender diverse; parents; school; Australia; pedagogy; curriculum; education

Introduction

The last decade in Australia has witnessed increased legislative parity for sexuality diverse individuals with their heterosexual counterparts and greater recognition of the diversity of gender. Alongside these shifts, however, there exists a simultaneous presence that continues to undermine the gains made by these minoritised communities, which is exhibited at the highest levels of government (Butson 2018; Cumming-Potvin and Martino 2018; Ferfolja and Ullman 2020a) and which produces marginalising discourses that construct gender and sexuality diversity as problematic. As such, a tension exists in schools, where teachers have beheld a broader culture of acceptance of gender and sexuality diversity yet function within a vocal and perceptible national political agenda that positions equity issues in education as extremist (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020a). This has resulted in both public and political scrutiny of schools and educational curricula that is limiting and anxiety-producing for teachers and educational resource developers when they seek to implement inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity (Cumming-Potvin and Martino 2014; Duffy et al. 2013; Ullman and Ferfolja 2015). Thus, schools often side-step

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anything related to gender and sexuality diversity in curriculum, pedagogy and practice. Consequently, transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people are often invisible in school curriculum, yet, potentially hyper visible in school communities, where they are frequently targets for discrimination (Kosciw et al. 2018; Ullman 2017).

This paper reports on a national research project¹ that aimed to ascertain parents' perspectives about gender and sexuality diversity-related content inclusions in Australian school curriculum via an online survey. A qualitative component drawing from a subset of these parents, those with gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) children, examined how these parents experience and negotiate the public education system for their child. This discussion draws on the voices of parents with a TGD child to examine how their child is positioned in discourses of personal and institutional risk, how harassment is depoliticised through bullying and safety discourses and how policy frames these interactions as interpersonal incidents leaving untouched the interrogation of cisnormative discourses. Participants spotlighted how pedagogical approaches placed the burden of gender identity, relationship management and education on the TGD student and their family, highlighting a need for greater professional development of educators.

Background

To contextualise the complex space in which teachers work and GSD students learn, one needs to understand a powerful discursive framing which has been perpetuated by those in strategic positions in Australia, most recently illustrated through the moral panic which was active nationwide from 2015 to 2017 in relation to an education initiative: Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA). The intent of SSCA, which was run on an opt-in basis and was mostly engaged in by high schools (Thompson 2020), was to create safe and welcoming spaces for GSD students, their families and staff. The approach of SSCA transcended the traditional, bullying-oriented focus on homo/transphobic language use by positioning heteronormativity and the gender binary as limiting and not fully representative of Australia's social diversity. Unsurprisingly, such educational progress at a time of neoconservative governmental rule was perceived as perilous to the socially-constructed, normalised gender order and resulted in a multi-year moral backlash which ultimately shut down the initiative (Law 2017; Shannon and Stephen 2017).

Central to this moral panic, largely fuelled by high profile individuals and groups, including conservative politicians, organised religious lobbyists and right-wing media (Law 2017; Thompson 2020), were discourses of childhood innocence and parental rights. There were also references to the initiative's supposed indoctrination of students with 'radical' views around the social construction of gender, and allusions to its potency to undermine the heteronormative nuclear family. The focus on parents and family and their apparent 'indignation and horror' (Thompson 2020, 3) was central to these arguments.

One political lobby group, called *Binary* in homage to binary sex/gender, developed anti-PC packs to educate parents about the 'indoctrination' of students at school by 'radical gender activists' (Smith 2019, para 1) and schools' use of 'code' words (para 21) such as 'anti-bullying' as a form of subterfuge. Binary's director allegedly claimed, 'despite the banning of the Safe Schools program in NSW, parents and children still had to "deal with the issue of transgender in schools"' (Smith 2019, para 12). Supporter funded, these packs were launched in 2019 at an event attended by Members of the

New South Wales (NSW) Parliament, lending political power to the material's messaging.

Concomitant to the SSCA moral panic was a belief that schools already undertake inclusive work as a result of school policy and/or within generic anti-bullying programmes which support recognition of bias-based harassment. The irony is that such materials have been variously critiqued for their frequent superficiality and failure to situate bias-based harassment related to gender and sexuality diversity as evidence of any broader social phenomenon (Ullman and Ferfolja 2015). For instance, in NSW, highlighted here as a case in point, a Legal Issues Bulletin, *Transgender students in schools – legal rights and responsibilities* (NSW Department of Education 2020) is the only substantial gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive resource on the Department's website to offer educators guidance on supporting this student cohort. Rather than focus on inclusive education, awareness raising or fostering school cohesion, the Bulletin distinctly focuses on risk management and mitigating the potential disruption caused by the presence of a transgender student – particularly a transgender student whose birth-assigned gender is known to the student body. This document thus positions subsequent adult interventions as reactive to transgender students' 'at risk' subjectivities through social marginalisation.

