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Non-binary young people and schools: pedagogical insights from a small-scale interview study

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ABSTRACT

While research is increasing into binary trans identities in educational settings, young people identifying as non-binary have been little studied. We explore the school experiences of eight non-binary teenagers aged 13–18. Our findings suggest that both the implicit and explicit curriculum are strongly binary, making it hard for non-binary young people to come out at school. Respondents had needed to educate themselves about gender identity and specifically about the possibility of non-binary identities, with little, if any, support from their schools. As non-binary identities were invisible at school, some did not feel safe there, and they came under pressure from both transphobic bullying and binary expectations of behaviour and self-presentation. Consequently, some respondents feared accessing any available provision for non-binary people, in case it outed them. Institutions should work harder to educate staff about non-binary identities, and non-binary young people should be involved in designing inclusive initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Gender; non-binary; trans; schools; colleges; LGBTQI+

Introduction

Increasing numbers of young people in schools in the Global North are identifying within the overall trans umbrella. More children and young people are coming out and/or being diagnosed as transgender (De Vries and Cohen-Kettenis 2012; Edwards-Leeper, Liebowitz, and Sangganjanavanich 2016; Giovanardi et al. 2019). However, while there is considerable research on those trans young people identifying across a gender binary, i.e. as male or female (Paechter 2020; Carlile 2020; Edwards-Leeper, Liebowitz, and Sangganjanavanich 2016; Ehrensaft 2012; Ehrensaft et al. 2018; Manning et al. 2015; Marguerite 2018; Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020; McCann et al. 2019; Meyer and Leonardi 2018; Neary 2018; Pleak 2009; Price Minter 2012; Pyne 2014; Zucker 2019), comparatively little is known about those children and young people who identify outside of this, as non-binary, agender, genderqueer or using other related terms¹ (Jones et al. 2020), and even research reports that use such terms as 'gender creative' in their titles frequently focus only on young people identifying across a binary gender divide. Furthermore, we have found virtually no research about non-binary young people's experiences of schooling, though they are occasionally

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mentioned in publications about what happens to binary trans people in educational settings (Bradlow et al. 2017; Evans and Rawlings 2019; Jones et al. 2016; Rankin and Beemyn 2012). As a first step towards rectifying this deficiency, we focus in this paper specifically on the experiences of a group of non-binary teenagers in relation to schools and schooling.

Schools are strongly binary institutions (Bragg et al. 2018), even within a generally binary social world (Jones et al. 2020). For example, most have gender classifications on official documents, gendered dress codes, and gender segregated facilities (Davies, Vipond, and King 2019). Primary aged children are still sometimes asked (by staff or peers) to line up in single-gender lines or engage in class debates or contests that pit boys against girls (Paechter 2007). School spaces and both explicit and implicit regulation of who can use them further institutionalise this heteronormative binary (Kjaran 2019) and produce as Other those people who do not fit this model. We can see this as schools providing a strong implicit curriculum of gender binariness that underpins pedagogic practices throughout the education system. These institutional binaries make non-binary young people simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in schools (Shuster and Lamont 2020): they are invisible because they are erased by the binary system and its assumptions, while being hypervisible due to their uncategorisability within a binary system. This is even the case when trans identities are recognised in schools. While many teachers are able to understand and respond to a traditional trans narrative of being born in the wrong body (Mason-Schrock 1996; Paechter and Marguerite 2020; Prosser 1998; Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020), non-binary identities, particularly if they feature fluidity in identity and/or presentation, may be less readable to adults in school. For example, Neary (2018) reports that pre-service teachers who were shown a video about non-binary gender

had predominantly negative reactions to this video clip, with several suggesting that the blurring of the male/female, man/woman binary 'went too far' (443)

Furthermore, while it may be relatively straightforward for a school to recognise the experienced gender of a binary trans student, fully accommodating a non-binary young person necessitates putting in place gender-neutral provision of such things as toilets and changing facilities, as well as altering binary categories in record systems (Kjaran 2019): this will be easier to do in some spaces than others. These challenges, reinforced by a strongly binary schooling system, mean that non-binary young people can feel especially misunderstood and out of place in schools (Travers et al. 2020).

In this paper we aim to illuminate the experiences of non-binary young people in schools, by reporting on the data from a pilot study of seven non-binary young people aged 13–18, plus one 16 year old from a separate study, all living in the UK. While our respondent group is small, our findings are important in the context of a dearth of research on non-binary young people's school experiences. The study is also unusual in that most of the interviews were carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown, so, while all but one (who was now home educated) were still officially at school or college, some of the respondents had not actually attended in person for some time, and one had started to identify as non-binary during the lockdown period. While losing the immediacy of interviewing someone who might have been at school only that day, for these respondents it did allow some degree of reflective distance.

