

‘I wasn’t allowed to join the boys’: The ideology of cultural cisgenderism in a UK school

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ABSTRACT

This case-study analyses the experiences of a trans pupil and teacher in a UK-secondary school. It aims to better understand cultural cisgenderism in schools, the acceptance – or lack thereof – of gender expansiveness, and the extent to which school policies are useful to challenge cisnormative gender regimes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the trans pupil and teacher and were analysed thematically. Document analysis of the school’s equality and diversity policy was also conducted. Findings revealed that cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity are embedded into the school culture, with gender structures evident in several areas, leading to trans marginalisation. There was also evidence that both teachers and pupils may contribute to exclusionary and reactive environments, where accommodations are provided only when a trans pupil is visible. This research may be useful for those working in schools to critique policies and practices and create positive change for trans pupils.

KEYWORDS:

Trans; gender; schools; cultural cisgenderism; physical education

Introduction

The term ‘trans’ is an umbrella term referring to a range of different gender identities which are ‘non-normative’, whereby someone’s physical sex and the social expectations related to this do not align (Allen et al. 2020; Matsuno and Budge 2017). While sex concerns a person’s physical characteristics and biology which usually assigns them as either male or female, gender refers to a spectrum of identities and a person’s internal sense of self, usually dictated by social and cultural norms (Matsuno and Budge 2017). Using social constructionist ideas around gender, what we often consider as ‘natural sex roles’ (e.g., woman/femininity and man/masculinity) are actually influenced by ideas about appropriate gender behaviours (Jones and Hillier 2013). Those whose biological sex (for example male or female) align with their gender identity (man/masculinity or woman/femininity) are considered cisgender, while those with a conflict between their biological sex and gender identity are trans. We therefore use the term trans in this article as an umbrella term to denote a range of gender identities including those which are non-binary.¹

Research exploring the experiences of trans youth in the school environment is growing. This is vital to better understand trans pupils’ feelings of safety and belonging in schools, alongside systemic issues which erase and invalidate trans pupils’ identities in this environment. In turn, this understanding has the potential to transform inclusive practice in schools, environments which are a central part to children’s daily lives (Allen et al. 2020); this is particularly important as children often explore their gender identities at a young age (Foley et al. 2016). Due to societal and cultural ideas around gender conformity, research has suggested that schools can be unsafe spaces for trans youth

(Luecke 2018; McGuire et al. 2010). Essentialist understandings of sex and gender, whereby it is perceived there are two standard, biologically-determined gender expressions are still prominent within education (Jones and Hillier 2013); thus, schools are spaces where binary gender is argued to be taught, learned and constrained by cisnormative thinking (O’Flynn 2016). These gender structures are prominent in spaces and practices including toilets, changing rooms, sports, physical education (PE), uniforms and names/pronouns (Jones et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010).

Using these ideas around gender, the aim of this article is to provide a case-study of one Hampshire-based secondary school in England regarding the extent to which trans identities are actively visible and included in the school culture. Although we focus on discussions around the wider school environment, due to our backgrounds and expertise specifically in PE, the article provides a unique analysis of this field. In this paper, we utilise the concepts of cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity, and firstly address the literature employing these concepts below.

Cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity in schools

The concept of cultural cisgenderism is utilised throughout this paper to better understand and make sense of the barriers trans pupils encounter in schools, how they are able to express themselves, and how they navigate their identities. According to Kennedy (2018), cultural cisgenderism is a well-established, unspoken ideology, moving beyond individual, prejudicial attitudes or reactions towards trans people, instead focussing on systematic and cultural problems which serve to erase trans identities. It is an ideology which favours birth-assigned sex as opposed to self-assigned gender, rewarding and celebrating a conformity to gender norms (Omercajic and Martino 2020). It is also argued to be a predominantly tacitly held ideology (Kennedy 2018), often used in conjunction with the term cisnormativity, evident in spaces that delegitimise any identities outside of binary gender categories, privileging those who are cisgender (Serano 2014).

To expand, cisnormativity is the idea that gender is a binary and based on assigned sex at birth, disregarding diverse, self-identified gender identities (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021). Thus, cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity essentialise sex and gender as ‘natural’, unquestioned and fixed at birth, ideologies which in turn ‘other’ and systematically ignore the existence of trans people. Under this ideology, trans people are considered as suffering from a medical condition and stigmatised for not meeting conventional gender norms, as they do not conform to essentialist, binary categories of sex and gender (Kennedy 2018). Ultimately, these institutionalised regimes impose restrictions for embracing gender diversity in beliefs and practices (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018).

