**Living your truth: Views and experiences of transgender young people in secondary education**

Aim: With the visibility of transgender individuals increasing, together with the awareness of associated challenges, it is important that research looks to understand the experiences of this population. This study explores the views and experiences of transgender pupils attending secondary school, with a focus on the factors participants report to support or hinder overall positive school experiences.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten transgender participants aged 11-16 years and data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings: The overarching theme 'acceptance and validation' was developed as the central thread to all participants’ views and experiences. Five main themes were also created: seeking acceptance and validation; receiving acceptance and validation; active rejection and invalidation; passive rejection and invalidation; and consequences of rejection and invalidation.

Limitations: The sample includes a low representation of lower secondary school aged youth and trans females, and participants who were receiving charitable support.

Conclusions: Participants appeared willing to risk what belonging they have experienced trying to ‘fit in’ and conform to cisnormative expectations, taking the journey to embody their authentic selves in the hope of finding genuine belonging in a typically cisnormative world. It is important that youth across the gender spectrum find belonging in truly inclusive school environments; implications for policy makers, schools, and educational psychologists are discussed.

Keywords: Transgender; belonging; acceptance; school policy; school experience.

## Introduction

### Sex and gender

### Historically, according to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) seminal paper, everyone ‘does gender’. ‘Doing gender’ traditionally involves dressing, behaving and interacting in a manner that expresses one’s sex (Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, gender is not an essential characteristic of all humans, rather, gender is a social construct that emerges through interaction with others (Johnson, 2015). Gender is typically binarised into the categories of male and female with an implicit societal expectation that one’s biological sex should predict (and be congruent with) their gender expression (Burdge, 2007; Lorber, 1994). This is also known as cisnormativity.

Recently, new models of gender have arisen that challenge the traditional gender norms. Killermann (2017) developed a model of gender that depicts a person’s sex, gender identity, and gender expression as existing independently of one another. In the latest version of this model, each of these aspects are presented on two continua enabling gradations from ‘lack of woman-ness’ to ‘woman-ness’ and ‘lack of man-ness’ to ‘man-ness’ (see Figure 1). In addition, these gradations may change over time rather than being fixed characteristics (Whittle et al., 2007).Thus, “gender is not sex, and sex is not gender” (Sheridan, 2009, p.2). One group which embody this distinction is the transgender population.

