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Towards a critical pedagogy of trans-inclusive education in UK secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

School systems within the UK are embedded within cultures of normative gender narratives. Such cultures can create difficult environments for gender diverse young people which in turn contribute to poorer academic attainment and long-term health and wellbeing outcomes. In an attempt to understand how to foster better understanding within schools, we drew upon the lived experience of gender diverse young people. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research explored the experience of six transgender and non-binary young people who reflected on their experience of secondary education in the UK. Drawing on critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework, we found that: unsupportive school environments and relationships led to decreased mental health and feelings of Otherness; gender diversity was a contentious topic not found within curriculums; and teachers had the potential to create and foster positive experiences within a pedagogy of gender diverse affirmative partnership. To facilitate this, there is a need for institutional support allowing teachers to critically interrogate the structural embeddedness of cisgenderism in educational spaces, and within cultures of pathologised self-identified gender identities.

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Introduction

Gender identity – within the field of education and otherwise – continues to fuel contemporary political debates and is often used to exemplify culture wars and polarised ideologies (Martino 2022a; Martino 2022b). An unfortunate consequence of this is that young people who identify as gender diverse report negative experiences, which in turn impact mental health, whilst lived experience tends to be side-lined (Francis and Monakali 2021; McBride 2021). Factors contributing to ‘school based wellbeing’ include acceptance and supportive school environments (Ullman 2022). In this article, trans is used as an umbrella term to denote anyone who does not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. This paper aims to contribute to the wider debate

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around challenging cisnormativity in schools by exploring the experience of a small sample of 18–25-year-olds reflecting on school experiences during adolescence. Critical pedagogy (Freire 1996) is used as a theoretical framework to interpret the participants experience and offer fresh perspectives on how to develop a trans-informed and gender expansive education (Martino 2022a, 2022b).

The school experience of trans youth

Schools in the UK are designed around cisgender norms (Simmons and White 2014) exemplified by gendered school uniform policy, changing facilities and curriculums that lack reference to trans experience (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile 2021). Cisgenderism is sustained by ‘surveillance and self-surveillance’ (Cumming-Potvin and Martino 2018, 42) creating a barrier to learning for trans and gender diverse youth who often just want to feel they belong in schools that inhibit them from being able to do so (McBride 2021). Teachers either lack awareness training (Henry 2017), or experience a discrepancy between policy and practice when it comes to trans inclusivity (Horton 2023; Martino, Omercajic and Kassen 2022). It is important that teachers foster a receptive and supportive atmosphere that allows gender diverse children a positive experience of their time at school, as Bartholomaeus, Riggs, and Andrew (2017) highlight. This supportive and receptive atmosphere will depend on teachers’ attitude, knowledge and confidence in addressing trans-related topics within schools. Yet, a necropolitics exists around the transgender debate in which it is prescribed by the societal narrative of how one ought to *live and die*. This necropolitics is engrained within normative thought and an important aspect of contemporary political point scoring, including securing votes amongst the right-wing populous – so much so that gender diverse children are met with a ‘pedagogy of refusal’, ‘discomfort’, or ‘resistance’; i.e. an anti-trans and pro-normative default institutional positions, exemplified by the attitude of ‘you cannot “be” in this pedagogical space’ (Martino and Omercajic 2021; Payne and Smith 2022). To challenge this necropolitics, Martino and Omercajic (2021) advocate a ‘trans pedagogy of refusal’ that is composed of three axioms; a pedagogical necessity of interrogating cisgenderism, a refusal of antinormativity through critique of how cisnorms are produced and become hegemonic, and a refusal of necropolitics. This then provides a logic and rationale for creating curricular spaces of recognition that address the erasure of trans people (2021). Consequently, in schools ill-prepared for gender diversity (Bower-Brown et al. 2021) trans youth experience higher rates of bullying (Francis and Monakali 2021), abuse and mental health issues as they navigate unsafe educational spaces that pathologise trans identities (Lennon and Mistler 2014).