With these ideas in mind, past research suggests trans pupils may be rendered ‘invisible’ within the education system, with schools often failing to challenge the norms which sustain cisnormativity and cisgenderism (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). This was evident in research by McBride and Neary (2021), whereby institutionalised cisnormativity was permeated throughout school culture. For instance, knowledge around gender identity was either tokenistically applied to the school curriculum or not included at all, under the presumption that all pupils are cisgender. In turn, trans pupils were not recognised, were stigmatised and their identities disregarded, causing confusion for some pupils who were unable to name their experience of being trans (McBride and Neary 2021). Similar arguments are evident within research by Kennedy (2018), suggesting the erasure of trans knowledge means many trans youth have not acquired trans-related vocabulary, and are therefore unable to express their feelings of being trans; this is argued to be a significant way in which cultural cisgenderism is exerted.

Although there is a distinction between the wider systemic issue of cultural cisgenderism and individual transphobic behaviours, trans pupils' experiences of both verbal and physical bullying may also be evident of a cisgenderist culture, where pupils are targeted for not conforming to cisnormative gender expectations. To elaborate, a UK-based survey by Stonewall (2017), using responses from over 3,700 young people (sixteen percent of whom were trans and eight percent of whom were questioning their gender identity), found that 64% of trans and gender-questioning pupils had been bullied, 46% had heard transphobic language frequently or often and nine percent had received death threats at school. Further research has suggested that the extent of bullying may be determined by multiple factors; for example, those who conform to binary-gender categories and are able to 'pass' as their new gender may be less at risk (McGuire et al. 2010). However, pupils who behave in a way deemed 'inappropriate' for their presumed gender, or who have an ambiguous gender identity, may be ridiculed (Jones et al. 2016). These ideas therefore reflect essentialist understandings of sex and gender and restrictive ideas about gender expression, whereby presentation of gender impacts how youth are perceived by peers (Namaste 1996).

Research also suggests problems may be particularly evident in binary-gendered spaces such as toilets and changing rooms; according to Davies, Vipond, and King (2019), entering school toilets can yield feelings of anxiety for trans pupils, with accusations of being in the 'wrong' space. According to Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic (2020), the mere existence of binary-gendered spaces is reflective of a cisnormative education system, whereby a failure to consider diverse gender identities is evident in the school structure. In other words, identities outside the binary are not conceptualised or acknowledged (Kennedy 2018). A common 'solution' is for schools to provide an alternative 'all-gender' toilet or changing provision. However, pupils using alternative spaces may also be made to feel uncomfortable (Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadvá 2021). Furthermore, this reactive accommodation reinforces trans pupils' outsider status in schools, potentially exacerbating their social isolation, impacting their mental health, and failing to disrupt cultural cisgenderism (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021).

Evidence therefore suggests that cultural cisgenderism is embedded into educational spaces. However, an area of the school environment where binary and hierarchical understandings of sex and gender are made more explicit is PE. PE is a subject which is most likely to be gender-segregated in schools (Hills and Croston 2012) and where gender-specific activities may be taught, due to overarching perceptions boys will inevitably outperform girls and they are suited to different activities (Velija and Kumar 2009; Wilkinson, Penney, and Allin 2016). Thus, ideologies about gender are embedded and sustained in PE, with binary gender stereotypes and male hegemony endorsed through single-sex arrangements. This is due to the focus on the body, making gender more visible and supporting a patriarchal gender hierarchy (Velija and Kumar 2009). PE therefore establishes the unquestioned and widespread ideology of cultural cisgenderism which goes further than marginalising trans youth; as stereotypical gender performances are encouraged, this upholds the perception of male superiority and misogyny, demonstrating that cultural cisgenderism can affect everyone (Kennedy 2018).

Policies which challenge structural inequities and move beyond an individualistic approach are essential to re-balance cisnormative power relations, in PE and more widely (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). However, there may be an absence of proactive policies, with schools instead supporting trans pupils and their parents on an ad-hoc basis (Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadvá 2021). Policy development may also be reactive, whereby 'out' trans pupils are the catalyst for schools to create policies in the first instance. However, this is problematic, as trans pupils may be discouraged from 'coming out' if policies which protect them are not already in place (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile

Paechter, et al., 2021). Thus, it has been argued a critical interrogation of cisgenderism and cishnormativity may not currently be apparent in schools (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). Instead, existing gender structures may remain, where trans pupils are asked to 'fit in' to established, often exclusionary, practices and whereby trans pupils are asked to advocate for themselves (Frohard-Dourlent 2018). This is further supported by Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic (2020), who criticise reactive measures in policy which require a trans pupil to be present. Instead, to disrupt cisgender privilege and trans erasure, knowledge and critique around cisgenderism needs to be embedded into policy and practice, creating a 'trans affirmative and gender expansive education' (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020, 12).

At present, there is a lack of research concerning the experiences of trans pupils in school environments in the UK and little research to date has focussed on trans pupils' experiences of PE. Due to the mobilisation of binary understandings of gender particularly visible in PE, this is considered an important area to address. This article therefore explores the experiences of one PE teacher and one trans pupil, forming a small case-study of trans inclusion in a secondary school in the South of England. With past literature in this area often using larger surveys (Allen et al. 2020; Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadva 2021; Jones and Hillier 2013; Jones et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010; Stonewall 2017), a small-scale, qualitative study was considered important to gain more in-depth perceptions; thus, the research aimed to focus upon the lived experiences of the participants in depth. Within this study, the following research questions were formed:

1. To what extent is cultural cisgenderism embedded into the school culture?
2. In a cishnormative environment, what barriers are evident for trans pupils and how are these enacted in PE?
3. How effective are policies in challenging and changing cultural and ideological values around gender?