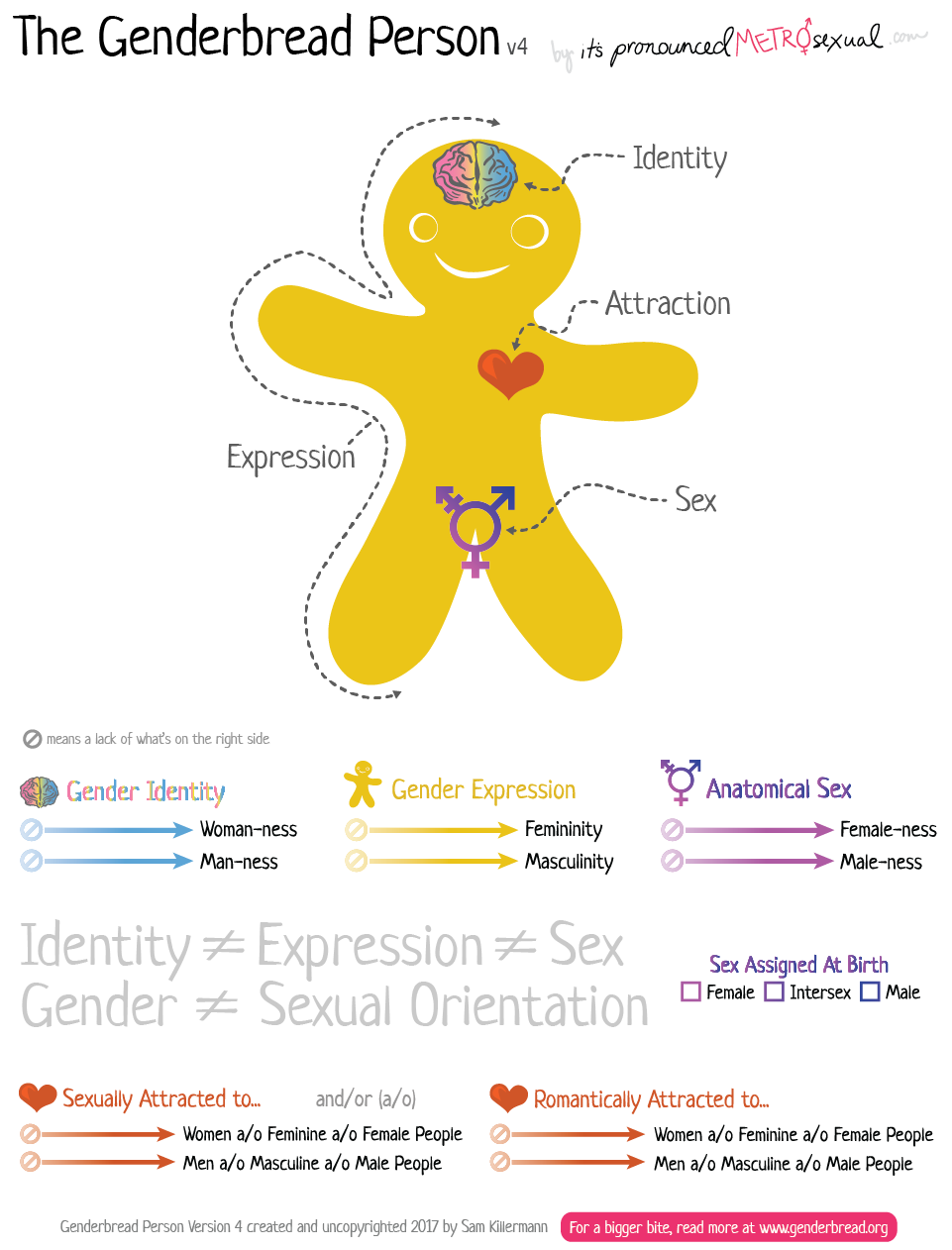


Figure 1 *The Genderbread Person v4 created by Sam Killerman (uncopyrighted and approval sought)*

### Defining transgender

The term ‘trans’ is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. Transgender individuals challenge the traditional gender binary model in that their sex and gender identity are incongruent (Burdge, 2007). In contrast, ‘cisgender’ is a term often used to describe those who can more easily conform to traditional gender norms (Cava, 2016). Schneider (2010) noted that different members of the trans community will experience exclusive societal challenges based upon their gender identity and expression and, therefore, research exploring one group will not necessarily have relevance for other trans individuals (e.g., non-binary or androgynous). The current research focuses on the binary trans community (i.e., trans men and women).

Transgender individuals are one of the most marginalised and oppressed populations in society (Sausa, 2005; Seelman, 2014). They are subjected to greater discrimination, victimisation and hate crimes compared to non-trans individuals (Haynes & Schweppe, 2017; Jamel, 2018: McBride & Schubotz, 2017). A survey including 594 trans young people aged from 11 to 19 years, found 51% were bullied for being trans, 33% didn’t feel safe in their school, 51% had skipped school due to bullying, 84% had self-harmed and 45% had attempted to take their own life (Bradlow et al., 2017). Higher levels of victimisation in trans youth have been correlated with increased levels of depression, suicide ideation and attempt, mental health difficulties, substance misuse, and decreased self-esteem (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2012). Trans youth also experience additional stressors in comparison to trans adults such as ageism, lack of parental and family support, and violence and discrimination at school (Day et al., 2018; Hatchel et al., 2019; Jones & Hillier, 2013).

Due to feelings of depression and lack of safety at school, trans youth are more likely to truant single lessons and whole school days, resulting in reduced attendance at school and lower academic attainment which can have a profound impact upon their future lives (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2018; Day et al., 2018).

Although a plethora of research has identified negative experiences faced by the trans population, recent research has extended the work on posttraumatic growth following a degree of trauma, to look at growth following adversity for gender diverse populations (Taube & Massap, 2020). Ratcliff et al. (2020) explored factors promoting posttraumatic growth in sexual minority adults, including transgender individuals, who experienced adolescent bullying. The results suggested that individuals who attributed the bullying they received to their sexual identity, rather than intrinsic factors, considered the bullying to be more severe but, in turn, experienced greater post-traumatic growth. Those who had disclosed their minority identities to their friends experienced greater social support and this facilitated their experiences of post-traumatic growth; being open with friends and coming together in the wake of the trauma of bullying, especially severe bullying, offers an opportunity to grow from the experience (Ratcliff et al., 2020), protecting against depressive symptoms and contributing to greater psychological wellbeing (Helgeson et al., 2006).