The bully-victim framework employed in this and other state/federal education resources to scaffold understandings of bias-based harassment creates particular conditions for caring or consideration of gender and sexuality diversity and assumes an interpersonal, often dyadic, focus. 'Bullying' events are individualised to the perpetrator(s) and the victim(s) (Ullman 2018) rather than being positioned as a structural issue relating to power, discrimination, surveillance, punishment (Foucault 1978) and inequity. This reductionism is appealing in its efficiency, particularly if approaches to social and emotional learning are viewed as a frivolous distraction from the 'real' work of schooling constituted by neoliberal and neoconservative discourse (Connell 2013); however, addressing GSD discrimination in schools is critical, as evidenced below.

Literature review

Experiences of GSD and TGD students

Discrimination against GSD individuals in educational institutions is well-reported in the literature (Bradlow et al. 2017; Ferfolja and Stavrou 2015; Hillier et al. 2010; Kosciw et al. 2018; Robinson et al. 2014; Ullman 2017). Such abuse has considerable bearing on a student's education and future opportunities; it has been shown to decrease one's ability to focus at school, has a negative impact on grades and leads to school avoidance and truancy (Hillier et al. 2010; Robinson et al. 2014; Ullman 2015a, 2015b; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2016). It is also associated with decreased feelings of school belonging and educational aspiration (Kosciw et al. 2018; Ullman 2015b).

TGD young people remain targets of harassment at school globally; a fact recognised in a review commissioned by the United Nations (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2016). Numerous large-scale projects have highlighted these students' experiences. For instance, in New York, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has examined the experiences of GSD youth in the United

States at regular intervals for over twenty years. They recently highlighted increases in the reported frequency of *educators'* transphobic remarks between their 2013 and 2017 national surveys; nearly three-quarters of the cohort of 23,000 young people aged 13–21 (71%) heard school staff members make transphobic comments (Kosciw et al. 2018). Their statistics on students' personal experiences of harassment based on their gender and sexuality diversity further highlight school-based challenges, with 60% of the cohort reporting harassment due to their gender expression. State-wide data from California comparing cisgender ($n = 2201$) and transgender-identifying ($n = 59$) students similarly highlighted transgender students' reports of a significantly less inclusive and safe school climate across multiple measures, including a significantly lower frequency of reporting that their teachers intervene to stop transphobic comments (McGuire et al. 2010).

Britain's most recent School Report (Bradlow et al. 2017) which surveyed 3713 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) youth aged between 11 and 19, found nearly half of the respondents had experienced homo/transphobic harassment. This percentage increased to 65% when just analysing the gender diverse sample. Fewer than one-third of participants indicated that their teachers intervened during such harassment, which is potentially linked to these students' negative mental health outcomes; more than four in five gender diverse young people (84%) reported self-harming behaviours and nearly half (45%) had attempted suicide (Bradlow et al. 2017).

Australian research offers additional explanation for the relationship between how students are treated at school and their school-based wellbeing. In the *Free2Be?* National study of GSD students aged 14–18 ($n = 704$; Ullman 2015b), the TGD student cohort ($n = 51$) were significantly less likely than other participants to describe their teachers as inclusive or positive about gender and sexuality diversity and significantly less likely to defend them in instances of bullying related to their gender expression. These measures of school culture were strongly, significantly correlated with these students' sense of happiness at school, their sense that their teachers cared for them, and their confidence in their own learning. Further, teacher positivity towards gender and sexuality diversity functioned as a significant predictor of TGD students' sense of connection to school, explaining 22% of its total variance (Ullman 2017). These relationships are reflected in Jones and colleagues' 2016 survey of 189 TGD young people aged 14–25. Young people who reported no teacher support of their gender identity/expression were more than four times as likely to leave school; those who described their teachers as 'mostly inappropriate' in terms of their preferred name/pronoun use were more likely to report their marks had dropped and that they were unable to concentrate in class (Jones et al. 2016, 165).