Methodology

Sample

The motivation to conduct this study arose through one of the researcher's work in the school. In their capacity as a PE instructor, they were aware of several openly trans pupils and therefore trans inclusion was considered a noteworthy area to explore, to determine to what extent cishnormativity and cultural cisgenderism were embedded into the school culture, and the extent to which teachers were knowledgeable about potential barriers trans pupils may face. As research regarding trans pupils' school experiences (in particular, in PE) is relatively scarce, the researcher's access to this sample – alongside the rapport they had with the trans pupils – was a key incentive in choosing to explore this further. The researcher was also aware (anecdotally) of several potential barriers that may have been evident for trans pupils.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which offer flexibility in terms of questions asked, the use of follow-up questions, and the order in which they are utilised; they are therefore considered less limiting than structured interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method, with one trans pupil and one PE teacher from the same Hampshire-based secondary school interviewed, using a convenience sample relevant to one of the researchers.

To add some additional context, one participant was a trans boy (*Joe*) who had known he was trans for around five years at the time of the interviews. He had moved to his current school at age 13 and

was interviewed around 18 months later, at the age of 15. Thus, within the interviews, Joe reflected on his experiences in both schools, offering a comparison across different environments. At the time of the interviews, he stated he was planning to medically transition in the future and was currently on a waiting list. In terms of the PE teacher (*Liam*), he was also a year group tutor and maths teacher at the time of the interviews, and therefore was able to comment on a wide range of practices at the school. Liam started at the school as a newly qualified teacher, around four years prior to the interviews, and worked alongside several other PE staff.

One of the researchers was also aware of several other trans pupils in the school at the time of the research, and it was therefore considered important to analyse trans inclusion in this environment. Although it would have been advantageous to interview these other trans pupils, due to wider constraints surrounding the sensitive nature of the research, this was not possible. Although Joe cannot speak on behalf of all trans pupils, his perspective is considered important to gain some understanding of the extent of cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity in the school. The rationale for interviewing Liam was to gain an understanding of policies and provision in place for trans pupils, and the extent to which these were proactive or reactive, particularly considering the cisnormative binarisation of PE. The initial, specific focus of the research was therefore on trans pupils' PE experiences. However, as conversations in the interviews broadened to include other subjects, the research aims were refined to include trans inclusion and cisnormativity in other areas too.

Materials and procedures

Ethical approval for the study was gained through Solent University ethics board in April 2020. Separate interview guides were created for Joe and Liam, based on the research questions of the study. In terms of the interview with Joe, interview guide themes consisted of his initial identification as trans, the process of 'coming out' at both schools, structural issues in the schools, his experiences of individual and systemic discrimination, and reactive and proactive measures taken by the school to combat discriminatory practices and/or change the culture for trans pupils. In terms of the teacher interview guide, this was created based upon Liam's experiences of teaching trans pupils in multiple subjects (namely PE, maths and as a year group tutor), and questions were formed regarding structural and systemic barriers to inclusion, confidence and strategies in dealing with these issues, and policies in place at the school.

Once interview guides were created, Joe and Liam were contacted to arrange a suitable time and date for the interviews, which took place using *Microsoft Teams*, due to COVID-19 restrictions in the UK. Before the interviews, participants (and Joe's parents) had the opportunity to ask any outstanding questions about the study. In-depth interviews then took place between June and July 2020, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Due to the small sample size of two, and after reflecting on transcribed interviews, it was decided there were opportunities for further follow-up questions based on respondents' answers. For this reason, Joe and Liam were asked to conduct an in-depth follow-up interview, with both participants agreeing. Second interviews took place within a month of the first interviews and interview guides were created based upon previous responses and themes outlined, allowing further probing questions to be included. The same procedures were repeated. Reflecting on the second interviews, these were considered a useful way to gather richer data with a small sample size.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the safeguarding of the participants was prioritised, particularly Joe who was under the age of 18. Before the interviews, both participants were provided with an information sheet and informed consent form. Due to Joe's age, an assent form was used, and informed consent was obtained by his parents. The researchers made sure Joe and Liam knew

they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was also made transparent that the data would remain confidential, with only the researchers aware of who had taken part. Anonymity was considered by using pseudonyms (Joe and Liam), alongside removing any identifiable information from the transcripts. Finally, both participants were made aware they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and a list of support services was created to provide to participants if required.

Data analysis

Firstly, interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after they took place. After each transcript had been produced, these were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data, to begin to recognise and interpret themes, a method recommended by Bryman (2012). The strategy used to interpret the data in the interviews was thematic analysis, a widely used data analysis method where the researcher pinpoints and examines themes within a data set. Themes are therefore patterns across a data set which are important to describe and analyse phenomena under investigation and are usually associated with a specific research question.