### Transgender and the social model

One potential factor impacting on trans youth outcomes is the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging. Due to traditional gender norms, trans youth may be experiencing lower levels of belonging, which may be contributing to their increased likelihood of mental health difficulties. However, the aetiology of being transgender is often considered of a biological or psychological origin (Nolan et al., 2019; Zucker, 2017). Gender dysphoria may be alternatively explained utilising a social model whereby the social construction of traditional gender norms and associated gender expectations lead to feelings of dysphoria. Thus, the associated risks of mental health difficulties may be due to a deficit in a sense of belonging within societies that enforce traditional gender norms.

Belonging is a fundamental human motivation that drives emotion and behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and deficits in belonging have been linked to both psychological and physical health issues which may explain the higher rates of mental health difficulties in the transgender population. Olson-Kennedy et al. (2016) highlighted the need to examine the social environments of transgender youth to recognise the possible ameliorative support mechanisms. However, only a small number of published studies have explored trans youths’ experience of their school environments during their gender transition.

Research undertaken within the United States of America (USA) and Australia revealed transgender youth were more likely to experience harassment and victimisation, inadequate sex education, and highly gendered school environments (Day et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). In the UK, Burns et al. (2016) explored factors that affected educational equality from the perspective of two trans students, three parents and two trans advocates. The barriers for participants included gender stereotyping, transphobic bullying, peer exclusion and school absenteeism. Similarly, McBride and Schubotz’s (2017) study explored the experiences of 15 transgender youth in the UK and found homophobic and transphobic name calling to be greater for trans youth compared to their non-transgender peers. In addition, hetero-/cis-normative policies were found to negatively impact trans youths’ school experiences. Both of these UK-based studies referred to the need for trans-inclusive education to be part of school curricula, as well as trans-inclusive policies and flexibility in school practices.

However, it is encouraging that recent unpublished research focussed upon the positive experiences of trans youth in school revealed several ways in which both staff and students promote feelings of acceptance and respect. This may suggest increasing awareness, understanding, and support for the transgender population and, consequently, more positive school experiences. The key supports included the use of appropriate gendered language, support from peers and staff members, and the provision of school clubs/societies (Leonard, 2019).

What the published research to date does not explicitly explore are the factors that both support and hinder an overall positive school experience. A nuanced understanding of these factors combined with effective policies and practices could ameliorate the negative outcomes experienced by trans youth. Thus, the research question for the present study is ‘What are the views and experiences of transgender youth in secondary education?’.

## Method

### Design

The researchers took a social constructionism epistemological stance; therefore, semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit rich qualitative data relating to the views and experiences of transgender young people. Interviews, rather than focus groups, were chosen due to the sensitive nature of the research topic as they provide confidentiality and anonymity (Longhurst, 2003). The interviews lasted between 17 - 38 minutes (*M* = 26 minutes and 7 seconds).

### Participants

Ten transgender participants between the ages of 13 – 16 years (*M* = 15) were recruited through opportunity sampling. All participants were in attendance of a charity weekend residential in the UK led by Mermaids. Mermaids is a charity that works to support young people who are transgender or gender variant, and their families, to enable young people to freely explore their gender identity, feel empowered and to provide a sense of community (Mermaids, n.d.). Mermaids agreed to provide access to participants with no conditions; they had no vested interest in this piece of research.

Parental consent and participant assent were required for participants under the age of 16 years whereas participants aged 16 were able to provide consent. Most participants identified as male (*n* = 8), one participant identified as female and one participant was comfortable being identified as either male or female at the time of the study, though, they wanted to identify as female in future. Three participants lived in England and seven lived in Scotland.

### Materials

Two audio recording devices were used to record the interviews to reduce the risk of data corruption or error. The interviewer used a copy of the interview schedule (see Appendix A) which included questions to explore the positive and negative aspects of participants’ school experience. The interview schedule was devised in collaboration with a young transgender adult who had completed their secondary education. Suggestions were made to the terminology within, and structure of, the questions to facilitate a conversational interaction between interviewer and participant. All suggestions were applied to the interview schedule.

### Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton School of Psychology Ethics Committee and Research Governance. At the weekend residential, two of the researchers delivered a presentation of the study to parents of transgender youth to outline the nature of the study and reasons for the young people to take part. Parents were given an opportunity to ask questions and were invited to inform their children.

Interested participants met with one of the researchers and arranged a time to complete the interview. Participants were given the choice of completing the interview independently or with a parent present; two participants opted to have their parent attend with them. At the end of each interview, participants were provided with a £10 Amazon voucher to compensate and thank them for their time and effort.