We have explicitly chosen to write a data-driven paper in order to start to address the relative invisibility of young people who explicitly identify as non-binary within the wider literature on trans young identities and schools. There is a marked tendency in the academic literature (and also in public discourse) both to subsume non-binary identities within the wider trans umbrella, and to assume an association between androgynous self-presentation and non-binariness. The young people we interviewed challenged both these assumptions: most did not identify as trans, seeing this as something rather different, and they were also vociferous in their feelings about assumptions about how non-binary young people should present themselves. We therefore felt that it was important to focus on the voices and opinions of these young people, and the emphasis of this paper reflects that.

Of course, non-binary identities are not the only identities held by the young people we interviewed. In order to take an intersectional approach to our respondents, we asked them about their other identities. We see this as a way for them to indicate to us which identities are important to them: this means, for example, that although more than one had a disability, only one is recorded as identifying as disabled.² Because all but two interviews were text-based (as requested by the respondents), our knowledge of their other identifications is entirely based on what they said about themselves. We did not ask them about any specific identity apart from in relation to gender, but we did ask about other identities generally, gaining a variety of responses (see Table 1). As only one mentioned ethnicity (as white), we assume, given that most interviews took place during the Black Lives Matter protests, that all our respondents considered themselves to be white, and that the fact that it was not mentioned is reflective of the invisibility of whiteness in much of contemporary society. Seven also spoke about sexual identities. It is important to be aware that our respondents' non-binariness does not stand separately from other ways in which they identify and are categorised by others. For example, one respondent told us that others used their autistic status to dismiss their non-binary identity (Toft, Franklin, and Langley 2020).

In the rest of this paper we will focus on some of the themes that arose from the interviews with these young people, and on the pedagogic implications of our findings.

Table 1. Respondents' ages, locations, school settings, and identities.

Name	Age	Non-binary identity	Other identities	School setting ⁶	Location in UK
Ash ⁷	16	Non-binary, sometimes queer	Sometimes pansexual	Sixth form college	West Midlands
Fin	16	Transgender non-binary	Judaism	Secondary school	Southern England
Jude	13	Non-binary /genderqueer	pansexual	Secondary School	West Midlands
Lee	16	Non-binary/non-existent	ace-pan-grey-romantic; Autistic; disabled; Christian; white	Secondary school	Southern England
Mel	17	Non-binary		Sixth form college	West Midlands
Nic	13	Don't feel male or female/nonbinary	pansexual	Secondary school	Scotland
Rowan	16	Non-binary	Pansexual/spicy bi	Secondary school/ home educated	West Midlands
7Sam	18	Non-binary	Trans; bi	School sixth form	North-west England

After briefly outlining our methods, we will focus on five key areas: identities; being out at school and home; bullying and feeling unsafe; school policies and practices; education about non-binary identities. We argue that the implicit curriculum is as important as the explicit for supporting, or undermining, non-binary young people in educational contexts.

Methods

Alex conducted interviews with all seven respondents in the pilot study, with approval from the Nottingham Trent University College of Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from respondents orally and in writing before interviews took place, and, in the case of those aged under 16, from their parents. Particularly in view of the lockdown context, care was taken in approaching the interviews to minimise the potential for interviews to be upsetting for respondents, and to ensure that they had access to support if needed. Six interviews utilised online instant messaging, and one interview took place via Skype voice call. Two respondents came from the Young Disabled LGBT+ Researchers Group, a multi-ethnic group with whom Alex works on a regular basis. The others were recruited via advertisement on the forum of a trans youth charity, with the only qualifiers for participation being self-identification as non-binary and being either still at school, or having recently left. This group included a physically disabled respondent; trans and non-binary people with disabilities other than autism seem generally to be absent from the literature.

Although it was originally envisioned that interviews would mainly take place over the telephone or face to face, ethical approval was gained for online interviews, and all but one respondent requested an interview via instant messaging, pointing out that this was less anxiety-inducing than phone or video calls. Furthermore, instant messaging was seen as more private, as most of the interviews took place during the early part of the lockdown period between March and April 2020. For the young people it was easier to talk via text input whilst their homes were occupied by family, due to the potentially sensitive nature of the interview. Interviews that took place using instant messaging lasted around 90 minutes (ranging from 60 to 120 minutes) suggesting a greater time commitment for the respondents, compared to the 60-minute-long Skype voice call. However, this was counterbalanced by the less intrusive nature of instant messaging and the opportunity to consider answers more fully before responding. Previous research has also noted the potential benefits of instant messaging, particularly with regard to accessibility and reducing barriers to participation (Harris and Roberts 2003). Importantly, some research suggests that although instant messaging interviews take longer and involve an extended period of rapport-building, the quality of data produced is similar to face-to-face interviews (Shapka et al. 2016). It is also the case that communities for non-binary young people are largely based online, so conducting online instant messaging interviews seems entirely appropriate.