To conduct effective analysis a system of coding was used whilst making decisions about the narratives that derived from the research. To do this, guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised, with relationships and patterns considered across the transcripts. Any data considered interesting or relevant was extracted and placed in tables. Following this, the meanings of the quotations were interpreted for what they revealed about the phenomenon, and each were given specific codes to analytically capture their respective meanings (Nowell et al. 2017). Thus, a deductive approach was used, with the concepts of cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity utilised to develop themes from the transcripts.

Document analysis

As some of the interview themes related to the use of documents and policies, it was decided that the school's equality and diversity policy would also be analysed. Due to the limited number of interviews conducted, the document analysis assisted in triangulating the methods to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Thus, document analysis was a supplementary method which took place after the interviews had been conducted; it was used as a comparison and a means to cross-reference several sources. Firstly, the policy was downloaded from the school's website and qualitative content analysis was used, which allowed categories to be actively generated and developed from the data as opposed to using pre-determined themes (Bryman 2012).

Several steps were followed, adapted from Bryman's (2012) recommendations. Firstly, familiarity with the document was ensured by reading the policy and conducting initial searches for key words and phrases to consider the presence of and frequency of key terms. In line with Bryman (2012), potential patterns and categories were considered within the policy, again using the concepts of cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity as analytical tools. The categories initially generated were then listed, which included 'aims and objectives of the policy', 'background information provided', 'clarity over key terms and definitions', 'links to other policies', 'consequences of breaching the policy', 'strengths of the policy' and 'weaknesses of the policy'. The policy was also checked for its length, using the number of words as a guideline, as well as when the policy was created and last amended.

Results and discussion

‘They were very worried how other pupils were going to react’: Cultural cisgenderism and the school culture

The initial questions asked in the pupil interview were around ‘coming out’ in the school environment. At the time, Joe had ‘socially transitioned’ at school, a process whereby a trans person becomes recognised as a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth. This may include changes to names/pronouns, the use of different toilets and changing rooms, and adaptations to appearance such as clothing and hairstyles to align with gender expectations (Frohard-Dourlent 2018). Some trans people may only socially transition, whereas others may also undergo medical procedures including gender-affirming surgery and hormones. As previously stated, Joe indicated he was on a waiting list and was therefore hoping to medically transition in the future. When discussing his ‘coming out’ experiences, he explained:

It [coming out] was kind of a strange experience ... There were some incidences in my previous school, how someone mistook me as a male in the girl’s toilets and I had to explain myself. I had no choice to be in the female toilets, so I kind of had to purposely ‘come out’ just for everyone to understand. I wasn’t allowed to use the male toilets. (Joe)

As Davies, Vipond, and King (2019) have noted, the use of gendered toilets may result in accusations of being in the ‘wrong’ space for trans people. Presumably, under normalised gender expressions and cisnormative thinking, Joe did not look ‘feminine enough’ to go unnoticed in the female toilets due to his more masculine looks, clothing or mannerisms; thus, his gender was monitored and scrutinised by others, leading him to reveal his gender identity. This is also supported by Ingrey (2012) who highlights misrecognition in public toilets due to gender non-conformity, and is particularly problematic as past research suggests the majority of trans pupils are unable to use their preferred toilets in schools (Stonewall 2017). When a trans person is crossing gender lines or has an ambiguous gender identity, they may have to reveal their trans identity to others (Allen et al. 2020). Thus, Joe’s comment suggests many trans people have no choice but to ‘come out’, even if they are not ready to do so.

Joe then went on to discuss that his school, at this stage, were aware of his identity as a trans boy. Despite this, he was made to use the female toilets:

They knew I identified as male and that was perfectly fine, it’s just the fact that obviously because of my birth gender, obviously where I’m not allowed to physically transition because actually the legal age is sixteen, I wasn’t allowed to use the male toilets ... They were very worried how other pupils were going to react if I used the other toilets that I preferred but I wasn’t allowed to and quite frankly I also wasn’t allowed to use the disabled toilets ... It was just for safety and everything like that. (Joe).

Ignoring trans students’ requests in the name of safety demonstrates the cisgenderist nature of the school system. Within existing school spaces, the needs of trans pupils cannot be accommodated and there is little evidence that the norms which create the unsafe spaces are challenged (Frohard-Dourlent 2018). Schools such as these may be considered ‘gender restrictive’, whereby gender norms are policed, and policies which restrict gender expression are evident (Luecke 2018); this may impact both binary trans pupils (such as Joe) and those who have ambiguous or fluid gender identities. According to Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic (2020), the school’s worry about others’ reactions highlights the visibility of trans pupils as ‘remarkable’, also demonstrating institutionalised cisnormativity in the school system.