Another barrier to trans affirmative educational experience is an absence of supportive trans-inclusive policies within UK secondary schools (Horton 2023). Draft guidance (DfE 2023) may cause more harm to trans students as it often lacks input from gender diverse voices. Clear and supportive policy is essential for student wellbeing (Ullman 2022) particularly during times where debates over transgender issues dominate the political and culture war landscape (Martino 2022a, 2022b). The lack of supportive policy alongside a hostile political and media background renders discussions and curriculum materials around gender identity to be controversial and (like sex education) closed off (Morgan and Taylor 2019). As a consequence school leaders become increasingly

reluctant to engage in trans affirmative pedagogy for fear of resistance, backlash and moral panic (Payne and Smith 2022; Ullman 2022).

Towards a trans-inclusive education

A lack of gender diversity reflected in curriculums and school environments contribute to schools as strongly binary institutions excluding those who do not adhere to cishnorms (McBride 2021). Moreover, cisgender privilege and cisgenderism, which Lennon and Mistler (2014, 63) define as:

cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth

are institutionally embedded (Martino 2022a, 2022b). Whilst schools are keen to promote anti-bullying, safety and diversity awareness they are less willing to explore how the structure of schooling perpetuates the gender binary thus denying a systemic commitment to trans affirmative education (Martino, Omercajic and Kassen 2022). However, there are a limited number of empirical studies that have begun to explore what trans-inclusive education looks like (McBride 2021; Omercajic 2022) and how the well-being and academic achievement of trans students (Horton and Carlile 2022; Peter, Taylor, and Campbell 2016) can be enhanced. A primary step is to create gender affirmative environments including gender inclusive toilets and facilities made available for pupils and staff (Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir 2015) as well as making all uniform available to all genders (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile 2021). However, these inclusive steps may not always be successful, and may be met with resistance from staff and students (Omercajic 2022). Increasing research documents how trans young people mobilise their voices to educate teachers and pupils about gender identity (McBride and Neary 2021). Whilst their confidence and experience should be valued, vigilance is needed to ensure this work does not fall solely onto the shoulders of minority students as this can become psychologically and emotionally challenging (Horton 2023; Martino 2022a, 2022b; Paechter, Toft, and Carlile 2021). Alternatively, schools and teachers could take a more radical approach grounded in a critical interrogation of cisgenderism (Martino and Omercajic 2021) in partnership with students in a space where ‘all grow’ (Freire 1996). Horton and Carlile (2022) argue for a trans-emancipatory approach to education which involves a whole school power shift towards cis-trans equality rather than accommodating individual trans people to a cis-gender system. Furthermore, a trans-emancipatory approach is committed to a critical interrogation of cisgenderism (Martino and Omercajic 2021) and how it intersects with race and class (Krell 2017) and is grounded in Western, colonial categorisations (Laing 2021). To enable this, there is a need for robust trans-affirmative policy (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) as well as financial resources and funds to support staff development. Ultimately, this is challenging work as rigid gender binaries enforced through schooling often are reflective of a system that has, for a long time, lacked flexibility due to increased datafication of the education system, high stakes testing and accountability cultures (Ball 2021). However, it is a willingness on the part of schools to take risks and challenge this rigidity which may allow more space to open up for trans-inclusive education.

The potential of critical pedagogy for fostering space for trans affirmative practice in secondary schools