However, it is critical not to position TGD individuals as victims without agency or resilience (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017; Hillier et al. 2019; Jones 2017). Australian national research has shown that TGD young people were twice as likely to engage in help-seeking behaviours and activism than their cisgender, same-sex attracted peers (Jones and Hillier 2013). The *From Blues to Rainbows* research project echoed this (Smith et al. 2014); 90% of their sample of TGD participants had participated in at least one activism activity and 62% did so as a way to be 'heard' and to feel better (82). These findings illustrate strength, power and the contribution that many make to social change as well as their resistance to dominant discourses of gender and sexuality.

Experiences of parents of TGD students

The literature related to parents of TGD children is growing internationally, and includes, but is not limited to the experiences of parents and family during the early transitioning stage (Barron and Capous-Desyllas 2017; Kivalanka, Weiner, and Mahan 2014); transphobic harassment and the need for schools to create safe learning environments (Domínguez-Martínez and Robles 2019); parental advocacy (Goldstein et al. 2018); intersections of class and the parenting of TGD children (Neary 2019); parental affirmation and justice-based parenting (Pyne 2016); as well as parents' experiences engaging with school counsellors (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2015).

Much of the research that exists highlights parents' labour – both emotional and tangible – in the form of parent-led communication with schools and family-school collaborative support initiatives (Riley et al. 2013; Riggs and Due 2015). Australian research examining the cohort-specific needs of 31 parents of TGD children highlighted their desire for greater education of school staff and other parents around knowledge and awareness about gender diversity (Riley et al. 2013). The researchers found that, 'Parents, in particular, commented that the ignorance and fear of other people contributed significantly to the difficulties they faced and due to this they felt misunderstood, blamed and judged for supporting their child' (Riley et al. 2013, 651).

School community members' lack of knowledge about gender identity is a dominant theme in this research space (Riley et al. 2011; Schimmel-Bristow et al. 2018). In environments where educators lack training, awareness or guidance on how to support gender diverse students, it is unsurprising that external, 'official' validation of the child's gender identity appears to inspire school-based action. In their 2015 survey of 61 Australian parents of gender variant children, Riggs and Due found that parents whose child had been formally diagnosed by a health care professional reported higher levels of support from their child's school than parents of children who had not had a formal diagnosis. As policy and Departmental guidance shifts, much can be learned from parents about how their children's schools are impacted by broader cultural discourses, as related to visibility, accessibility and student wellbeing. First, however, it is important to position this research in a theoretical space.

Theoretical framing

Inconsistency exists between the legal recognition of GSD individuals in Australia and the silences and invisibility of gender and sexuality diversity that prevails within schools. We have referred to this tension as a consequence of a *culture of limitation*, a complex and messy interplay of neoconservative, neoliberal, heteronormative, colonial and patriarchal discourses located within Australian culture (see Ferfolja and Ullman 2020 for a detailed examination of this concept). Discourse, here, is used in the Foucauldian sense, and may be defined as the 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Foucault 1972, 49). Since education is increasingly steeped in neoliberal and neoconservative discourses (Connell 2013), we draw from these concepts and their intersections to illustrate how some knowledge is positioned as essential and powerful while others are constructed as irrelevant or even indulgent in school education.

Education is impacted by a culture of limitation perpetuated by individual subjects and organised activist groups with considerable social, cultural and political access and power, who desire to maintain the normative status quo. Within the culture of limitation, TGD young people and their families, often vulnerable subjects, are subjected to messaging which positions their subjectivities as abnormal, pathological and non-existent. For instance, Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, declared that counsellors' and teachers' endeavours to support TGD students were 'gender whispering', implying that young people's gender identity is suggestable and alterable (Baxendale 2018). Further, he stated that he sends his child/ren to a private religious school to avoid 'skin curling' (McGowan 2018) curriculum content inclusive of same-sex attraction and gender diversity. Morrison's attitude in relation to equity for, and recognition of, TGD people was further witnessed in his open criticism (and intended removal of) gender-inclusive restroom signage in his own department, referring to it as '... ridiculous ... political correctness over the top' (Baker 2019).

Schools and teachers are influenced by the culture of limitation which renders them fearful of acknowledging or celebrating gender (and sexuality) diversity in any meaningful way beyond, at best, what are generally risk-averse and reactive education policy guidelines (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020). Educational discourses intersect with discourses of childhood (Robinson, Díaz, and Townley 2019, 325) as well as a fear of an assumed likely-disapproving parent subject and community (Ullman and Ferfolja 2016) to position GSD/TGD-related knowledges as controversial, risky, inappropriate and (often) impossible matter for educational conversations with young people.