### Analysis

The first author manually transcribed and anonymised each interview recording prior to its deletion. To maintain anonymity, a number was assigned to each participant, which is quoted in the findings section to indicate the relative contribution of each participant. The transcripts were analysed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis (TA) from a social constructionism perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018). The researchers brought their prior experience and knowledge into the analysis of the data but with full awareness of their subjectivity with regards to their gender identity in order to minimise bias (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

## Results

The researchers actively generated one overarching theme: ‘acceptance and validation’ (see Figure 2).

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2 *Thematic Map Including the Overarching Theme, Main Themes and Sub-Themes Created Through the Process of Thematic Analysis*

It appeared that central to participants’ views and experiences of attending secondary school were the core concepts of ‘acceptance and validation’. Participants expressed their desire to be accepted by school staff and their peers which, in turn, provided them with a sense of gender validation. Their views and experiences within this overarching theme were broken down into five main themes: ‘seeking acceptance and validation’; ‘receiving acceptance and validation’; ‘active rejection and invalidation’; ‘passive rejection and invalidation’; and ‘consequences of rejection and invalidation’.

### Theme one: Seeking acceptance and validation

#### Subtheme: Identity formation.

The act of coming out as transgender was described as a process rather than a single time point through which participants formed their identity and sought to receive acceptance and validation. The process typically began with internal dissonance which created the need for an explanation and better understanding of the self. Most participants believed that the concept of being transgender was not widely known or understood. Nevertheless, once the term ‘transgender’ was learned, most participants shared that they conducted their own research to further understand what being transgender meant. Learning this term seemed to help participants understand themselves, feel more normalised and gain the confidence to explain their experience to others. Participant 4 provided details of his experience:

It was actually taught; one, we had one class, one class on LGBT and they mentioned transgender for like a split second and then I went home and then we searched because when they were talking about like feeling like trapped in your, like this is the body that you have biologically, not feeling like that’s who you are, that’s not your gender really… And I just felt like that was, that is exactly how I feel and I went and did more research before I was going to come out or anything like that because I didn’t want to come out and then be like I’m not actually, I’m just confused (**Participant 4).**

#### Subtheme: Coming out.

Prior to coming out, many participants noted the importance of researching and becoming familiar with the legal rights for transgender individuals. Participants felt that acquiring knowledge of their rights would increase their ability to explain their identity and, in turn, increase the likelihood of their friends and family accepting and validating them.

Social acceptance issues related to sex, gender identity and stereotypes, seemed to impact the timing of when participants chose to come out. Some participants hid their gender dysphoria and waited until later in life to come out when they believed they would be better accepted. Participant 9 shared their reflection on the timing of coming out: “maybe I could [have] come out earlier, when I was like, when I knew… or come out after school… I wouldn’t have been bullied as much”.

Many participants appeared to experience a tension between ongoing gender dysphoria and the overwhelming pressure to conform to gendered expectations. These participants shared that after suppressing their thoughts and feelings for some time, they eventually felt a strong need to come out to alleviate gender dysphoria which outweighed the pressure to conform to gendered expectations. For example, Participant 1 shared, “I started thinking about maybe I should come out because pronouns and that were starting to get on top of me and being called like a boy and stuff like that was really affecting me”. In order to maximise the likelihood of receiving acceptance from others, participants chose the timing of coming out carefully. Considerations were given to the time in the school year, to the perceived inclusivity of the school that they currently attended and to how they wanted to come out:

I guess, I started to really think about it sort of first year of high school… is when, because that was the first sort of chance I got to actually think about it more openly because this high school that I’m going to is a lot better than what my primary school was. It’s a much more accepting place and it’s much more open **(Participant 2).**

#### Subtheme: Trying to pass.

Most participants did not identify as ‘trans male’ or ‘trans female’ when asked for their gender; rather, they stated simply male or female. These participants wanted to be viewed, treated, accepted, and validated as the gender with which they identified rather than as a ‘trans’ individual. Therefore, one main concern participants expressed was related to ‘passing’ as their identified gender in everyday life. If participants were misgendered (identified as their assigned sex rather than the gender with which they identified) they experienced negative emotions including gender dysphoria. For some participants, there was a strong sense of avoiding exposure as being a trans young person as they wished to be recognised only as the gender with which they identified. Participant 4 said, “It was really hard because I would get misgendered a lot and it could just, it would ruin a day, completely ruin a day for me.” This was echoed by Participant 7:

When like you don’t really feel like you pass enough as like a guy or something because all the other ones are really tall they [have] really deep voices with veins sticking out their arms and stuff ha ha and I’m just sitting there like ‘oh’ like half… half the height of everyone and like really squeaky voice **(Participant 7).**

#### Subtheme: Wanting trans education in schools.

In order to increase trans acceptance and validation, and also acceptance for all members of the LGBTQ+ community, participants suggested that schools should educate pupils about sexual and gender diverse individuals. In doing so, participants believed that schools would increase understanding, reduce concerns and increase the likelihood of acceptance for all LGBTQ+ individuals from both staff and pupils. In addition, through education of LGBTQ+ issues, participants felt that LGBTQ+ young people may spend less time feeling different, as they will have the language and understanding to explain their emotions.