Consequently, fresh perspectives are needed to challenge cisnorms that open up more possibilities for trans-inclusive education. One lens, that has not yet been applied to the experience of trans youth's experience of UK secondary school, is that of critical pedagogy; an educational philosophy commitment to empowering traditionally marginalised groups. Student participation and lived experience form the basis of a critical pedagogy enriched curriculum (Shor 1992) which critiques the 'banking' method of education which assumes knowledge is fixed in favour of developing a 'problem posing' education where knowledge is open to co-construction through dialogue, critical thinking and collaboration with students to address social issues (Freire 1996). Critical pedagogy was developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in 1968). His ideas have been developed to reflect a Marxist perspective which challenges the ideological challenges posed by neoliberalism (Giroux 2014; McLaren 1994). Theorists like Shor (1992) emphasise the importance of participation as a mode of developing democracy in education. Hooks (1994) applies a feminist lens and argues for the reclamation of spaces of love and care forsaken within a patriarchal society, Darder (2017) develops this work to explore how critical pedagogy can help emancipate minoritised communities through a humanising education. A critical pedagogy lens can help us to explore how student-staff relationships, curriculum content that interrogates structures of power and wider educational practices can be rendered more trans-inclusive. Ultimately, critical pedagogy, which is concerned with the impact of wider social structures and how they perpetuate oppression, helps to shift focus away from individual acts of transphobia, trans assimilation and accommodation (Horton and Carlile 2022) towards a model grounded in a process of trans desubjugation where the knowledge and embodied experience of trans youth (Martino 2022a, 2022b) and the interrogation of cisgenderism (Martino and Omercajic 2021) are central to the educational process. Critical pedagogy has been criticised for its idealistic, utopian nature (Ellsworth 1989) and impracticality for implementing in practice when the education system is increasingly dominated by neoliberal hegemony (Ball 2021; Giroux 2014) where teachers are hindered by 'the rules, regulations and ideologies of the larger social system' (Moore 2000, 154). However, Freire counteracts these criticisms by imploring practitioners to remain hopeful for change, for Freire, hope is an 'ontological requirement for human beings' (1997, 44) and necessary for any future teacher wanting to tackle injustice and oppression.

Methodology

As a small-scale qualitative study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as a research design to understand participant's experience of life, alongside the meaning attributed to it (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The use of this methodology allowed us to understand how young people make sense of gender identity development alongside their secondary school experience. IPA is a reflective process that views participants as experts in their own personal and social worlds (Howard, Katsos, and Gibson 2019). The research does not aim to make generalisations but instead seeks an

in-depth exploration of a small number of experiences that can contribute to our growing understanding of how best to support trans youth in secondary school. Once ethical approval was granted by the university in alignment with BERA (2018) guidelines, samples were chosen through adverts in local university student newsletters and social media posts via charities supporting LGBTQ + youth. The participants involved belong to marginalised groups and the upmost care was taken to ensure that the research empowers participants giving voice to minority experience rather than marginalising them. Part of the process of IPA is acknowledgement of the positionality and subjective perspectives of the researchers. Consequently, as researchers, we approach this research as cisgender allies, with trans, non-binary and gender diverse friends, family and colleagues. One of the researchers is part of the LGBTQ + community which helped facilitate some understanding towards the lived experience of participants and empathy for the challenges participants they may have faced. An ethics of care (Noddings 2013) was central to the data collection process with the capacity to refer participants to relevant charities should they have become distressed during the conversations. Semi-structured interviews (lasting between one and two hours) which are well suited to exploring sensitive topics (Elam and Fenton 2003) were conducted in person and via an online video platform. Participants were asked to talk about their experience of exploring their gender identity within secondary school, focusing on factors which facilitated or hindered their gender expression. Participants were asked to explore key relationships including those of peers and teachers as well as their recommendations to better support trans youth. Once collected, data was transcribed, coded line by line (Charmez 2006) and stored on password protected computers. Thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012) was employed to analyse the interview data with the key themes of (un)supportive environments, (in)visibility in the curriculum and the potential of teachers as trans-affirmative allies emerging. A narrative account of the experiential themes was produced which drawing upon participants' words exemplifies their attitude and experience (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) which is presented in the findings section and the discussion, which follows, explores their experience through the lens of critical pedagogy and trans inclusive pedagogy (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant information.

Name	Summary
Sebastian	19 years old, Trans (he/him). <i>'Within the area I went to school with, it was just not okay to be anything but a heterosexual straight, like heterosexual cisgender person. There was no chance that I would have said anything when I was at school.'</i>
River	24 years old, Non-binary (they/them). <i>'I didn't come out in secondary school. It didn't feel like a safe space to do that.'</i>
Marie	25 years old, Non-binary (they/them). <i>'I remember back in school, just not really fitting in anywhere. My parents and family and teachers would say, 'Oh, she's such a tomboy'. I wasn't really so interested in hanging out with the girls. But I didn't really fit in with the boys either. I was just ... trying to find where I belong.'</i>
Diana	19-year-old, Trans (She/they). <i>'Heteronormativity is there in the classroom. And, and it sort of filters down to the children, and how much of that is sort of internalised by children as well.'</i>
Brad	23 years old, Non-binary (they/them). <i>'I didn't know until college, I knew something was off. I knew I was different. I cut my hair. People didn't know if I was a boy or a girl. I just used to get very distressed because I couldn't say the word 'girl'. I didn't really realise why I didn't. I didn't know non-binary genders existed at all. I didn't really know a lot about the trans community.'</i>
Ron	25 years old, Trans (they/them). <i>'My general experience of developing my gender identity in school was I didn't.'</i>

Findings

Unsupportive environments.

