Introduction

A recent media flurry in the UK about trans and gender diverse children is testimony to the fact that trans and gender diverse children are increasingly acknowledged within families and visible within school cultures. Children who express themselves in a way that is not traditionally associated with their assigned sex at birth (henceforth: assigned male at birth (AMAB) or assigned female at birth (AFAB)), and their parents are beginning to enact cultural changes in schools. Some parents are supporting their children with “social transitions.” These transitions are not necessarily about encouraging a child towards a particular (medical) transgender path, but rather about accepting their children’s gender explorations and affirming their gender roles, expressions and identities by means of using respectful and congruent language (e.g., names, pronouns and documentation) as a matter of basic human dignity (Winters et al., 2018). As such, social transitions for trans and gender diverse children are co-constituted by parents and their children by attempting to eliminate the limitations imposed by the schools in relation to changing names, pronouns, uniforms and gender-segregated spaces, such as toilets and changing facilities, thus facilitating safe spaces that allow the child to freely explore and live their experienced gender identity, role and expression.

Trans and gender diverse youth are considered one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups at school (Kosciw & Pizmony-Levy, 2016). Freire (2000) demonstrates through his sociological pedagogy that (oppressed) people are the starting points of social change when they overcome “limit situations” and that schools are important sites of struggle. He suggests that “limit-situations” are manifest at the interface at which a person meets micro and macro structural limits, and at which time people think and reflect on their situation, ontologically considering it, but experiencing it as limiting. Limit situations are (consciously and
unconsciously) created by people. These limit-situations support particular social structural inequalities which can be challenged and changed through reflective dialogical processes. According to Freire (2005), dialogical processes are fundamental for generating I-Thou relationships between (at least) two subjects. He states: “in the dialectic of these relationships […] there are subjects who meet to name the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000: 167 emphasis in original). Through I-Thou dialogues, all parties respectfully reflect on each other’s realities of the culture they live in, which always, whether in positive or negative ways, engenders a consciousness about potential social change. By identifying the “thematic universe” and following a series of problem-posing in which people are limited, a new habitus is formed, and it is here that the possibility for change lies. The habitus is embodied socialized norms or tendencies in spaces that influence behavior and thinking. It affects but is not a determiner of the identity, actions and choices of the individual. Actions and choices in the habitus are linked to a person’s cultural capital, which can be represented simply as knowledge, money, and social connections (Bourdieu, 1992). According to Crossley (2001) the habitus is not a context that dupes people in acting in particular ways but predisposes them to act in potential ways, facilitating agency in pursuit of specific goals. Although not specifically commenting on gender transformations, we think Freire would not deny that limit-situations involving gender identities, expressions and roles can be expedited through micro dialogical negotiations between family members in the course of daily relationships and interactions and that these can, consequently, engender more macro changes in school policy and professional pedagogical practice through discussions in schools.

Freire (2000) argues that an investigation of the “thematic universe” within pedagogical spaces can install education as an important conduit of freedoms, because experiences and
Positionalities can be acknowledged and then problematized as limiting people’s liberties through reasoned understanding. This democratic dialogical context can engender a transitive critical consciousness towards an equitable life and away from what he calls naïve transitivity, which is rooted in a conscious state of intransitivity that is underpinned with a nostalgia for past ways of living and a lack of interest in new possibilities. However, according to Freire (2000), this naïve state of intransitivity can for numerous reasons be defended with fanciful explanations for immobility and fragile arguments and polemics about traditions, rather than contributing to a dialogue.

Freire (2000) argues that limit-situations can also be reformed positively with the help of teachers if they adopt an ethical duty as citizens and if they are prepared to promote pedagogical spaces for understanding and developing possibilities – in this case, gender identities, roles and spaces – and by embracing the dissent necessary for transforming and democratizing our communities (Darder, 2017). The ability of teachers to exercise in-group agency that challenges oppressive gender norms can help to create a shared alternative future and produce “untested feasibilities” (Freire, 2000: 113) which can be expedited within school cultures.

Sociologists have long emphasized the role of the (hidden) curriculum within schools from Durkheim (1961) to Jackson (1968) in depicting students as passive receptacles of gender socialization aided by government institutions shaping or maintaining gender roles, expressions and identities. However, the role of parents, their trans and gender diverse children and the teachers within the school has received comparatively scant attention in their attempt at producing a critical consciousness that challenges limit-situations in relation to children’s gendered life at school.
In this article we examine data obtained from parents across the UK who are supportive of their trans and gender diverse children. Here, we start to develop an understanding of how parents, their trans and gender diverse children and some teachers are reconfiguring gendered ‘limit situations’ (Freire, 2000). Freire (1998, 2000, 2005) provides us with a useful framework to understand how school cultures and their populations are contributing to a living praxis about gender and underwriting the freeing of trans and gender diverse children. As such, the recognition of these gendered subjects and the limits imposed are where possibilities for change can begin. Particularly, we will argue that parents, their trans and gender diverse children and teachers are changing school cultures through an enlivened critical consciousness that helps to reconfigure both personal and structural limit-situations by introducing “untested feasibilities” (Freire, 2000: 113), affecting children’s membership in (school) cultures.