All seven interviews followed the same semi-structured schedule for consistency. The schedule was devised in collaboration with the Young Disabled LGBT+ Researchers Group, in order to best reflect the foci and concerns of non-binary young people. As the research was conceived as exploratory in nature, the schedule was broad, focussing upon everyday school experiences in relation to being non-binary. Respondents were given space to explore their experiences whilst questions

guided the interview towards particular areas of interest identified via the literature, previous research and our reference group of young people. Interviews aimed to discover participants' experiences and thoughts about definitions, coming out, perceptions, pronouns, online life, changing rooms/toilets, teachers, physical appearance, school support and how to improve school life for themselves and other non-binary young people.

These data were supplemented by an interview with one respondent conducted by Anna as part of a wider international study, with approval from the Goldsmiths, University of London Ethics Committee (Carlile, Butteriss, and Pullen Sansfaçon 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon et al. 2019). This was conducted over Zoom, with the young person's parent in the room. While obviously the presence of a parent can affect the data, this allowed this young person to feel more comfortable, as is reflected in what appears to be a frank interview. They were recruited via the snowball method as part of a cohort of transgender and non-binary children and young people aged five to 23 who were referred to in treatment with, or had experience of children's mental health services in relation to their gender, and permission was granted for data to be used in other studies. The interview schedule was in line with that of the wider study, with some changes made for local context. The questions asked about family, hobbies, neighbourhood, schools, feelings about their bodies, and experiences with clinics.

We analysed all the data thematically, using NVivo to record and refine categories in the data. Analysis was led by the first author, and NVivo categories were shared and confirmed with the wider team. Due to the relative lack of previous research in this area we were particularly mindful to focus on the data rather than on previous research categories, and to let our respondents' voices come through in our analysis.

Identity

All of our respondents identified as non-binary in some way, though this might mean different things to different people. For some it denoted a definite move beyond the binary to something specifically different, while for others it simply reflected a feeling of not being either male or female. The term 'non-binary' could also just be a convenient and relatively easily recognised label for a more complex identity (Vijlbrief, Saharso, and Ghorashi 2020), or an unwillingness to accept gender at all:

Non binary or non existent really. I just use non binary because it's easier and kinda an umbrella term. (Lee)

Similarly, one respondent identified as trans and one said that they 'use that as an umbrella term sometimes', but some were explicit that they did not. This distinction is important because of the tendency for non-binary identities to be subsumed under trans: even the person who did identify as trans saw it as a distinct identity. Being trans was seen as something at least partly independent of being non-binary, and for some was related to dysphoria:

I also identify as trans, as I plan to medically transition (Sam)

This distinction was particularly clear in relation to non-binary toilet and changing room provision, which we discuss later, with two respondents telling us that this was less of a problem for them because they were not trans:

Alex: Would it be better to have non-gender specific toilets?

Mel: I guess so, but I don't really mind, I just use the toilets. I'm not trans either. I think that would be harder for people. Some people at college who were trans wouldn't like that I don't think.

Language and its acquisition was seen a key to the use of identity labels (Losty and O'Connor 2018); respondents described discovering the language for their feelings or identity, suggesting that discovering the language to describe their identities was an important turning point for them (Rankin and Beemyn 2012). Once they had gained this language they might then take up the label quite rapidly and easily:

I looked into labels and was like that sounds about right. I'll stick with that one (Fin)

The lack of this language within their schools, however, made it concomitantly difficult for young people to have daily access to it as something that is known and taken for granted. It became specialist knowledge that they had to both find for themselves and teach to others, including teachers and parents.

Vijlbrief, Saharso, and Ghorashi (2020) argue that online spaces are an important site for people to explore gender identity and find something that fits their feelings, and this is reflected in our findings. Our respondents described searching the internet for appropriate ways to describe themselves, and having a feeling of recognition when they found them (Marguerite 2018). Identity terms might also be provided by supportive friends as part of a dual coming-out process of telling people that they did not feel comfortable in a binary gender and giving their feelings a name. These processes were often accompanied by considerable self-reflection and self-education through online exploration (Bragg et al. 2018). No-one told us that they acquired any of the language they used to describe their identities through either the formal curriculum or from school support staff. This reflects Carrie and Anna's previous findings that children and young people of all genders are active in online self-education about gender identities, sometimes to the extent that they are better informed than their teachers (Carlile and Paechter 2018).

Being out at home and at school

Without an appropriate gender label it is hard to come out to others; however, most of our respondents did try to come out to some people once they had acquired one:

Alex: And when did friends start to understand?