### Theme two: Receiving acceptance and validation

#### Subtheme: Tailored school response.

The participants who felt accepted and validated at school had often experienced highly individualised support when they came out to school staff. A tailored school response involved staff asking the young person what they wanted to happen and, importantly, the staff would listen carefully so that they could apply the young person’s views by tailoring the school’s approach to supporting them. This was important to participants because each trans young person had different wants, needs and views; therefore, it was key that the school provided support with which the young person would feel comfortable. Participants who were provided with the opportunity to have autonomy over the way in which they would come out, the support to be put in place, and any changes to be made in school, felt accepted and conveyed a positive view of the school’s response. In contrast, schools who appeared to have a set process for responding to participants coming out as transgender created feelings of worry and confusion amongst the participants. Participant 6 highlighted the need to be heard by school staff:

I would have liked them to have been a bit more respectful of my opinions and of my where I was at… ‘cause I just wanted to erm have access to the male toilet which I didn’t think was that big an issue, erm and it’s not but that’s what it’s turned in to **(Participant 6).**

#### Subtheme: Peer acceptance.

Most participants had received supportive attitudes and behaviour from their close friends and peers which appeared to contribute to their sense of acceptance and validation at school. Participants appreciated peers who were curious, yet, well-meaning, and those with whom they could have ‘normal’ conversations. For example, “a lot of people started their questions by saying ‘I don’t want to sound rude but’ and then asked the question that wasn’t in any way rude and they were, the people at school are lovely” (Participant 6). Such normalisation fostered a sense of belonging amongst their peers. In addition, participants valued peers who made an effort to use the correct pronouns and names, and who were willing to accept their pronoun and name mistakes in a humble manner without excessively apologising. In doing so, it appeared that discomfort from accidental misuse of pronouns was reduced by avoiding attention from others related to their gender identity.

#### Subtheme: Teacher response.

The extent to which schoolteachers expressed their acceptance of trans students influenced some participants’ perceptions of their school’s level of acceptance and inclusivity. Teachers who were viewed as accepting and validating ensured the use of the participants’ correct pronouns and names. For example:

A lot of the staff are lovely as well, a lot of just my regular teachers… they’re always really polite and really respectful erm, I’ve had a lot of people just apologise to me for err messing up my pronouns erm and it’s just really nice ‘cause they err a lot of the staff and all the pupils do respect me and do try their best to be a good ally **(Participant 6).**

In addition, teachers would adjust their style of communication and the topics they discussed to align with the student’s gender identity.

### Theme three: Active rejection and invalidation

#### Subtheme: Hostility and bullying.

Prior to beginning their social transition by coming out to a friend, family member or their school, participants had experienced rejection in various ways. Several participants were concerned about peers who they described as subscribers of toxic masculinity ideology. For example, Participant 8 shared, “all the boys are like masculine and bullies.” Therefore, participants were concerned that their divergence from traditional gender stereotypes would be rejected and invalidated through deliberate acts of verbal or physical victimisation due to toxic masculinity. Participant 10 described another incidence of hostility and bullying:

This teacher turned to me, I think that she’s a lesbian, but she turned to me and said ‘you’re not a real boy so I don't have to treat you like one’ **(Participant 10).**

Some participants experienced a reduction in bullying after coming out as transgender. Nevertheless, it is important to note that no participant reported experiencing a total absence of hostile or bullying behaviour.

Many participants who experienced bullying referred to the purposeful public use of their old assigned name (deadnaming) and pronouns (misgendering) as a means for bullies to reject and invalidate their gender identity. Participant 3 discussed their experience of deadnaming, both accidental and on purpose: “the teacher deadnaming me… and there’s been a couple of kids that have done it to try and annoy me.”.

#### Subtheme: School apathy.

The way in which school staff responded to participants coming out had an impact on their view of the supportive and inclusive nature of their school, and therefore, their sense of rejection and invalidation. Schools were typically portrayed as well-meaning, yet, some were apathetic towards the importance of changes and provision of support to enable the participant to feel comfortable at school. For example, Participant 5 believed the staff had not been thorough in their actions to support his transition: (Interviewer) “Is there something you’d have liked the school to have done differently then around trying to make sure it’s as supportive and positive a change as possible?”; (Participant 5) “Double check that it’s [old name] deleted next time”.