These actions are mechanisms of the systemic construct of cisgenderism – the 'cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community' (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63). Discourses of cisgenderism disregard the individual's 'own understandings of their genders and bodies' and 'reinforce the idea that there are only two genders, that gender is determined on the basis of assigned sex ... and that the mistreatment of people on the basis of their gender is thus legitimate and understandable' (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2018, 69). A culture of limitation evinces cisgenderism through cisnormativity – 'the normalisation of cisgendering' (Ericsson 2017, 140). In cisnormative schooling cultures, individuals are positioned by default within the binary construct of male/female as determined by birth sex, while those who resist, or do not fit, this construct are pathologised and maligned through surveillance and punishment (Foucault 1978).

Cisgenderism is felt not only by gender diverse students, but also by their parents. Parents may experience the 'loss of invisible privileges that accord with having a child who is cisgender' (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2018, 70), including those which relate to school-family communication and advocacy for their child. Cisgenderism is rife in schooling cultures, is visible in curriculum, pedagogies and practices, where it relegates the TGD subject to that of 'outsider'; it has a 'negative impact not only on transgender people but all people involved in school communities' (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017, 15). This outsider status impacts the ways in which parents of TGD students variously engage with the school, using their agency (Weedon 1987) and resistance (Foucault 1978) to support their child where possible.

Methodology

This paper draws on a large, mixed method national research project of parents of children currently being educated in the public system (K-12). The research had three data collection points, including a quantitative online survey which examined parents' perspectives regarding the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversities in the curriculum. Qualitatively, an online forum as well as face-to-face and online interviews were conducted. These qualitative data collection points were with Australian parents of young people who either self-identified as GSD or whose peers perceived them to be GSD. These participants were recruited via a survey question asking whether the respondent was a parent of a GSD child and inviting them to provide their contact details for follow-up contact by the researchers. For this paper, we focus on the parent interviews.

The aim of the interviews was to understand what was happening for participants' children in school and importantly, how these parents 'read' and navigated their child's educational experiences. The chief investigators conducted the interviews online, although one interview was conducted in person in a safe, public space. The investigators employed a semi-structured interview approach, which enabled a particular focus for questioning while simultaneously enabling dialogue (Hesse-Biber 2007), allowing participants to, at times, make sense of their experiences. The interviews, which lasted up to an hour, questioned parents about their perspectives of their child's experience at school in terms of curriculum content related to gender/sexuality diversity; the types of support received from school in relation to their gender/sexuality diversity; responses from other parents in relation to their child's gender/sexuality diversity; positive and negative experiences of navigating the schooling environment; and, changes needed, if any, to foster a positive experience for GSD-students.

Thirteen interviews were conducted. All interview participants identified as mothers, bar one who identified as a father. Parents came from a variety of Australian states, including NSW, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania. Four parents did not disclose their state of origin during the interview. All parents had a least one GSD-child attending a public school and the majority of participants ($n = 10$) reported that their child was TGD. Analysis of these 10 interviews is the focus here. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms have been used. Additionally, any references to school location or other potentially-identifying demographics have been omitted.

Interviews were transcribed by a transcription company. The data were uploaded into the qualitative software NVivo, where it was analysed using a coding frame developed by the two lead researchers in collaboration with a qualitative research assistant. This involved reading the interview transcripts multiple times to ascertain the range of key issues/topics that arose and discussing, as a team, what they illustrated; individually re-coding in light of these discussions; then reviewing coding allocation and labels as a group. Twenty-seven codes were identified, including but not limited to, bullying, educational policy, educators' mis/understanding about gender and sexuality diversity, negative school experience, well-being and curriculum, and there were some instances of over-lap. Data from these codes highlight the ways in which anti-bullying policy, risk and isolation and pedagogies of containment limit the inclusion of TGD young people in schools.

Findings and discussion

Inadequacies of anti-bullying policy

Numerous participants spoke about the harassment their child/ren faced at school, which varied in nature but generally included teasing and name-calling as well as physical assault. Participant narratives highlighted schools' positioning of these interactions as 'bullying' and how the ways in which such instances were addressed were ineffectual and confronting for the young person *and* their parent. The excerpt below is from one such narrative, where the mother highlighted the trauma experienced by her child as well as the questionable response of the school towards the violence.