Sam: Not long after I found the language to talk about it when I was 14, though I did have one or two friends who didn't quite get it and so ignored it. But for the most part they understood and were supportive.

Coming out as non-binary was, however, described as particularly difficult because the identity is still relatively unusual – as Mel put it, 'it's not a common thing'. This meant that

the term often had to be explained as part of the coming-out process, which could make it harder for people or even lead to a failure to come out as intended:

Up until I was 16 my mum still didn't get it, but when I was 16 I managed to explain it all to her in a way that made sense, and over time she's gotten a lot more supportive. (Sam)

Sam had also tried to come out to a teacher aged 16, but was unable to communicate successfully due to the teacher's ignorance, with longer term effects:

She just couldn't wrap her head around it, and it put me off telling them for a while (Sam)

Coming out as non-binary was therefore potentially fraught with difficulty, with most people finding it easier to come out to friends than to either family or to the wider school community. However, all but one respondent was out to at least some family members, receiving varying amounts of acceptance and support. Some were then helped by their families to come out to their schools or colleges.

Most of our respondents were out to at least one person at school or college, though for one coming out at school had been delayed by the Covid-19 lockdown. Those who had moved from mainstream schooling into sixth form colleges for the last two years of their education made a clear distinction between the two, including explicitly delaying coming out until they had reached this later stage. Reasons they gave for this were focused around what they saw as the greater maturity of college students, and the concomitant lower risk of being bullied:

everyone was more mature, and it was a more relaxed environment than school, where there is more pressure to conform (Sam)

Ash mentioned that having an LGBT group at college was a help. For them, coming out at college made their non-binary identity less of a daily issue they had to deal with because news of it spread rapidly:

Alex: So you told your friends first?

Ash: Yes, then they told other people and that's what happens in college!

In some cases, school or college staff were very supportive, including helping people to come out to their parents, or, with consent, informing other teachers or classmates so that the individual did not have to do that themselves. Others, however, were much less helpful. Nic, at 13 one of our youngest two respondents, was out to a few people at school, including a guidance teacher, but was reluctant to take this further as they had witnessed a discussion in a science class in which students had argued that there were only two genders and the teacher had failed to intervene. In a situation like this, what is *not* done pedagogically becomes more salient than what is; that such a discussion was allowed to take place unchallenged reinforces binary assumptions inherent in the formal school curriculum (Carlile and Paechter 2018). Similar assumptions are also reflected in the informal curriculum which governs what is and is not visible on school noticeboards. Rowan told us that all that was signposted in their school came from posters about a non-school-based support group meeting in the local area. Even schools that were helpful in some ways might cause difficulties in others. Sam, who described their college as 'actually

'fairly supportive' found that the lack of an actual policy on supporting non-binary students meant that

they were a bit all over the place, for example, when I was changing my name, I was initially told I could get it changed no problem, and then when I went to change it I was told I needed a deed poll.³

We will discuss further below the problems that arise from a lack of school policies about trans and non-binary students.

Fin, who had only started to identify as non-binary during the Covid-19 lockdown, viewed coming out at school with trepidation, partly because the school had had its Stonewall certification⁴ removed. They had also had a less than satisfactory experience reporting what they considered to be transphobic language about another student, which led them to believe that the school would not support them in the event of bullying:

I overheard some students in my year group, actually in my form, talking trash about nonbinary people and talking trash about the only openly trans person in our school. They were being really horrible about L, saying all these nasty things that made me cry. I was in Pastoral and made a statement about it. And I never heard what they did. I made that statement 10 days before getting pulled out of school [due to Covid-19], and they never got back to me about the action for those people saying those things.

Fin's planned strategy to deal with potential intransigence from their school was to arm themselves with documentation, such as the Equality Act,⁵ in order to educate their school about the requirement for their gender to be respected and any necessary adjustments made.

The one person, Lee, who was out to neither their family nor anyone at school, was a particularly clear example of how lack of support in one arena could exacerbate lack of support in the other (Evans and Rawlings 2019). Lee was a 16 year old who, due to their disability, was significantly reliant on their parents for support and transport. This also meant that they were unable to attend face to face support groups. Lee was out to two friends and two unspecified professionals, but had made a conscious choice not to come out to anyone at their school (which they had only been attending for an hour a week) in case this resulted in them being inadvertently outed to their parents. Coming from a Christian family who 'have preconceived ideas', Lee had already experienced a lack of understanding from their parents when they had tried to come out as asexual, so did not anticipate that saying they were non-binary would be easy:

Also my parents told me I would grow out of it when I told them I was ace so that makes me more worried ... [...] ... they said about being asexual, that don't worry you will just grow out of it.