Interestingly, Joe outlines that under his previous school's regulations, a physical transition was necessary to use the male toilets, something that is difficult to obtain in the UK prior to the age of 16 (NHS 2020). This expectation that bodily appearance should align with gender identity promotes essentialist understandings of sex and gender, disregarding a person's own understanding of their identity (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021). This also emphasises appearance expectations for trans people, despite most toilets having single cubicles whereby appearance of the body should not matter – or be obvious – to others. Thus, it is evident the school normalises rigid binary gender structures and the prioritisation of biological sex over gender identity, whereby pupils are limited in their gender expressions (Ingrey 2012). This may in turn serve to invalidate and erase trans pupils' identities in a cisgenderist culture (Davies, Vipond, and King 2019).

A variety of problems may be evident from restrictive policies reliant on dualistic, binary norms; in relation to school toilets, trans pupils may avoid these in the school day (Luecke 2018), and violence towards trans people may be evident when they do enter these spaces (Ingrey 2012). Instead of asking trans pupils to 'fit in' to a cisnormative culture, it has been argued that schools should empower students to engage in gender exploration and transform restrictive systems that children navigate. This may include critically analysing gender-based policies, including those related to binary spaces such as toilets (Luecke 2018).

Moving to his current school, Joe went on to explain how he had 'come out' in this environment, stating:

I was very worried, only because I found out I was the only transgender in the school, so I was very worried considering it was quite a small school, so it was going to go around very quickly. When someone found out because they knew me as a child, they kind of pointed me out in a way and unfortunately for me, because they told everyone, everyone found out (Joe).

Joe was therefore 'outed' by another pupil, and consequently unable to reveal his identity as trans in his own time and way. Being 'out' is a complex process, and can mean being open in some contexts, to some people, but not others (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2018). Trans people clearly have to negotiate the disclosure of their identities, but it is not always possible to regulate this, with evidence that pupils 'outed' by their peers may feel intimidated and scared (Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadvá 2021). The process of having to come out (or being 'outed' by others), the work associated with this, and the fact this is considered noteworthy by pupils also provides evidence of the discourses of cisnormativity (McBride and Neary 2021).

Alongside being 'outed', trans pupils may also be bullied in a variety of other ways:

I was always pushed into lockers. But it wasn't all that bad because I was expecting it, so I knew exactly what I was going to react on, and I knew how to solve it. I have had a few verbal things that have been strange, someone called me an alien at one point. Also, I remember there was a gay one, how the gay ones they are non-human and the trans ones they are just outrageous and out of this world. So, it wasn't directed at me. It was directed at all transgender pupils. (Joe)

This bullying behaviour may also be evident from teachers, including the purposeful use of wrong gender pronouns:

Sometimes I would get punished, so if I was talking too much or something my teachers would punish me by using my birth pronouns, which did annoy me but it was just to get my attention and be like "don't do it". (Joe)

Although concerning, purposeful misgendering of trans pupils is not new; there is growing evidence that some teachers may use a pupil's 'dead name' purposefully, either as a means to mock them, a refusal to accept their identity, or due to school policies (Allen et al. 2020; Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadvá 2021; Jones et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010; Stonewall 2017). In this example, Joe's trans identity has been erased, reflective of a cisgenderist culture where sex and gender are assigned onto others (Kennedy 2018). Thus, teachers and schools may hold views which invalidate gender diversity and promote binary, essentialist understandings of gender and sex, with a lack of acknowledgement that, as an example, a trans boy is a 'real' boy (Kennedy 2018).

Joe's identity as trans therefore challenges cisnormative gender roles and regimes, subsequently 'othering' him in the school. What is evident from these quotations is that this bullying, including verbal and physical abuse, is often accepted and downplayed by Joe. He outlines 'it wasn't all that bad', 'it wasn't directed at me' and 'it was just to get my attention', indicating he understands, accepts, and normalises behaviours contributing to cisnormativity in the school system. This has been apparent in previous studies, whereby the amount of harassment and how serious it is perceived to be has been downplayed by some trans youth (McGuire et al. 2010). Pupils are therefore likely to interpret their own experiences of harassment differently – i.e., consider them to be less important – than those of their peers, although the reasons for this are currently unclear.

'They always split the genders': Binary assumptions, cisgenderism and PE

Although binary assumptions may be embedded throughout the entire school culture (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile Paechter, et al., 2021), PE in particular is heavily gendered and cisnormative in nature, whereby male and female pupils may be offered different, segregated 'gender-appropriate' activities (Hills and Croston 2012; Velija and Kumar 2009; Wilkinson, Penney, and Allin 2016). This was discussed by Joe in relation to netball and basketball:

Because netballs obviously associated with girls and basketballs more associated with boys, I prefer basketball, basketball is my favourite sport. But then it's kind of one gendered and it's not fair considering they don't include both genders, which I am annoyed about ... We all did netball, but girls weren't allowed to do basketball, so it was unbalanced. (Joe)

This quote clearly highlights the different opportunities for males and females in PE within some schools, whereby a wider range of sports and activities may be offered to boys compared to girls, and where different activities are considered male (basketball) or female (netball) appropriate. This was explored by Treagus (2005), who analysed the history of netball as a 'suitable' sport for women which was codified to discourage roughness, over-competitiveness and 'too much' physical exertion, ensuring the game remained appropriately feminine. Therefore, sport has historically been a space grounded in dichotomous gender differences, with the socialisation of males and females into different sports still evident today, creating environments which are based upon stereotypical notions of gender (Phipps 2021).