So he was definitely in public schools right up until we put him in [alternative; non-government] school. He was really badly abused ... They talk about it as bullying, and I don't think it's bullying. He was being physically assaulted on a regular basis at these primary schools. The one that we settled on, where he spent the longest time, he had the most horrific experiences in. I went to the school a couple of days after he came home and he was covered in bruises, and he was just horrifically traumatised. I went to see them about [it] - and they were like, well we have this bullying policy, we have a five-step process, he just needs to put his hands up and say stop. I'm like, is that between kicks to the head and the stomach? Seriously, they just didn't want a bar of it. So I just yanked him out of school. (Mother of a gender diverse teenager)

A number of issues are apparent in this excerpt that problematise not only the notion of bullying but the school-based policy and pedagogy aimed at addressing it. First is the fact that serious physical abuse is positioned as 'bullying', a depoliticised concept that conceals the severity and intent behind the perpetrator's behaviour. Discourses of childhood position bullying as an antisocial behaviour, yet, also, as behaviour in which young people commonly engage – almost akin to a schoolyard rite of passage. This limited framing ignores the social rewards which may be experienced by the perpetrator(s), and demands little accountability by school-based adults in the co-construction of a school culture which provides these rewards. Further, this reductive approach fails to acknowledge the power differential operating between the perpetrator(s) and victim. While Foucault (1978) points out, power is everywhere, operates like tentacles, and everyone has power in various contexts, power is also productive, relegating some to the discourse of Other, and therefore, 'deserving' of punishment. It cannot go unmentioned that perpetrators of such assault would be criminally liable in any other context.

Furthermore, a generic bullying framework ignores questions of gender, class, race, sexuality and their intersections (Ringrose and Renold 2010) and, thus, fails to offer young people, or the adults trying to guide them, meaningful tools for navigating the complexities across/within these social relationships. As Ringrose and Renold write (Ringrose and Renold 2010), normative gender expectations related to how children and young people navigate peer relationships and conflict often obscure school-based harassment, social marginalisation and exclusion, reconfiguring these as 'normative cruelties' (575). As outlined above, despite the dire physical and emotional consequences for the victim and the fear and anxiety experienced by such assault, the school policy, as described here, appears to make the victim responsible for any recourse; he could simply terminate the abuse by drawing on the 'five-step process' detailed in the school's anti-bullying policy. The young person is encouraged to just 'put his hands up and say stop' – in other words, 'stand up for

himself'. Such a directive is in-keeping with the 'gender logics of playground masculinities [which] dictate ... to be a male victim constitutes one of the most serious breaches of heroic masculinity', marking the male subject as 'sexual deviant ... feminised' (Ringrose and Renold 2010, 582). School bullying policy which uncritically shifts responsibility onto the victim seems to function as an attempted corrective, rebalancing the power dynamic through the (re)inscription of gender normative behaviours.

The school's approach detailed above is of additional concern as it implies that the behaviour or 'bullying' involves only two actors – the victim and perpetrator(s). Where schools can seemingly blame the behaviour on the pathology of perpetrator/s and targeted child, the problem is delimited and supposedly controllable. As such, it is confined to those in the exchange, rather than addressing the broader socio-cultural discourses that reinforce inequities through the policing and marginalisation of 'transgressive' subjectivities. This framing positions harassment and bias-based bullying as discrete instances of inter-personal conflict, rather than as tangible moments constituting (hetero/cisnormative) power and privilege. This is buoyed by a broader socio-cultural framing of gender and sexuality diverse individuals as deficit and deserving of surveillance and corrective intervention (Foucault 1978) as exemplified in the following excerpt.

Well, I told them about the type of bullying that he'd been subjected [to] ... just constantly getting called a faggot, a poofter, all of that fairly standard sort of stuff. But other ... things that were more indicative that it was also about gender. He loved Barbie dolls, he loved rainbows, anything that he had with rainbows on it got trashed. They'd grab his Barbie dolls and shove them down the drain ... or alternatively destroy them with their feet, and chuck them away. Anything that they could do, they did to him, to demonstrate that he just didn't fit. Yeah, it was pretty hideous. ... I really genuinely think that there needs to be a different approach to this type of stuff. I don't think it can be explained as bullying. ... They [teachers] need to teach kids about gender diversity. We need to have that conversation early on, so it's a non-issue. (Mother of a gender diverse teenager)

Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon and in western societies this aspect of subjectivity is positioned in binary opposition; masculinity is everything that femininity is not and vice versa. What is deemed appropriate gender behaviour is reinforced (and celebrated) through socio-cultural institutions that perpetuate the dominant discourses in operation. Subjects, who transcend that which is considered 'normal' are punished (Foucault 1978). Thus, a child whose interests lie outside the gender norm experience punishment through pejorative epithets such as 'faggot' and 'poofter', highlighting how the individual's gender expression (or assumed sexuality) is unacceptable. Bystanders who witness these acts are simultaneously 'pulled into line'. Moreover, disparagement of the feminine means that those who resist dominant forms of embodied masculinity and 'incorrectly' take up feminised ways of being (such as playing with a Barbie doll) are traitors to the socially constructed natural gender order and, in particular, to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). In this quote, we see that not only is the targeted child 'problematic', but more broadly, so are symbols of femininity. It illustrates how 'bullying' is a broader political act rather than a discrete event or set of events; here, it is gender policing.

