

# Gendered School Cultures as Limit-Situations: The Roles of friendship and Friends in Challenging Gender-Normativity

Dr Zowie Davy

[zowie.davy@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:zowie.davy@dmu.ac.uk)

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- Psychologically:
- how friendship dynamically affects a child's development
- what constitutes good and bad friendships
- What friendships can accomplish in relation to positive mental health outcomes
- How good and secure child/carer attachments (Bowlby, 1958) provides emotional bonds with their caregivers and predictive of other close relationships later in life including secure friendships (Waters & Cummings, 2000).
- Clinical:
- friendships as precarious in trans related literature, due to the real possibilities of rejection by friends. "It is not unusual for trans and gender diverse people to experience multiple costs when they come out as trans or gender diverse, including a loss of friends" (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006).

- Hines (Hines, 2007) demonstrated from reports from her transgender participants that friends in their network were key in providing social support not otherwise provided by the family of origin
- trans and gender diverse people often anticipate the risk of compromising their friendships when coming out as trans and or during transition (Baril, 2015).

# Methodology

- Analytical approach: Phenomenology influenced by Merleau-Ponty and Paulo Freire
- From this perspective we were able to analyze friends and friendships within a dynamic process, ongoing, and unfolding and to which we conclude that with a range of friends interacting, they contribute to developing democratic and more equitable services for trans and gender diverse children at school.

# The research question

- What are the experiences of parents who support their children within school cultures?
- The research tool:
- Experiences of parents in relation to friends and family, school staff, and advocacy within the school
- Perceptions about how the school was supportive, or not, within a range of school cultures
- Explore parents' perceptions of the gender limits imposed/allowed in schools - gender roles, identities and expressions, and the freedom to determine gender.
- Perceptions of teacher training and school policies about (trans) gender and gender diversity, which is not fully reported on here.

# Sample and sampling

- From social network and support groups due to the relatively small cohort size of supportive parents of trans and gender diverse children in the UK.
- This is a possible limitation of the study.
- We attempted to mitigate some of the potential negative experiences by asking parents about positive aspects of schools
- Interview data were collected from 21 parents across the UK.
- Parents identified as men (n=4), women (n=15) and trans (n=2)
- Ethnicity: white British (n=17), Afro-Caribbean British (n=1), Anglo-Asian British (n=1) and white Polish (n=2).
- Parents came from rural and urban villages, towns, and cities.
- The schools that their children attend(ed) range(d) from reception to high school.

# Bullying and the role of friends

- “there was one person in particular who was just making it impossible. [Name] said that it was when he was changing, and how he was identifying just made it impossible. There was one incredible friend though who knew about all this before we did and [name] came out to this pupil beforehand and they have been exceptional.” (Parent of AFAB adolescent boy)
- “The school was very good at stopping this and they were very good at stopping people picking on people because they were different, rather than pulling out trans as something. You shouldn’t pick on anyone, any sort of disrespectful language whether it be race, sexuality, any sort of language” (Nicola, parent of AFAB adolescent genderqueer person).
- “At the start of the year there was a bit of pushing, but it was dealt with very quickly” (Victoria, parent of AMAB prepubescent girl).

# Fear of loss and rejection

- I said well you haven't told me anything, as far as I know you have friends , you are doing good at school [...] I did have to plan the coming-out at school, and [name] was really worried about it all going wrong with her friends [...] Also the head teacher said that they would train all the teachers before she came-out. They did little things like saying class, or children rather than saying boys and things like that. So she was grateful for that (Parent of AMAB pubescent girl).
- “I think her anxiety has gone down a lot. There were times when she didn't want to go to school, her attendance was quite low, she was worried about her friends, not the rest of the world but her friends, and they supported her so well that she improved. Children nowadays are much more open. I was quite worried that they would not be so positive.” (Anna-Marie, Parent of AMAB girl)



# Gender distancing

- “some of the boys have taken a step back, so [name] is just understanding where they are coming from and has found that a bit difficult, because she doesn’t just want to be with just the girls. And at the start of the summer holidays [name] started off at a bit of a low mood, because she felt that she didn’t have any close friends, so she was in between the two really, they have been very good at accepting it, but she has not really felt that she could get close to them. You had a lot of support from [friend’s name] and [friend’s name], they have been very supportive.” (Parent of adolescent AMAB girl, the child was in the room at the time of the interview).

# Enduring friendships through time

- “she has so many friendships and things I think that she feels very happy and fortunate and pleased that she can be who she really is and people are ok with that. As I say she has some really lovely friends and I am hoping that they will last the distance with her. She has some male friends who continue to be her friend, which is brilliant.” (Parent of AMAB pre-pubertal girl)

# Coming out-unexpected reactions

- Carole: yes, the difference is that the girls knew [name] already, they like her and that is who she is.
- Zowie: do you think that the pupils are much more knowledgeable nowadays?
- Carole: yes I think they are partly more knowledgeable but partly it is what it is. They are so much more open to difference, whether it is gender or ability or sexuality and this kind of stuff for young people is kind of whatever, it is not an issue (Carole, parent of AMAB girl)

# Children's friendship as micro-communities

- “He has little group of friends, but they are all girls and he tried to mix in with the boy's, he was in a school band, but they were going down the park, smoking a bit of weed and [name] thought that he had to do that to be one of the boys [...] so he did it for a while, but now he has got a boyfriend and other friends, he doesn't go out with the other boys” (Audrey parent of AFAB boy)
- “It was going into the first year at college and it was during that first couple of months there and meeting lots of new people and talking to different people and different ideas they then started to have conversations about defining yourself like non-binary and very much talking about sexuality and gender at the same time. And then they said that they are non-binary sexuality and non-binary gender and they like the fact when people do not know whether they are a boy or a girl. It was much more accepting at college than it ever was at school. I don't think that they were confident to tell people at school but at college they were and willing to stand up for friends as well. And then got involved with [organization] and since then they have helped to set up some LGBT groups at college and then onto university saying that I am genderqueer. So very much confident in who they are and finding who they are this year really” (Parent of AFAB genderqueer child).

# Children more knowledgeable, accepting and identifying as LGBTQ

- “his closest friend at school is gender fluid and identifies as “they” pronouns, I struggle to understand that concept, but I am understanding it more now. Some of his friendship group are gay and I think they are just a nice friendship group and I think he felt comfortable with them.” (Parent of adolescent AFAB boy)

Parents' liberal friendship groups

# LGBT “Friendly” structures