The dominant gender binary was then elaborated on further in interviews, with ideas around safety particularly evident. Firstly, Joe reflected on his experiences in his previous school

They always spilt the genders which always annoyed me. The fact that they always gendered us, as in I wasn't allowed to join the boys because of my build. I don't take testosterone, so I don't have more of a male figure. Which kind of annoyed me even though I identified as male and even on the registers I was identified as male, but I wasn't allowed to join the boys because of safety hazards and them thinking I was a bit more fragile than the boys. (Joe)

Binary understandings of gender are mobilised in PE with the safety of girls often in mind, coinciding with previous literature highlighting unchallenged perceptions of inevitable male physical superiority (Velija and Kumar 2009). This showcases constructed ideas about gender and gender norms which circulate the broader context and influence trans pupils' everyday lived experiences. However, the rigid gender binary split was not as evident in Joe's current school, with Liam explaining 'we like to mix up the genders in our PE classes ... we try and mix them as much as possible'. Despite this, concerns around safety, particularly in relation to contact PE, were still commonplace, with Liam stating 'sometimes for example, like I said before in a rugby module, obviously the boys will have to be together and the girls have to be together for the contact reasons around that'.

The gender binary split in PE reflects deeply rooted ideas in wider sport spaces about 'natural' sex differences, whereby female athletes are often considered 'inferior and in need of protection' (Pieper 2016, 1139). This also reflects a paternalistic view, whereby particular characteristics are assigned to each sex (e.g., males are strong and females are weak), perpetuating gender stereotypes (Katz and Luckinbill 2017); in reality, there are a wide range of differences (for example height and strength) *within* same-sex groups. When asked how gender-split sessions might impact a trans pupil in PE, Liam explained:

We're happy to cater for them, we're happy to allow them to go in which ever group they feel possible. At the end of the day we're not going to force them ... we're quite an inclusive school so, maybe they say I'd like to play football with the boys and they've transitioned to a boy, we'll absolutely allow that but if they say actually I don't feel comfortable with the boys and want to go with the girls then that's absolutely fine. Yeah, I think it's important to put the ownership onto the pupils. (Liam)

Frohard-Dourlent (2018) refers to this as the 'student in charge' narrative, where trans pupils are central to decision-making processes. Although this narrative may aid in disrupting cisnormativity by challenging assumptions that all pupils are cisgender, it fails in making systemic changes which dismantle the cisgenderist functioning of schools (Frohard-Dourlent 2018). The ad-hoc and individualised nature of this approach thus fails to disrupt structural inequalities which contribute to the erasure of trans identities in the first instance. Discourses of individualisation result in inclusive practices being applied only in response to trans pupils being visible, i.e., being 'out' and comfortable declaring their gender identity to others. This is problematic, as schools arguably need to be set up with trans pupils in mind, with inclusive practices already embedded in the system (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). In relation to PE, an individualised strategy does not encourage teachers to consider pedagogical practices which avoid gender segregation and dismantle the binary system (Omercajic and Martino 2020); thus, the established norms and practices around PE remain unchallenged, with trans pupils asked to 'fit' into the current structure of segregated male and female activities, as is suggested above.

Despite these ideas, when pushed further about the ownership trans pupils have, it was made clear that choice may not be available for trans girls to participate in girls' contact PE:

We haven't encountered it yet but I believe that could be a bit problematic, for example if a male is transitioning to or identifying as a female and a girl's group are on a rugby module and they're doing contact I think that'll be some tough ground to consider because obviously boys and girls shouldn't do contact PE together. (Liam)

Thus, the ability to self-identify and 'go in which ever group they feel possible' may only be available for some trans pupils, namely those who are transitioning to or who identify as boys. This also

reflects concerns in the wider sport field, where stricter trans inclusion policies are often evident for trans women as opposed to trans men due to perceived physical advantages, safety, and ideas men may pretend to be women under the presumption they would have more chance of success (Carroll 2014). However, these arguments have been extensively critiqued (Sykes and Smith 2016).

In relation to PE, binary segregation of pupils was also evident in changing rooms; due to this, the teacher alluded to the use of an 'alternative changing provision' for trans pupils:

Obviously if they are identifying as male or female then we've had to make an alternative changing provision which is just a different changing facility that's not in the boys or girls changing rooms just to cater for them. I think this is mainly to make it not uncomfortable for the other students. They're not allowed to mix into different changing rooms. (Liam)

The request for an alternative space might assist schools in reimagining the environment in the future, in which educators may question the need for binary spaces, in turn undermining cisnormativity. However, the use of a 'third option' toilet or changing room still raises concerns around trans pupils being catered for on an individualised and reactive basis (McBride and Neary 2021), with pupils responsible for requesting this provision by revealing their gender identity. This approach gives trans pupils 'permission to exist within a cisnormative system', with no requirement for the systems to change (Omercajic and Martino 2020, 8).