All participants described a trans oppressive rather than trans emancipatory school experience (Horton and Carlile 2022). Cisnormative and transphobic attitudes prevalent in the school environment contributed to a feeling of a lack of support. Participants described experiences of bullying, social isolation and othering, Brad described how:

I came out to my parents in quite a distressed way. My mental health wasn't great [...] There was bullying. I had quite a lot of bullying. They didn't know what to do with me. I was an outcast. I'd get comments and it did get quite extreme. Really. They used to kick down toilets whilst I was in there. They thought I was like some kind of alien.

Participants deemed secondary school as an 'unsafe' space where rigid gender norms are policed in a 'cesspool of masculinity' (Ron). Brad, who was assigned female at birth, described how using the girls' toilets could often result in violent and traumatic situations:

We had boys toilets on one side girls on the other. It was an open space so I would just go into the girl's side. I got strangled twice in one day, which was not pleasant ... so it got real. Just because I had short hair.

Consequently, many students found themselves *masking* their real selves to fit in. 'It was just not safe to be anything but a heterosexual, cisgender person' (Sebastian). Ron describes how:

I had to become a person that fitted with that [toxic masculine] culture ... and it took a lot of energy and work to maintain that going through the years ... I guess, I was sort of fronting ... just putting on a different side of myself that allowed me to fit in a bit better.

Ron's experience highlights how trans youth feel the pressure of maintaining rigid gender binaries (Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir 2015) which constrain their gender expression and impacting their wellbeing and identity formation leading to performative measures (Butler 1990) to assimilate into the binary status quo.

The participants described how gender norms were vigorously upheld in school through 'lad' culture, othering and bullying of LGBTQ+ students or those appearing to deviate from the gender binary. Brad explained how bullying made them feel like 'an outcast' and like 'some kind of alien.' For Ron, there were no checks on the lad culture at school:

You could be walking down the corridor, and someone tries to punch you in the, you know, genitalia. That was normal. Looking back, it was bizarre.

This threatening environment impacted the mental health and attendance of participants and was compounded by a feeling of a lack of support from teachers and support staff. Many of the participants were impacted academically by hostile gendered school environments. The combined experience of the participants contributes to a sense of 'institutional betrayal' (Smith and Freyd 2014) where they have been harmed rather than nurtured by the school system that should help them thrive personally and academically.

In contrast to secondary school, college and university allowed the participants to feel free to explore their gender identity as there was more openness towards LGBTQ+

identities, with more out LGBTQ + students and lecturers. Lecturers are perceived to be more educated on trans issues and many signify trust through the use of pronouns in emails and by wearing rainbow lanyards. Ron explained:

I'm gaining firsts, so I'm doing well ... it's better at uni the trans stuff, uni makes a whole lot of difference. Most lecturers use their pronouns in their emails, to me it means that they are educated enough to know that it's a good thing. It means they are mainly safe ... also more people are out, a lot of people have come into themselves. There are a lot of queer people around.

For Ron, the experience of university had been transformative to the extent that they felt they would no longer be recognised by their school mates.

Trans invisibility in the curriculum.

One of the defining characteristics for the participants of secondary school was the lack of trans visibility within the curriculum, LGBTQ + identities were perceived as taboo and most participants only heard about trans people in sex education, reinforcing a medical model of trans identity. Brad explains their experience of sex education:

There was just the off-handed comment going, gay people exist. And that was it. It wasn't talking about trans people. It wasn't talking about non-binary people.

For Diana, who attended a boys' school, sex education was impacted by the religious orthodox views of some of the teachers:

Someone asked something about transgender people. And she [the teacher] said that she thinks that transgender people are just a very, very gay man, or woman.