### Theme four: Passive rejection and invalidation

#### Subtheme: Heteronormative culture.

Most participants identified the dominant culture of their school as heteronormative and with a demarcated binary model of gender. As participants learned the cultural norms were at odds with their internal experience of gender, participants indirectly experienced a strong sense of rejection and invalidation. Participant 1 reflected on the progress in societal acceptance of the homosexual population: “Transgender issues now are like what gay rights issues were about 30 years ago; it’s kinda that kinda thing. It’s still a very taboo thing in schools”. Participant 2 noted an experience of implicit heteronormative and cisnormative bias within the school curriculum:

People were like, they tried to be accepting of like different sexualities but like my primary, the closest thing we got was in our final like three lessons of sexual health sort of education, was a one-minute talk of the teacher asking the entire class ‘does everyone know what gay means? And do you know not to be mean to people for it?’ and that was it, just moving on. So it was, it was really indirect, but it was very clearly shown that it wasn’t normal, like it wasn’t a normal thing **(Participant 2).**

#### Subtheme: Gendered school systems and facilities.

All 10 participants noted experiences of rejection and invalidation due to the systemic use of gender as a method of social categorisation. Many participants attended schools where certain classes were divided into male and female, and their classroom seating was organised by the gender of students. In addition, every school that participants attended had gendered toilets and changing rooms. Moreover, school staff were thought to unconsciously validate heteronormative culture through their use of language and conversation topics with male students in comparison to female students. This use of gender as a means of social categorisation within schools serves as an unconscious endorsement of heteronormativity and, therefore, rejection and invalidation for participants whose gender identity does not conform to this culture. Furthermore, such gendered facilities would often expose the participant as ‘different’ as they would require special measures to accommodate their gender identity. For example:

Changing rooms were the other thing so that’s why I wanted to get them sorted as soon as possible, changing rooms, toilet, they kind of go in the same category… naa I didn’t like it at all, it would flare up dysphoria and then obviously you get the banter in the changing rooms and stuff like that and I just felt really disconnected from that kind of thing **(Participant 1).**

### Theme five: Consequences of rejection and invalidation

#### Subtheme: Mental health.

Most participants shared that they had experienced significant mental health difficulties. Some participants were unsure whether their poor mental health was a pre-existing factor that may have been negatively impacted through experiences of rejection and invalidation. However, other participants believed their mental health had deteriorated as a direct result of experiencing ongoing rejection and invalidation of their gender identity. Participant 3 contemplated if his anxiety was related to his gender identity, “because of anxiety… it’s got worse as the years have gone on though… I think it could be to do with being trans as well, it’s got a bit worse.” Participant 9 shared how ongoing victimisation affected him, “I developed like mental health problems… to the point where I ended up trying to take my own life… erm which landed me in an inpatient unit.”

#### Subtheme: School attendance.

Rejection and invalidation also had a significant negative impact on some participants’ school attendance. Participant 8 shared the effects of rejection and anticipated rejection from staff and peers on her school attendance: (Interviewer) “Is that anxiety having quite a big impact on your day-to-day school life?”; (Participant) “Mm hmm”; (Interviewer) “What kind of impact?”; (Participant) “I don’t go”.

## Discussion

This research set out to explore the views and experiences of transgender young people in secondary education. The overarching theme, acceptance and validation, was identified through inductive reflexive thematic analysis of the data, together with five main themes: seeking acceptance and validation; receiving acceptance and validation; active rejection and invalidation; passive rejection and invalidation; and consequences of rejection and invalidation.

The overarching theme generated in this study underpins the narratives of participants’ views and experiences and highlights two basic needs for trans youth in school: acceptance and validation. This finding can be explained by Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) belongingness hypothesis whereby the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. In the present study, participants detailed their attempts to maximise the amount of acceptance and validation they could receive through various means, including researching gender, carefully timing coming out, and endeavouring to pass as their identified gender. The attempts made by participants appeared to be motivated by their basic need to belong; participants favourably reflected on the ways in which they received acceptance and validation, and negatively discussed ways in which they were rejected and invalidated as their identified gender. Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that individuals who experienced deficits in belonging were more likely to suffer from psychological and physical health problems. This serves to explain participants’ accounts of the ways in which they experienced rejection and invalidation and how this affected their wellbeing. Thus, participants’ views and experiences seemed to be shaped by the extent to which teachers, peers and the school environment provided a sense of belonging through social acceptance and validation.