Furthermore, the idea that an alternative changing provision may be in place for the comfort and safety of other pupils is highly problematic, revealing the school's reasoning for this space is little to do with accommodating trans pupils' identities; instead, this reflects trans pupils supposed 'intrusion' into cisnormative spaces (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021). Although labelled as the 'alternative changing provision' by the teacher, the pupil stated, 'I actually go to the disabled'. When Joe was asked how he felt about this, he outlined 'with a lot of students, they have been teasing me ... they've been teasing me about not being able to get changed in the normal changing rooms and they would think I'm a bit weird or strange for that'. Discourses of cisgenderism are therefore evident through gender surveillance towards those who resist the binary, with pupils who use alternative spaces marked as different, reflecting their outsider status (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021).

It is evident that common gendered practices (such as getting changed in the 'appropriate' place) are policed in spaces associated with PE. McBride and Neary (2021) have previously found attempts to disrupt cisnormative educational spaces – including the provision of alternative, all-gender toilets and changing rooms – may be met with cisnormative violence such as homophobic and transphobic name-calling towards those using these spaces. This was further highlighted by Liam, who stated 'a male student was transitioning to be female and they were at the time getting changed in the boys changing rooms and some of the other boys were quite uncomfortable with it and they were making comments'. Trans pupils may therefore be subjected to cisnormative bullying regardless of the space they use to get changed for PE.

'It's very generic': Action plans and policies which fail to dismantle cultural cisgenderism

Policies are useful to analyse; according to Omercajic and Martino (2020), they are discourses whereby what is included, what is deliberately excluded, and what policymakers fail to consider reveal particular ideologies and assumptions about what is (and is not) considered important. Of course, policies on their own are not sufficient in achieving equity for all pupils, and school staff need to critique their own biases and ideas within a cisgenderist culture (Omercajic and Martino 2020). However, strong policies which result in adaptations to practice may aid in restructuring the systems which uphold cultural cisgenderism. Despite this, other policies may be

reactive, ambiguous, may lack specificity in actions required and resources needed, and may fail to support educators in making the essential adaptations (Omercajic and Martino 2020).

As previously stated in the methodology section, the school's equality and diversity policy was analysed as part of the study, but to ensure the school's anonymity, it will not be provided verbatim here. However, the policy is eight pages long and references the Equality Act (created in the UK in 2010) including protected characteristics such as gender reassignment. Bullying is also noted, and bullying behaviours are recorded and monitored based on several categories including transphobia. The duties of different members of the school's community are also listed, with the responsibilities of teaching staff including challenging the use of negative language, promoting inclusivity, and dealing with prejudice.

It is important to consider how documents such as equality and diversity policies are used and incorporated into the day-to-day practice of an institution, to understand their purpose and how they influence action and change (Ahmed 2007). Past research indicates some policies may aid a tokenistic, 'tick box' approach which often fails to create reform (Shaw 2007). In relation to this study, a tokenistic policy would do little to address cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity. However, effective policies may advantage pupils by exposing and interrogating the systems upholding cisgender privilege, in turn minimising the pressures of conforming to gender norms for all (Omercajic and Martino 2020). Analysis of the school's policy revealed it to be a reactive policy, which aims to police behaviours and challenge discriminatory practices (including transphobic language) *after* these occur, without considering resources, education and time that may be needed to dismantle the systems in place.

These types of policies have been extensively critiqued by scholars such as Short (2013), who have argued that the cultural values, norms and ideologies that give rise to bullying behaviours remain – such as cisnormativity, trans erasure, and the naturalisation of gender binaries and norms. This focus on anti-bullying in the policy also fails to challenge power dynamics and disregards discourses which underpin normative gender constructions and cisnormative power (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021). An alternative approach is to challenge systemic problems and take trans-affirmative action through curriculum and educational changes; changing the culture of an institution means long-term, transformative action is required, which also needs to be reinforced outside of the education system (Short 2013). When Liam was asked about the policy, he also had some criticisms, stating:

I am aware there is a note of transphobia in the equality and diversity policy, which falls under behaviour, discipline and exclusions ... yeah, it's very generic, it doesn't actually say a lot ... it just kind of mentions transphobia and doesn't expand on it. (Liam)