Evidently, these students attended secondary school before the introduction of the RSE¹ (Relationships, Sex Education) framework (Gov 2021) which potentially may have improved provision through its commitment to educating young people around LGBTQ + people throughout the curriculum. The consequence of this lack of visibility meant participants experiencing confusion over gender identity, how to express it and not knowing that other non-binary genders existed. Ron explains:

I was just not aware that, you know, I could freely explore these things. I wasn't even aware that they existed. I just thought I was a weird guy [trans-inclusive education] would have led to me being about to work out what I was experiencing a lot quicker.

Participants explained how visibility from an early age would help raise awareness of gender diversity. This could have helped them name their experience earlier, develop empathy amongst all students towards gender variance and help counter negative stereotyping in the media. Sebastian explained that trans-inclusive provision would be 'marvellous because it normalises' and could help counter the 'warped perceptions of transpeople' some cis children and young people have. Brad highlighted the importance of this work from early primary school age:

If you teach kids well, this is what you do and say when someone says they are a boy instead of a girl or that they are non-binary. This is how you approach things and the kids will just do it ... you know there may be one or two that are confused, but like they don't, there's not that stigma [found amongst older children].

Brad recognised this work needs to start when children first enter school. Additionally, participants called for more holistic education which forefronts space for children to

understand their rights, space to develop their identities in safety potentially through protected queer spaces. River explains their vision for a more supportive secondary educational experience:

We are doing ourselves a disservice by not focusing on the emotional well-being and development of children. If you want good grades and something that looks nice on paper, the quickest way you are going to receive that is by ensuring that your students and children are not distracted by the trauma they are facing within other areas of their life ... children are human beings you know. We should be walking out of schools feeling like we're emotionally literate and able to talk about who we are.

Evidently, River's envisioned curriculum is better prepared to explore ambiguity and complexity by fostering emotional literacy and critical thinking to better understand one another and challenge intolerance.

Teacher potential as trans-affirmative allies and transformative intellectuals

Participants described the damage inflicted by sometimes well-meaning and occasionally overtly homo and transphobic teachers. Brad described being outed in class by a teacher talking about a Mathematics problem relating to a postman or woman 'she stopped and looked at me for three seconds ... or post person.' Furthermore, River was asked to change in the staff toilets upon complaints from other girls hostile to their lack of gender conformity:

I sort of felt alone in that and then when that happened with, obviously these teachers, you know, telling me, 'Ohh, it's probably just best if you changed in the toilets because then nobody can moan at you' like, I think they sort of worded it as if they were doing me a favour.

A picture emerges of their gender identities as problems to be solved rather than a need to challenge the wider structural issues that exclude these young people. Sometimes, a lack of knowledge meant safeguarding issues arising. Brad described being asked to come after school to educate a perpetrator of abuse they had received and was asked to show their binder because the teacher and student did not know what it was. Diana recalls having several teachers refer to homosexuality and non-normative gender expression as 'a disease.' For many participants their gender expression was at best an inconvenience and at worst pathologised making them feel responsible for their own oppression.

Consequently, participants highlighted the need for supportive teachers who are, above all, well-educated in supporting trans students and able to provide appropriate, nuanced and caring support. Educated teachers 'well versed in the language of gender and sexuality, can set the tone' (Diana). More LGBTQ+ role models in schools, allyship through pronouns and rainbow lanyards, were all highlighted as necessary for trans inclusion. Participants recalled some experiences of allyship that had supported them in secondary school. For Sebastian it was something as simple as being permitted to wear shorts rather than a skirt during netball tournaments. For Brad, visible markers of allyship were crucial to feeling safe:

If I see a teacher with a lanyard or pronouns in their email ... some kind of pin. It's oh, I see a person, and a lot of the time people don't. So [when I see it] I know who my safe people are.

Training from queer people (Brad) and support for teachers in this work (Ron) in light of protests like those related to the teaching of ‘No Outsiders’² in primary schools (Ferguson 2019) are both crucial to enact trans affirmative pedagogy. Overall, participants expressed a desire for teachers to engage with students around trans identities and appreciated those willing to educate themselves and understand their experience, Brad explained:

I had a tutor in college, who turned out he was demi-guy and he messed up once [with their pronouns] and then in the end said, ‘Hey, Brad can you like just stay behind’ not in front of everybody, just said, ‘I’m really sorry, I recognised it and corrected it, is that an ok thing to do?’