Bearing in mind the above scenario and analysis, the reluctance of schools to acknowledge how normative constructions of gender and sexuality function within school social hierarchies or to teach about the range of gender subjectivities and expressions renders

schools and teachers complicit in the perpetuation of such discrimination. Dominant discourses of bullying 'reproduce an oversimplified narrative', stymieing understandings of how broader systems of power influence school culture and, thus, limiting how they 'envision possibilities for change' (Smith and Payne 2016, 2). Education can have a very positive effect on school culture and behaviour and can reduce discrimination and prejudice (Domínguez-Martínez and Robles 2019); ironically, this would potentially reduce teachers' work through a reduction in 'bullying'. What is critically stipulated in the above quote is the need to provide this education 'early on, so it's a non-issue'; however, western constructions of childhood 'framed within developmentalist perspectives' (Robinson, Díaz, and Townley 2019, 325) position such conversations as inappropriate with the potential to corrupt the innocent child, who is constructed as existing 'naturally' outside/unaware of and somehow unaffected by normative gender expectations.

Risk and isolation

TGD students are frequently considered *at risk*, and unfortunately some *are* at risk – largely the result of schooling cultures. Yet, teachers report that their schools are reluctant to teach about, or implement a whole school approach to, gender diversity (Ullman and Smith 2018). Considering the lack of pre-and in-service professional learning in this area, and recent moral panics as described earlier in this paper, it is little wonder that most schools are concerned about broaching the notion of gender.² The sanitised, a-political concept of 'anti-bullying' provides a safer framework within which educators can work; however, its agenda of protectionism and risk avoidance does little to challenge the power dynamics inherent within a hetero/cisnormative positioning of who is Othered/victimised/pathologised and who is in a position to do the protecting (Formby 2015).

Many parents of TGD children spoke of how their child was isolated and marked by schooling practices and pedagogies that aimed to (supposedly) support the student. For instance, one mother described how her child was harassed while using the toilet.

There were a couple of incidents where the boys had been climbing over the cubicle because she wouldn't pee at the urinal standing up in front of everybody. Because she didn't want to go in there anymore because these kids were climbing over and saying what have you got, you got a big willy going on in there or something? So, she'd come home and do a giant wee and then she'd be fine. So, that was happening on a fairly regular basis, so she was missing quite a bit of school because she couldn't pass urine and was getting ... stomach-aches and things from holding on. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

The school's eventual response was for the child to use the disabled cubicle (rather than the girls' toilet). The provision of a disabled toilet or teachers' toilet is a common solution to the socially constructed 'dilemma' of providing appropriate facilities for transgender students and is apparent in policy documents (NSW Department of Education 2020); however, this approach is fraught. Students who use these facilities are marked (again) in their difference, by others and themselves, and the emotional costs may be high, as illustrated below.

She didn't want to go to the boys' toilets anymore and I was getting phone calls to say come and pick her up from school ... So, the school, I guess, were becoming more and more aware that this was a problem, because I'd talked to them about this toilet issue. Things also about

getting changed in the classrooms as they did for swimming lessons, she wouldn't do that, so I said to them, can we get her into the toilets and get her changed there? They said, oh yeah, she can go to the disabled toilet. [Name of child] was like, I'm not disabled. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

She was put in a disabled toilet as – [an answer to the question] where do we put this child? During that time, she came home and she was very upset about her body. It actually impacts on her mental health. She said, am I disabled? Am I different now? Her mental health actually was impacted quite considerably. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

Such an approach places the responsibility for change onto the student rather than the larger school community. In doing so, the student is made complicit in their victimisation, either resulting from being positioned as Other by only using a toilet designated for them or resulting from their 'intrusion' into the domain of cisnormative spaces. Participants relayed how discourses of safety and protection were frequently raised by school personnel, but these seemed to overlap with institutional safety and protection, as witnessed in another mother's description of the school's reaction to news that her son was using the boys' facilities.