That was 3 years ago and I had known for a year before that point

Lee was aware that their case was particularly problematic not just because their impairments made them more dependent on their parents than most 16 year olds but because their problems with schooling meant that there was an unusual amount of contact between home and school. They had also previously almost been outed to their parents when they were still questioning their gender, which made them additionally nervous:

Alex: Ok. So the reason you don't tell people at school is to stop it coming back to your parents?

Lee: Yep. Because I have meetings every few months so it's high risk. And the number of people it could go to and then them not tell my parents like what happened before when I was just questioning.

If I was a typical student I probably would.

This left Lee particularly isolated, relying almost entirely on online groups and friendships for support.

Friendships, whether online or in person, were extremely important to our respondents. Each of them was out to at least one friend, and friends were generally experienced as immediately accepting—where they were not the relationship was gradually dropped. This reflects the finding of Bragg et al. (2018) that peer relationships are important for accepting and sustaining gender identity. Friends supported our respondents in numerous ways. Some had helped with the coming out process, including coming out to oneself, by providing appropriate language to describe how they felt, helping someone choose a new name, or supporting them in telling a teacher or parent that they were non-binary. At school, friends were particularly important in challenging misgendering or standing up to transphobic bullying. Fin, for example, thought that their two closest friends 'would definitely challenge the person who is doing the mis-gendering', and Rowan reported that, after their English teacher had explained about their non-binary identity to the class, 'sort of my friends said they had a chat with a few of the kids that weren't so good about it'. Friends were also valued for respecting and trying to use people's correct pronouns, or, if they found that hard, using their name to avoid misgendering. If a friendship was already sufficiently close, however, respondents might be relatively tolerant of misgendering or using a 'deadname', if the friend was considered to be making an effort:

One of my close friends took a while not to call me a girl but that is just because they are not used to nonbinary genders (Jude)

Generally, it appeared that good friends, at least, accepted our respondents' non-binary identities and continued to treat them as they always had. This continuity was particularly important to some people, who had feared that their friendship group would behave differently if they knew their non-binary status.

Bullying and feeling unsafe at school

All our respondents had either been bullied or feared that they would be if they were (more) out at school. They reported both seeing general transphobia aimed at binary trans young people and experiencing a more specific lack of understanding and targeting of those who were non-binary. As is good practice when dealing with hate speech and actions, anything that our respondents, as potential victims, considered to be transphobic, we labelled the same way. For those who were not widely out at school, witnessing transphobic abuse aimed at others acted as a disincentive to coming out further:

For instance, the only out trans student, L, who I mentioned earlier. She is constantly bullied and harassed by anyone and everyone who feels like they want to have a go. She has been called every nasty thing under the sun ... my heart really goes out to her because it is not nice to just have to deal with being called a tranny 20 times a day by different people. (Fin)

Our respondents' schools seemed to have a very patchy response to transphobic bullying, with the chances of intervention depending on individual staff. Teachers were reported as addressing bullying if they knew that it was happening. However, because most of our respondents were not fully out in school, transphobic comments could be ignored by staff who were unaware that they had a bad effect on someone present. This reflects the invisibility of trans and non-binary identities in most schools (Carlile and Paechter 2018). Because schools and colleges only appeared to develop strong policies and practices if they knew they had a trans or non-binary student (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020), a vicious circle developed that actively prevented young non-binary people from coming out. The lack of anticipatory action from schools and colleges meant that the underlying ethos of a school community might include tolerance of transphobia, with the result that young people were afraid to come out as non-binary, so were invisible to the institution. Furthermore, only putting provision in place once someone is out puts additional pressure on that person. Neary (2018) argues that, while the presence of a trans child or young person in an institution or community can open up discussion of gender variance and recognition of problematic practices, this tends to rely on the labour of the trans person and can result in the individuation of inclusion.

For our respondents, transphobic bullying mainly took the form of critical comments about their non-binary status, insistence that gender is binary, and the unwelcome use of 'it' as a pronoun (all of our respondents used they/them). Fin pointed to a lack of understanding among cis people of how hurtful misgendering and deadnaming could be to those who are trans or non-binary:

Because the fact is that straight cis people rarely realise just how much it hurts to be called she if that is not your pronoun. Or to be deadnamed. Or to be called a faggot or be called dyke, or to be called a tranny. When you reclaim slurs and then you get called them it is not nice.