Allyship came through a willingness to learn. For River, the importance was of teachers remaining students:

Just because you’re an adult doesn’t mean you’ve stopped learning. Just because you teach children doesn’t mean that you’re not learning ... you should be evolving with the children around you.

Crucially, participants were keen for teachers to engage them in dialogue around their identities and support them through developing their own knowledge and understanding of gender identity.

Discussion

The experience of the participants reinforced existing literature around the pressures young people face to mask their gender identity within secondary school (Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir 2015), how educational spaces pathologise self-identified gender identities (Lennon and Mistler 2014; Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), as well as the higher rates of discrimination, bullying and harassment from other children and adults they face (Francis and Monakali 2021). This impacts their mental wellbeing (O’Flynn 2016) and attainment (Snapp et al. 2015). There was a lack of engagement with trans issues and participants felt unsafe advocating for their own inclusion. Their collective experience amounts to an ‘institutional betrayal’ (Smith and Freyd 2014) of trans children and young people. To counter the cisnormative oppression experienced by many of the participants is a need for a transformative, trans-emancipatory (Horton and Carlile 2022) pedagogy that challenges cisnormativity and builds the kinds of safe spaces of acceptance participants felt at university where they could thrive personally and academically. A trans-inclusive culture recentres the holistic, intellectual and spiritual development (Hooks 1994) of students through an ethics of care and compassion (Noddings 2013). These safe cultures are urgently needed in secondary schools so that trans young people can feel safe to explore their identities and channel the huge amount of energy and effort expended into self-protection into their academic work and self-actualisation.

An important part of moving towards this inclusive culture is to tackle trans visibility throughout the curriculum. Invisibility maintains hegemonic cisnormativity as the ability to be able to name and be educated about one’s identity is a key part in the struggle to challenge domination (Hooks 1994). Drawing upon critical pedagogy, Freire (1996) proposed moving away from ‘banking’ methods of education towards ‘problem posing’

education where education starts with the lives and experience of the students in class. This could mean opening space for student-teacher exploration of issues related to gender identity. In a first instance students could be asked to pose their own questions for consideration and bring in texts, artefacts, media and books for discussion (Shor 1992). A more structured approach could involve posing key questions to students to foster opportunities for writing and discussion, teachers could pose to the class questions such as, 'What are trans rights and why are they contentious?' 'Why are trans lives invisible within the curriculum?' 'How might we support a trans friend?' This approach underpins a social production of knowledge and builds space to problematise assumptions and negative media stereotypes by making connections between the wider debate, their own lives and those of their peers. Furthermore, this approach brings gender identity outside of sex education and into the real, complex lives of students and interrogates wider systems that embed cisgenderism (Martino 2022a, 2022b). A student-centered approach aims to do education 'with' rather than 'to' students (Shor 1992) and understands the process as one of empowerment and self-transformation which can celebrate trans lives rather than seeing them as problems to be resolved or assimilated into cissexist systems (Skelton 2022) and thus actively reject what Martino and Omercajic (2021, 3) refer to as the 'necropolitical logics' that aim to perpetually deficit the disenfranchised. By engaging in dialogue and co-constructing understanding of gender identity it recognises that young people are part of the world they inhabit rather than bystanders (Shor 1992). A process of mutual inquiry challenges the binary nature of the curriculum (Paechter, Toft, and Carlile 2021) making space for ambiguity, nuance and complexity which are needed to thoughtfully explore the experiences of trans lives in a space where all (students and teachers) grow (Freire 1996). Evidently, to facilitate such dialogue there is a need for teachers to create a 'brave' space (Brazill 2020) where the perspectives of others are protected, a space of 'calling in' rather than 'calling out' and the need to value and respect differing perspectives and experience as well as support available to those needing it.