As Liam notes, the section of the equality and diversity policy covering transphobia is brief, around 200 words long, and only mentions transphobia alongside other discriminatory behaviours such as sexism and racism. Thus, a policy such as this has little influence on the culture and values of an institution, working as a reactive rather than a proactive policy, 'treating the problem too close towards the end of the spectrum' (Short 2013, 151). However, even as a reactive policy, no specific examples or behaviours to be aware of are noted for school-based staff, and no clear and specific consequences for breaching the policy are listed. This is particularly problematic, as past research suggests some educators may not be familiar with gender identity issues (Stonewall 2017), likely resulting in a lack of knowledge on how to identify and challenge bullying or discrimination towards trans pupils. This was also noted by Joe, who had criticised the lack of consequences for transphobic behaviours he had experienced:

They are kind of just telling them off, just getting a slap on the wrist and then leaving it. I sometimes do wish certain incidents with myself, and some others I've seen in my previous school, I wish they had a higher punishment. (Joe)

Past research suggests teacher intervention is vital to tackle bullying towards trans pupils (McGuire et al. 2010). However, studies have noted that educators may take a reactive approach to addressing discriminatory behaviours, in which they are only dealt with if a trans pupil is present (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile Paechter, et al., 2021). In addition, bullying may be considered by teachers as an individual, interpersonal conflict between the perpetrator and victim, failing to acknowledge cisnormativity which permeates school environments and may impact who is the target of bullying in the first instance (Ferfolja and Ullman 2021). When Liam was asked how the policy could be improved, he explained:

I think perhaps having a specific transphobia policy would help staff understand it and deal with it more and be more aware of it ... I think it (*having additional information*) would definitely help me, any additional information that a PE department can get would be fantastic, just to help increase our subject knowledge, broaden our horizons, especially if you're not used to dealing with things like that. (Liam)

As trans pupils advocate for their rights, this may become the incentive for teachers to educate themselves on gender diversity through their professional learning and development, which coincides with past arguments (see Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). However, as previously noted, tackling transphobia is not enough to dismantle cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity – ideologies which move beyond individual, prejudicial attitudes and behaviours. This highlights the extra guidance and education schools may need to transform cisnormative expectations; integrate gender diversity and fluidity into school systems; make gender diversity visible; and proactively support trans pupils. Through effective policies, established practices and the multiple ways gender is enacted can begin to be destabilised.

Conclusion

To summarise, the study aimed to provide a case-study of one Hampshire-based secondary school in the UK, considering the extent to which cultural cisgenderism was embedded into the culture, how this was reflected in PE, and the extent to which policies recognised and dismantled these ideologies and systems. Although the findings of this research cannot be generalised to wider trans pupils' experiences and other school policies, the data provides an in-depth insight into practices which *may* be evident elsewhere. The trans pupil in this study may have partially disrupted cisnormativity in his school through being 'out' about his gender identity, helping to dismantle cisnormative erasure. However, to challenge the ideology of cultural cisgenderism, the wider school community needs to engage in affirmative action, avoiding reactive and tokenistic strategies which may only have impact on an individual level.

As Omercajic and Martino (2020) have previously noted, providing trans students with individual agency, although thoughtful, does little to restructure the cisgenderist system which enforces cisgender privilege. For those pupils who are questioning their gender identity, or who do not want to deal with the emotional burden and gender policing associated with 'coming out', individual accommodations are rendered useless (Omercajic and Martino 2020). Thus, based on the findings of this research, a number of recommendations are provided as a starting point to recognise and resist cultural cisgenderism and cisnormativity, and to begin to adapt the school culture through proactive – rather than reactive – work.

Firstly, as other research has suggested (see Luecke 2018; McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2018), schools should aim to entrench gender knowledge into the school curriculum, making gender diversity visible and positive. As bullying and harassment are common in school environments, educating others on gender expansiveness may be considered an effective challenge towards cultural cisgenderism, normalising gender diversity, and setting a foundation for schools to support other equality and diversity work (Luecke 2018; McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2018). This may reduce the need for anti-bullying policies and agendas, which are often reactive and focus on bullying as an individual issue. Education for school-based staff may also be required, to understand the necessity of rejecting essentialist understandings of sex/gender and integrating gender expansiveness into school systems.

As PE is a heavily gendered space with imposed gender roles and a focus on the body, teachers may need further support to develop an inclusive curriculum. Based on this study's findings, some trans pupils may have autonomy regarding how they participate in PE; however, this may not be the case for all, and an ad-hoc, individualised approach fails to disrupt wider practices and taken-for-granted norms about gender in PE. The findings also suggest that simply providing access to an alternative changing provision as a reactive measure for trans pupils does not prevent cisnormative bullying and does not necessarily make trans pupils feel more comfortable. Therefore, where possible, access to gender neutral spaces for the wider school population may be beneficial, such as single-cubicle, all-gender toilets and changing rooms. It is hoped the findings generated here may be useful for educators to reflect on and/or critique their own school policies and practices, and to begin to interrogate cultural cisgenderism within schools, which at present serves to marginalise and erase gender diversity and expansiveness.

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Notes

1. Although non-binary identities are often included in the trans umbrella term, it is important to note that some non-binary people may reject the term trans (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile Paechter, et al., 2021).

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