The dominance of heteronormative and cisnormative cultures perpetuated in schools through a variety of means provided challenges to participants achieving a sense of belonging. Within this study and previous research, there are examples of ways in which schools passively reinforce gender norms, including gender segregated facilities, the discourse and everyday language students and teachers use when discussing gender, and the lack of LGBTQ+ information within the curriculum (Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Woolley, 2017). Although transgender individuals fit within the accepted binary model of gender (male to female or female to male), in contrast to having no place within that model (i.e., non-binary), heteronormative culture expects a person’s gender to reflect their biological sex and to be demonstrated clearly through stereotypical visual appearance and behaviour. Participants experienced a passive, yet sincere, sense of rejection as they learned that the cultural norms of the environment were at odds with their internal experience of their gender. Consequently, they often chose to disregard or conceal their feelings to avoid potential social rejection and invalidation engendered by the cultural norms.

Actively seeking acceptance and validation continued to be a strong motivator for participants as they felt a tension between the need to reduce personal feelings of dysphoria and the need to be accepted as their identified gender. Participants sought information related to their gender incongruence to gain a sense of acknowledgement and validation of their feelings. However, learning about being transgender was not enough to feel a sense of belonging to society and every participant eventually felt a strong need to come out due to uncomfortable feelings of dysphoria. Participants’ experience of dysphoria appeared to be due to a sense of dissonance between their personal gender identity and how others perceived their gender (based on biology). Therefore, participants’ sense of dysphoria may have been a result of cisnormative culture and associated experiences of invalidation and rejection, which led to a negative and dissonant perception of their body. If a new model of gender, such as the Genderbread model (Killerman, 2017) were accepted and normalised, trans individuals may not feel a sense of dissonance between their body and gender identity; their body would no longer represent the ‘wrong’ gender. Hence, gender dysphoria may in part be a sense of societal rejection.

Many participants shared their experiences of active rejection prior to, and subsequent to, coming out. Victimisation of transgender young people has been documented extensively within previous research (Day et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2012). The heteronormativity and cisnormativity frameworks can help to explain bullying whereby individuals who subscribe to such views attempt to ‘police’ and uphold gender norms by actively rejecting and invalidating those who might transgress them (McGuire et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2012). It is possible that individuals who perceive violations of traditional gender norms feel a sense of challenge to their accepted model of gender and, therefore, feel the need to defend it (Read et al., 2020). Some participants also experienced further direct rejection in the form of school apathy, whereby school staff appeared to lack understanding of the importance of providing young trans people with a sense of belonging through school changes. It has been well documented that experiences of bullying, rejection and invalidation related to gender identity are linked to negative outcomes including feelings of isolation, school absence, poor educational outcomes and mental health difficulties (Day et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). Within this study, some participants believed that the rejection they experienced directly affected their mental health, which then impacted upon their school attendance. Thus, the three main themes related to ‘rejection and invalidation’ may provide further support to Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) conclusion that individuals subjected to deficits in belonging are likely to experience mental health difficulties.

Experiences of receiving acceptance and validation at school appeared to provide participants with a sense of belonging. Participants valued having opportunities to express their views of what changes in school would be helpful and to have their opinions influence the appropriate actions to be taken. Therefore, it was important that schools listened and tailored their response to each trans young person rather than responding in a standardised manner, which supports findings by Schimmel-Bristow et al. (2018). Moreover, participants’ views of school were often determined by the accepting nature of school staff and their peer group. Participants were pleased when peers were curious and when they treated them as normal. Together, a tailored school response, positive teacher response, and peer support helped to create a positive school climate for participants, which have been determined as important predictors of belonging in past research (Aerts et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2016; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018).

### Limitations

Notable limitations of this study are related to the method of data collection. All participants were recruited at a single charity residential weekend, so all participants were in receipt of support from the charity. This may have influenced participants’ views and experiences through either a greater focus on positive or negative aspects. Additionally, in order to attend the residential event, the charity required young people to be accompanied by parents; thus, participants’ attendance suggests supportive relationships with their parents in relation to their gender identity. Furthermore, this research includes a low representation of lower secondary school aged youth and trans females which may represent the population of trans young people. It is possible to review the number of referrals in the last year received by the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), a specialised clinic within the UK commissioned by the NHS for young people experiencing gender dysphoria, and they reveal a lower number of referrals for lower secondary-aged trans young people and for young people assigned male at birth/trans females (see Table 1).