Being misgendered and deadnamed was a particular problem for some of our respondents, who felt that it was important that schools should educate their peers about the distress it caused. Nevertheless, their response when this happened was very much dependent on context. Specifically, they appreciated that their parents, teachers and friends might take some time to adapt and remember to use correct pronouns; when someone accidentally got it wrong they might correct them but were generally not offended:

With students if they were doing it by accident I would probably try and correct them but if they did it knowingly I would try and just ignore it (Jude)

As Jude implies, correction is only safe when people are slipping up: when misgendering is a form of bullying it may be better to ignore it and hope that a friend or a teacher intervenes. When this did not happen, it could be very distressing, and left our respondents never quite sure whether or not the school environment was a safe one:

There are some times when I feel fine and safe and others when I don't, just because there is more chance that someone won't be nice about it and say something. (Ash)

One aspect of transphobic bullying that was particularly problematic for our non-binary respondents involved other people's stereotypical views of how a non-binary person should look or behave. All of our respondents reported some pressure to conform to often quite specific expectations, some of which related to the gender they were assigned at birth. Lee argued that expectations were inversely related to birth gender assignment:

Yeah, like the stereotypical androgynous or to wear what their assigned gender is to make others feel more comfortable. Also if you were assigned male then you're expected to be feminine and if you were assigned female you're expected to be masculine which is stupid.

It's also like people expect you to be almost binary in the opposite direction

Sam had actually asked people directly about this:

Yeah, definitely - I think they expect them to look like young girls/women with short, dyed hair, sometimes wearing a band t-shirt and with a nose piercing (very specific, but I had this conversation with my friends and family and that's a summary of what people tend to think)

I definitely feel pressure to look like that

For some people these expectations led to dysphoria as they found it difficult to meet them while still wearing clothes they felt comfortable in. Others were able to avoid this pressure due to their fortunate preference for the androgynous combination of T-shirt and jeans. However, even these participants were aware of an expectation that they should dress in a particular way, and were relieved that it was not such an issue for them. These assumptions nevertheless stifled creativity and self-expression in clothing for all the young people. It was also pointed out to us that these issues were easier to deal with at college, where there was less likely to be a uniform. Even for some older students, however, the binary nature of school dress codes was a significant problem for those who were subjected to them. Fin, who had very specific views about how they wanted to dress, was most vociferous about this:

I have always observed the 6th formers, and the 6th form is very binary. With girls, all of them would wear really tight trousers, a mini-skirt with loafers and tights and see-through blouses and blazers. All the boys wear suits. To me, I know what I want to wear. I want to wear a suit every day and keep my hair short ... [...] ... There is definitely a stereotype or being androgynous. I was worried that I would be considered as not trans enough in that way ... [...] ... To me, being non-binary means I have the freedom without that expectational pressure, to be myself. Although there is an exception from very ignorant people that I should be androgynous, wear t-shirts, baggy jumpers, jeans and boots. I am just like no. I am going to wear what I want to wear. And if that is something more formal or something more eccentric, like a camp gay man, I don't care.

It is interesting that this example relates to a situation in which there is not a full uniform, just a dress code, which is interpreted in a very binary way by other students. While binary school uniforms can clearly be a problem, in many ways this is easier to address by making all items of uniform available to all students and allowing all combinations. Where those young people who want to be creative in their dress come up against strongly binary peer or school expectations, which, as Kroeger and Regula (2017) point out, tend to emphasise

conformity, this can be much harder for non-binary young people to resist or to feel comfortable with.

School policies and practices

As far as our respondents were aware, none of their schools or colleges had any policies that referred specifically to non-binary people, though three did mention a trans policy. While this is better than no policy at all, treating non-binary people as if they come under a general trans umbrella does not adequately deal with the problems that they can face in school, and reinforces binary pedagogic assumptions. As Davies, Vipond, and King (2019) point out, institutional school systems shore up the gender binary in many ways, including: requiring a gender classification on official documents; gendered dress codes; gender-segregated facilities; and gendered sports teams. In this context, while it can be comparatively easy for a binary trans young person to be accommodated, given a sympathetic institution, it is much harder for those people who identify across or outside the binary. Bragg et al. (2018) note that even schools that promote gender equalities were perceived by students as structured and operating in ways that reinforce binaries. Furthermore, as Meyer and Keenan (2018) point out, policies can become scripts that define and restrict the legibility of gender, which leads to barriers and restrictions for those who do not fit into these. They also note that policies tend to focus on the variant student, both in their labelling (e.g. as a 'trans policy') and to emphasise protection from bullying (Blair and Deckman 2019; Carlile and Paechter 2018). This treats variant students as people who have to be integrated into the institution, rather than the institution as needing reform.

What this meant for our respondents was that they repeatedly banged up against things that might appear small but were significant to them. The binary nature of school uniform was mentioned as something that schools should address, as were the limited choices offered by official forms (Carlile and Paechter 2018):

Definitely on forms it often asks you your gender and gives you a male and a female option they should offer a nonbinary option

And probably a custom and a prefer not to say (Jude)

Fin argued that the overtly Christian ethos of their school also allowed staff to avoid engaging with LGBT+ issues as a matter of conscience, leaving them unsupported.