So, when the teacher asked me about toilets, I said, oh, he tells me he uses the boys' toilets. She's like, 'No, he doesn't! No, he doesn't! I've never seen him use the boys' toilets!' and she got very defensive, then said there'd have to be a risk assessment done and all this palaver about how it's not safe. ... The special ed teacher then said that he can use ... a teacher toilet, like a single stand-alone teacher toilet that he was allowed to use if he wanted to, but that he shouldn't go into the boys' toilets until they work it out. (Mother of primary school-aged son)

The concerns foregrounded position safety as derived through procedural thoroughness designed to protect the teacher/school, since this parent had not reported that their child experienced harassment in this setting. Here, policy positions TGD subjects as the location, or cause, of 'risk'. The removal of the child from using student toilets and the subsequent marking of the child as different as the default 'protective' position, suggests schools' assessment of risk ('work[ing] it out') is focused on the child's risk to the school community, as well as educators' risks of misapplication of Departmental policy. This excerpt highlights the tensions felt by educators; a fact reinforced by participants who consistently highlighted how school leaders conferred with representatives from their state-based Departments of Education to 'make sure they're all okay with what we're doing' (Mother of primary school-aged daughter).

While not uncommon for schools to 'unofficially' provide students with a variety of 'safe spaces', including use of the library during classroom breaks when they are most vulnerable to peer harassment, it is noteworthy that schools offered TGD students space away from classroom and peer activities as a potential solution to school-based challenges. On the one hand, this potentially solves an immediate problem related to the student's personal discomfort or distress; however, this positions the TGD child as 'special' or unusual, potentially exacerbating social isolation, as highlighted below.

So the school came up with an idea of you can go to the office at first and sit in the office until you feel calm. But that became every recess and lunch because being outside in the playground was too scary for her. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

Such a strategy, although possibly well-intended, does not address broader issues of discrimination, nor in the long run, does it ensure the child's safety. Underlying issues within the schools' control remain unexamined by this approach. It also begs the question, should not *all* areas of schools be safe for *all* students? Knowing that safety is an issue and not seeking meaningful solutions surely breaches a school's duty of care. Conducting a risk assessment or removing the student from the situation does *not* disrupt the dominant cisnormative discourses that permeate school environments (Smith and Payne 2016); nor does it address the issue of 'bullying' or other socially-marginalising behaviours. Rather, it punishes the gender diverse subject through institutionally-mediated social isolation and subjects their identities to excessive analysis and arbitration, reinforcing their outsider status while impacting their mental health. These practices are not solutions nor are they educative; moreover, such resolutions hide diversity while making it a 'special event' – a position eschewed by many transgender young people who seek normalisation (Smith et al. 2014). Indeed, the imposed silencing and invisibility simply reinforces discourse that positions TGD students as different; silence, as Foucault (1978) points out, is equally constitutive of discourse. The mother continued:

So she was spending every recess and lunch in the office which is not great for social peer development. Then to address that they were giving her extra positive behaviour [rewards]. So you'll get an extra reward if you come out into the playground and play at lunchtime ... it's just that they are just band-aiding everything. ... You change one thing and it becomes a problem somewhere else. You put her in the office but then that becomes a problem. You give her extra rewards, that becomes a problem because then she's special and she's getting the extra attention. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

Pedagogies of containment and disclosure

Supporting TGD students was experienced as a burden by schools rather than as an opportunity for reflection or growth. Given the limited frameworks in which educators are positioned – including Departmental discourses of bullying and risk management – alongside mainstream media and political discourses perpetuating transphobic rhetoric, it is not surprising that educators attempt to mitigate risk and off-load perceived liability. However, the failure of schools to educate their staff and students about gender diversity and to critically consider how gender operates as a socially-organising force within their school culture is felt most keenly by those most vulnerable – the TGD students and their families.

Many of the participants shared stories of how their child's school attempted to support their child through classroom conversation, usually at the parent's request. A shared element of these conversations was teachers' focus on the TGD child themselves and their gender 'change' (not affirmation or acceptance) rather than on the differences between gender identity and sex assigned at birth more broadly. In the re-telling, these conversations seemed to be quick, perfunctory, and in-keeping with an intention to suppress, instead of encourage, conversation. One parent told of the school's attempt to support her child's social transition.