Table 1. Gender Identity Development Service referral figures financial years 2020-2021

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age at referral** | **Sex assigned at birth** | | |
| **Female** | **Male** | **Not known** |
| 11 | 62 | 22 | 6 |
| 12 | 119 | 21 | 11 |
| 13 | 181 | 66 | 30 |
| 14 | 326 | 106 | 28 |
| 15 | 342 | 163 | 34 |
| 16 | 304 | 174 | 34 |

Moreover, due to the epistemological stance taken, the researcher’s prior knowledge and experience will have inevitably contributed to the understanding and interpretation of the data. It is important to note that two researchers identify as cisgender and one researcher identifies as transgender.

### Implications

Several implications are noted for policy makers, schools and educational psychologists (EPs). Policy makers may wish to amend the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) national curriculum (or equivalent curricula) to include teaching about gender diversity and discrimination. Specifically, all young people could be given the opportunity to learn about alternative models of gender such as queer sociology, gender pluralism and degendering (Sanger, 2010). Consequently, young people experiencing a varied sense of gender would be accorded knowledge and validation, which may in turn, serve to support their mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the integration of gender identity information and issues into the wider curriculum would serve to normalise gender diversity.

With adequate support, senior school staff members would be in a good position to modify their school policies, systems and practices to create a gender-inclusive school environment and ethos. The key changes could include degendering PE lessons, creating gender-neutral toilet and changing facilities, providing gender diversity training to staff, and ensuring alternative gender options are available on all documents. It will be important for future research to establish the effectiveness of whole-school approaches that promote acceptance of gender diversity to increase trans young peoples’ sense of acceptance and validation in school.

Schools could also provide clear and accessible guidelines on what constitutes gender identity related bullying within their school policy, and the process of reporting and dealing with such cases. It may also be useful for schools to designate a member of staff as an LGBTQ+ ally, though, it would be important that all staff understand their role in supporting transgender students by embracing diversity and fostering good relations. Staff will need support to ensure they are cognisant of transphobic and discriminatory behaviour, and to know how best to address such behaviour. Moreover, school staff will need support to understand the importance of treating a trans student as the gender with which they identify and avoid gendered classroom practices such as ‘boy-girl’ seating plans and ‘boys versus girls’ competitions to prevent feelings of rejection.

EPs are well positioned to support the successful implementation of new school policies and practices by collaboratively devising implementation plans with schools (Graham et al., 2006; Patel, 2013). In addition, EPs are apposite advocates for young people and can act as facilitators of problem-solving meetings between school staff, parents and the young person. Within such meetings, EPs can use their psychological knowledge and conciliation skills to explore what could further support an overall positive school experience for trans young people by considering the school environment, ethos and values, and understanding of gender diversity, and the impact upon the young person.

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**)**

1. **Interview Schedule**

**Interview schedule**

**Descriptive data:**

* What is your name? (they will provide their preferred name)
* How old are you? What year are you currently in at school? *\*Build rapport by talking about their specific year group, e.g. for Year 7s, how have they managed the transition from primary to secondary, if they’re in Year 8 or if they’re in Year 9 they’re likely to be choosing their options, if they’re in Year 10/11 they’re likely to be taking some exams\**
* How would you describe your gender? You can tell me in any way you’d like, or feel free to say that you do not want to.
* *\*Specific prompt: what pronouns do you use?*
* When did you begin your social transition, can you remember when you told your friends and/or family? What school year were you in?
* How did you first learn about Mermaids? Do you know when this was?
* *\*Provide a description of this study to the participant using the participant information sheet\**
* Can I ask why you have decided to take part in this study?

**In depth data:**

* How is school going?
* \**Specific prompts: Do you have a favourite teacher? Do you have a favourite subject? What are the other children like?*
* How do you feel about school?
* Can you tell me about when you first felt that you wanted to speak to someone about transitioning?
* Who did you tell at school about socially transitioning?
* What did they say?
* Tell me about the key factors that were involved in your transition at school?
* Tell me about your experience of transitioning?

**If not answered from the above questions:**

* What challenges did you experience?
* What do you think helped to resolve these challenges?
* Is there anything you think could have helped to resolve or reduce these challenges that wasn’t implemented or available to you?
* Is there anything you would have done differently?
* Is there anything you’d have liked others to do differently?
* What went particularly well during your time at school since first telling people?
* What school factors were/are most important to you?
* What support did you receive?

**Final question:**

* Is there anything else you would like to add about your views and experiences of socially transitioning whilst at school that we haven’t covered today?

**General prompts:**

* Tell me more about that
* What do you mean by that?
* Is there anything else you would like to add?

*\*Summarise their comments to check understanding\**

*\*Pause\**