A third element in fostering a critical pedagogy of trans inclusion is to consider the potential of teachers as trans-affirmative transformative intellectuals. Generally, the teachers encountered by the participants lacked awareness of the lived realities of trans youth. For Freire (1996) the first barrier to learning is the distance between student and teacher. Consequently, teachers have a crucial role to play in forging safe, trusting environments in which trans and young people can be open to explore their gender identity. Brad's experience of a teacher being open to learning and correcting their behaviour was indicative of the impact teachers can have on developing trans-inclusive environments in schools as Ginot (1972) argues teachers create the climate in classrooms with the power to make a young person's life miserable or joyous. Giroux (1988) argues that teachers need to be redefined as transformative intellectuals. Part of this process involves teachers taking responsibility for asking questions about what and how they teach and how this aligns with wider goals of creating a fairer, more socially just world. According to Giroux (1988, 127) teachers must be transformative intellectuals if they are to educate students to be 'active, critical citizens.' This process starts with teachers being prepared to explore their own gender identity to develop an interrogative stance critical of gender entitlement where they can critically analyse the structural norms they work within and question

their own assumptions of gender (Martino and Omercajic 2021) and thus help to dismantle cisgender privilege (Serano 2014).

One of the fundamental ways to achieve this is to reconceptualise students as partners in the education process, co-constructing knowledge and understanding of gender identity alongside their teachers and peers and being open to being a student just as a student is a teacher (Freire 1996). Additionally, teachers can model trans-inclusive behaviour (e.g. pronouns on emails, lanyards) and by adopting a zero-tolerance approach to trans-phobic behaviour they help model trans-inclusive practice. This process begins with teacher education where trainee teachers are given space to understand the challenges faced by trans students with university lecturers who challenge the view that this topic is too complex or challenging to deal with. Teachers are given space to explore how intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) underscores each individual's experience of gender identity and expression and that remaining indifferent to social injustice is antithetical to teaching today (Mayo and Vittoria 2021). As River states, trans-affirmative teachers need to remain open to learning from students in a Freirean process of 'teacher-as-student, student-as-teacher' (1996). Teachers need to understand that engaged trans-affirmative education can be discomfoting whole person work. This is an important part of creating trans-affirmative practice as discomfort is necessary to challenge normative practices and dominant beliefs and when handled with an ethics of care (Noddings 2013) has the potential for transformation which is necessary to meaningfully challenge oppression. Once in practice, for teachers to be trans-affirmative transformative intellectuals they need to be supported lest a culture of fear suppresses their voices. Teachers exist too within a space that does not always value critical reflection and social justice. The influence of neoliberal economic policy on UK schools continues to align education with economic goals (Giroux 2014) resulting in teachers having to teach narrowed curriculums (Ball 2021) and navigate increased datafication (Holloway 2020). These processes need to be challenged by leadership, sympathetic politicians, parents, students and teachers so that they do not continue to monopolise teacher attention and sideline engagement with wider issues of social justice. Evidently, teachers need robust policy, institutional support and funding (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) to ensure that they are given space to critically reflect on how their practice and institution perpetuates cisgenderism (Martino 2022a, 2022b) and how these reflections can be integrated to move towards trans emancipatory practice. This wider institutional support (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020) could help to narrow the gap between those advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion and those actually practicing it (Taylor et al. 2016).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the reflections of young people on their experience of UK secondary schooling and its impact on their gender identity formation. Evidently, schools continue to reinforce cisnormativity. However, participants have many suggestions for improving the situation and teachers and educators need to be supported to make more space available to hear their voices and co-construct the provision they need. The research was limited by the small number of participants and an area for future research could be to expand this project or explore how teachers and students

engage with the principles of critical pedagogy in classrooms to create more trans affirmative practice.

Notes

1. This framework has been designed to ensure that schools fulfil their obligations under the Equality Act (2010). For the first time, it explicitly embeds the teaching of LGBTQ+ relationships in primary schools demonstrating a commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusive education throughout the education system.
2. The 'No Outsiders' project is a popular scheme teaching LGBTQ+ inclusion (as well as other protected characteristics) in primary schools. It builds upon a research project which ran between 2006–2008 between academics and teachers exploring the disruption of heteronormativity in UK primary schools (see DePalma and Atkinson 2009).

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