They sat those two kindergarten teachers down and all of the kids with [name of child] in the room ... and taught the kids that the doctors had got it wrong. They'd done a test and now

[name of child] was actually a girl. That was their way of trying to deal with the social transition in school because they had no idea what to do. The kids - you had a little bit of bullying: 'You're a boy. You're a boy. Have you got a penis?' Again the school had no idea how to address any of that. They took it as a bullying incident rather than a gender- [related incident]. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

This failure to educate about the distinctions between sex assigned at birth and gender identity is evidence of an apparent *pedagogy of containment*, wherein schools attempt to control or restrict information about being TGD as an additional form of risk management. In lieu of additional information or explanation, classmates' curiosity seems reasonable and, instead of the classroom feeling like a safe space for exploration of these ideas, it is unsurprising that the identified student bears the brunt of this questioning. This narrative circles back to the deficiencies of a bullying framework as an element of a pedagogy of containment.

Another mother described the classroom conversation which took place when her son socially transitioned at school, which was likewise conspicuously silent on the process by which an individual understands and affirms their gender diversity. Instead, the conversation seemed rife with punitive undertones; without instruction about how such conversations or questioning could be done respectfully, warnings to students about bullying effectively push the topic to the margins.

What she [the teacher] did was sit the class down, talk ... to them about bullying, how you had to be nice to everyone and, in fact, [name of child] is now a boy. She'd clearly ... found some resource, done some session with the class that was about [name of child]'s transition but it was packaged in this language about bullying. (Mother of primary school-aged son)

Additional conversation with this mother revealed that no further dialogue about what it means to be transgender or about gender identity, more broadly, had occurred. Nor had any further discussion taken place, to the best of her knowledge, in other classrooms within the school. Such information containment and restriction is truly the bare minimum of what could be reasonably expected of educators, with 'be nice to everyone' an uncontroversial and sanitised pivot away from legitimate conversations about gender identity. At the same time, these silences and redirections are not without their own pedagogy, marking the child as different and conversations about gender transition as taboo. Further, these approaches raise more questions for children than they answer.

Where parents related a classroom discussion about their child's transition, they often described this as limited to particular classrooms as illustrated below.

So, where [name of child] did eventually get to stand up and talk about who she identified as and they'd read the *I Am Jazz* book, which was one from our personal library, and took it to school. They read it in [name of child]'s class and the two other classes that were from her year group. They also read it to ... the older sibling's class, because she said the kids in her class also knew [name of child] as [previous name of child] and she was quite worried that they wouldn't understand or accept what was going on. She didn't want to be teased or have to explain it to every single person. The school were reluctant to put that transgender education out to all the students, so it was really just [name of child]'s year group, which was year 3 at the time, and [name of other child]'s year group - [name of other child]'s year group - which was year 5 at the time. (Mother of primary school-aged daughter)

This targeted approach is not problematic, per se, and is often used as a strategy to safeguard the TGD child's privacy. However, it becomes aligned with a pedagogy of containment when conversations about the child's gender identity/transition is the *only* educative experience available to the students at the school. Such precautions are notably out of sync with recommendations related to visibility, inclusion and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Findings from this project are aligned with previous research which has highlighted the burden of labour experienced by parents of TGD children (Riley et al. 2013; Riggs and Due 2015) as they work to ensure their child is affirmed and supported. This project extends previous research by identifying teachers' pedagogies of containment and situating this within a broader culture of limitation which shrouds GSD subjectivities in Australian school environments. While this research presents the experiences of just 10 families with a TGD child attending a public school, common challenges and discourses were reported by parents across multiple locations. Taken as a whole, these trends highlight the need for trans-affirmative pedagogical spaces and their potential for both students and their families.

Addressing the needs of gender diverse students in a reactive, rather than proactive manner creates an educational environment which is potentially detrimental for TGD young people, having an impact on social, emotional, physical and academic well-being. Anti-bullying policies that depoliticise harassment, teacher and management practices that isolate and mark the student's difference, and pedagogies of containment and disclosure that limit access and understanding for all students, work against the needs of TGD students (and their families) who are often already in a vulnerable position. School-based approaches need to normalise diversity, preferably through a whole-of-school educational approach. To achieve this, it is critical that teachers and school leaders are trained in relation to gender and sexuality diversity, particular around TGD young people and their families. For social inclusion and celebration of diversity to occur, schools must review their site-based cultures which inform policy, practice and pedagogy.

Notes

1. This paper draws on national research undertaken by the authors entitled, *Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Schools: Parental Experiences and Schooling Responses* funded by the Australian Research Council's (ARC) Discovery Project scheme (DP 180,101,676).
2. Anecdotally, during this research, we were informed on numerous occasions that 'gender is a dirty word', besmirched by the politicking inherent in the culture wars occurring over the last few years.

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