There was some provision of gender-neutral toilets in our respondents' schools. This did not always stem from a school policy or decision; non-binary young people were quietly active in making use of disabled, staff, or visitor facilities. However, not everyone minded about this: some people saw gendered toilet use as something that was more of an issue for binary trans people than for themselves. Rowan used the female toilets if they were with a group of girls and the disabled one (or occasionally the male) if they were with a group of boys. For others, however, the paucity of non-gendered toilet provision was highly problematic. Fin, who had come out as non-binary during lockdown, was worried about which toilet they should use on their return, especially as their mum had suggested that using the disabled toilet implied, incorrectly, that being non-binary was a disability. Sam, who disliked using the disabled facilities suggested by their college,



mainly went into the nearby town to use a gender neutral toilet in a café. There was no non-gendered changing room provision in any of the institutions. Those who were in college, where physical education and sports were optional, said that they did not participate, though it is unclear whether access to changing rooms was the reason.

Several respondents told us that they felt unsafe using what provision there was, and that this included LGBT+ support groups, where they were available. Kjaran (2019) points out that toilets and locker rooms institutionalise heteronormative masculinities and femininities through the practices and performances of gender segregation, because the space is regulated on the basis of gender as a binary category. He also notes that, as they are both private and public, toilets are spaces in which gender identity is confirmed and consolidated. This is as much the case for the use of gender-neutral facilities as it is for gendered ones, where the neutral provision is specifically aimed at non-binary people. Those of our respondents who were particularly fearful of being bullied were therefore reluctant to use gender neutral toilets because it could out them to others.

There is 1 nonbinary toilet but it is at the end of the school and someone is normally in it and I don't like waiting outside it in case people are like why don't you just use the girls toilets
 [...] ... Well it is a toilet for all genders so anyone can use it and I don't know if they are nonbinary ... [...] ... Which is good because otherwise I probably wouldn't use it (Jude)

Jude was also aware that there was an LGBT club at their school, 'but I don't go in fear of being outed'. Similarly, Fin was worried that if they set up such a support group 'I would get even more abuse than I do now'. These examples indicate the gap between provision of and access to support. Even if a school provides some facilities or groups that non-binary students can use or attend, this does not mean that those young people will necessarily be able to take them up, unless other aspects of the institution are changed.

Education about non-binary identities

Respondents were generally scathing about the lack of education at their schools or colleges that specifically referred to non-binary identities. They all pointed to a need for more education for parents, teachers and students. The impression we got from their accounts was that while most of their schools (though not Fin's or Sam's) covered sexual orientation relatively thoroughly, they provided much less information on binary trans identities and rarely anything about being non-binary. Some people felt that having gender identity lumped in with sexual orientation in the LGBT acronym resulted in schools feeling that they had identity covered, when they did not. For example, Ash said that while their school had an LGBT group, 'I'm not sure if there is too much about it there'. Mel, whose college seemed at least to have mentioned gender fluidity and non-binary identities, found it problematic that discussion of gender took place alongside lessons about sex and sexuality:

I don't really understand why talking about gender has to be done when we people are talking about having sex ... [...] ... when you are talking about things like being non-binary it's always when people are talking about being gay and bi, and that means talking about sex things. But when I'm looking up things about non-binary, I'm not looking up about having sex.

This conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity also fails to deal with the lack of specific sex education provision for non-binary and trans young people. Haley et al. (2020, S84) argue that

[trans and non-binary] youth have unique sex education needs that are not well covered in standard curricula, which leads them to seek information from potentially inaccurate sources and leaves them vulnerable to negative sexual health outcomes.

Mel felt that education about identities should not take place in special lessons at all, implying that it would be better if it were threaded through the curriculum (Toft and Franklin 2020). This would be one effective way of separating gender education from that focused on sex and relationships.

The lack of discussion of gender identity in school also meant that the young people were never sure whether there were other non-binary people in their institution. Sam was told explicitly that they were the first non-binary student at their college, but, especially in a large school, someone might only discover others informally, once they had come out themselves. Both Jude and Fin believed that there might well be other non-binary people in their schools but, given the general silence about this, had no way of knowing who they were.

Respondents were all vociferous about the need to educate teachers, parents and other students about non-binary identities and what they meant. Having had to educate themselves about gender, some of them were then having to teach their families and even school staff. This made it much harder for them to come out, as they were never sure that someone would understand them. It also meant that their basic needs could be ignored, or that staff would not stop problematic behaviour because they failed to realise that it constituted bullying or discrimination. Nic thought that teachers and parents should learn about:

Respecting pronouns, people's preferred names and what it's like for someone who is non-binary being called their "dead name" and people using their old pronouns but not in a way it could scare someone and having a class discussion but if it gets out of hand to stop it

Plus just trying to normalize it

Lee, who also identifies as disabled, felt that as well as being educated in basic facts about non-binary identities, parents and teachers should examine their own prejudices and think harder about how they talk to young people. They pointed to the lack of attention to both disability and gender identity in both school and society:

as with disabilities it's ignored. People need to hear from experiences they also need to really analyse their own beliefs. Parents need to remember that kids listen carefully to what you say or don't say.

It was clear from our interviews that non-binary young people have clear and strong views about what education about gender identities should involve, suggesting that they should be fully involved in designing future provision.

Conclusions and implications

Non binary identities are invisible in schools in relation to both implicit and explicit curricula, while binary assumptions are threaded through the entire school experience. This leaves non-binary young people without a language to describe themselves, leading

to difficulties both in naming their feelings about their gender or lack of it, and in coming out to others. This means that, even once a young person has gone through a process of self-education and reflection, unsupported by their school, they then have to educate others as part of the coming-out process. Although the young people we interviewed had often been supported in their self-discovery by peers, some of whom were active in providing appropriate language for self-identity and coming out to others, they did not feel helped in these processes by their schools, and in some cases school staff ignorance had actually made things harder for them.

This invisibility also allows transphobia, especially intolerance of the non-binary young people who are the focus of this study, to thrive. It leaves non-binary (and trans) young people open to bullying, and requires them to deal with a constant pressure, both from underlying binary expectations and from other people's ideas about what being non-binary should look like. Their awareness of the views of others in school, combined in some cases with their experiences of homophobia or transphobia aimed at themselves or at others, makes non-binary young people fearful of outing themselves within the school setting. This includes a fear of being outed through the use of facilities provided by schools and colleges in an attempt to be more inclusive.

It is clear from the experiences reported by the young people we interviewed that schools and colleges should address non-binary education and provision well before they are aware that they have a non-binary student. Their approach should involve the whole organisation and both the formal and the informal curriculum, as well as education for staff and parents. There should be explicit teaching about non-binary identities and some of the names for them, including the variety of ways in which someone can identify under the non-binary umbrella. Schools should support this by cultivating an ethos in which binary social assumptions are overtly challenged, rather than reinforced, so that the institution as a whole becomes less binary in focus. This should include providing gender-neutral or, if possible, private, toilet and changing facilities for all students, so that those who are non-binary will not be afraid to be seen to use them. School uniforms and dress codes should be explicitly gender neutral and support given to those students who do not conform to peer expectations of how to respond to these. Staff should model respect for all genders by asking students (or, for the youngest students, their parents) their preferred names and pronouns and using them, and by refraining from addressing groups as one or two binary genders.

Schools need to work on educating staff and, where possible, parents, as well as students (Carlile 2020). It was evident in our previous work (Carlile and Paechter 2018) that even primary school students could have more knowledge of trans issues than their teachers. School staff need to be supported to catch up with and go beyond this level of knowledge so that they can authoritatively support young people, particularly those who are searching for a way of understanding themselves beyond the binary. Finally, while remaining aware that we should not put the burden of educating others onto what is already an oppressed minority, we should work to include non-binary young people in all school initiatives that aim to support them and to educate others about their lives. Non-binary young people themselves are likely to be most aware of the binary nature of educational institutions and, in particular, of how informal curricula and pedagogic practices contain inherent binary assumptions. Working with, rather than for, them, we

are more likely to be able to put into practice meaningful provision which fundamentally changes the binary underpinnings of schooling.

Notes

1. In this paper, for simplicity we will refer to these young people as 'non-binary'. However, this is not to privilege this identification above others or to treat it simply as a negative. As we will discuss, some of the young people we interviewed had specific identifications within the broad umbrella of rejection of a gender binary.
2. It is important to distinguish between having a disability, which may not be part of one's core identity, and explicitly identifying as disabled, which is.
3. A deed poll is a legal means for someone in the UK aged over 16 to change their name.
4. Stonewall is an LGBT+ campaigning organisation which provides awards recognising a school's work to support LGBT staff and students.
5. The Equality Act 2010 protects certain categories, including trans and non-binary people, from discrimination, and also puts a duty on educational and other institutions to act positively to prevent discrimination.
6. In the UK young people start secondary school at 11. Compulsory schooling continues to age 18. The last two years of this is usually known as 'sixth form' and can be somewhat separate from the rest of the school. At age 16 some young people choose to move to a 'sixth form college' with just two years of students in it to complete their secondary education.
7. All names are pseudonyms chosen by us for their gender neutrality. We have corrected spelling errors and typos in the young people's responses.

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