**Trans and gender diverse children in society**

Parents adopting the social transition approach towards their children’s gender explorations have had an outpouring of criticisms levelled at them in the UK and the US. Criticisms from some feminists with a trans-hostile agenda suggest that parents are forcing trans activists’ “trendy ideology” on innocent children (Jess Glass, 2018). These criticisms assume that cisgender children – those that identify with the sex assigned at birth – are ‘normal’ and being trans or gender diverse is ‘abnormal’; and moreover that the children are being pressured into (trans) gender roles, expressions and identities, which are not of their choosing, even though the etiology of transgender identities is far from being understood.

Mallon and DeCrescenzo (2006: 217) argue: “In such a hostile environment, blaming the child for their failure to adapt to traditional gender norms is easy.” Within society, those who are hostile to trans and gender diverse children generally believe that all children should have a
‘normal’ gender which is based on the gender-normative assumption that genitals equate to gender identity and expression. For instance, some parents stating that they had Christian values appeared on numerous prime-time news channels discussing their removal of their child from school because they did not want them subjected to a trans child that the school was supporting (Nagesh, 2017). There is much social pressure from many quarters to conform to traditional and religious models of binary gender. However, this also suggests that gender diversity is not viewed as natural psychosexual development in children. Those children who cannot change or refuse to change their gender non-conformity are treated and judged much more harshly by a society that insists on adherence to strict gender norms. The major threat, it seems, is that through the witnessing of this so called “transgender ideology,” the ‘deviant’ gender behavior has somehow become affected and also has transmittable elements (i.e., gender normativity is changeable into gender diversity). This would mean that gender normativity is more unstable than gender diversity because a child can become gender diverse by simply being exposed to ‘transgender propaganda.’ There does not seem to be a reversal mechanism for gender diversity. For example, one cannot simply become gender normative by witnessing gender normativity in action within this logic. This, of course, is far from the truth. Children who deviate from the socially-prescribed behavioral norms for boys and girls are often quickly pressed to conform by some parental figures, teachers and peers. In this sense, gender is not seen as naturally fluid, unstable and elusive. The naïve consciousness about gender fixity as a correct developmental pathway privileges some idealized gender expressions over others (Butler, 1990). As such, those who are hostile towards the mere existence of gender diverse children uphold the powerful structures surrounding traditional gender roles, expressions and identities.
Many of these critics of gender diversity in childhood are active on social media and use truncated academic studies to argue the case against supporting trans and gender diverse children with any form of transition. Much psychological research considering trans and gender diverse children seems to privilege gender normativity as the most suitable developmental and social outcome and often infers that gender diverse expressions in children are merely phases (Steensma, McGuire, Kreukels, Beekman, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013), sometimes cases of confused mental ill health (Kaltiala-Heino, Sumia, Työläjärvi, & Lindberg, 2015) and/or resultant from bad parenting (Kuvalanka, Allen, Munroe, Goldberg, & Weiner, 2018; Stoller, 1975). Many of these critics active on social media often (mis)quote the studies that have been conducted with trans and gender diverse children. While recognizing that many follow-up studies were conducted (Green, 1987; Money & Russo, 1979; Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Zuger, 1978), this body of research argues that gender ‘non-conforming’ children move from abnormal to normal gendered states. These studies further advocate for a wait and see approach for clinicians and parents with the assumption that the majority of children will grow up to be gender-normative and/or gay or lesbian. This wait and see approach is most notably visible in psychological research about persistence/desistence in trans and gender diverse children (Temple Newhook et al., 2018). More recently, there have been some more studies that have tried to evidence the persistence/desistence rates (Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, & Zucker, 2008; Steensma, Biemond, de Boer, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2011; Steensma et al., 2013; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). The results build on an axiom that about 80 per cent of children assessed in gender identity clinics do not go on to transition to a different gender to that assigned at birth. Steensma et al. (2011) have demonstrated that between the ages of 11 and 13 years old, and with the advent of puberty and realizations about sexuality, some children do change their minds
about their social transition. However, Temple Newhook et al. (2018) demonstrate that the evidence in these more recent studies about desistance have many shortfalls, because of the methodological, theoretical, ethical and interpretive position that they take. As such, the evidence has not been adequately achieved to make such claims because the analysis of “desistance” does not include sufficient longitudinal evidence, as gender transitions can occur at any point in a lifetime. Other assumptions in the follow-up studies that Temple Newhook et al. (2018) critiqued were that some children were judged to be desisting by their parents or that the conclusion was based upon other third party information rather than the children themselves. Between one-fifth and one-third of participants were not part of the follow-up evaluations, and 22 per cent of them were termed “non-responders” including 19 per cent whose transitioning status was unknown. Three per cent did indicate that they had desisted. Despite many outcome statuses “being unknown or unconfirmed, these were all categorized as desisters in all three Dutch studies” (Temple Newhook et al., 2018: 216). Moreover, there is little acknowledgement in these desistance/persistence reports that many children may desire living beyond a binary notion of gender (Richards et al., 2016) and/or may not necessarily need or access (the same) gender clinic in the future.

Commentators suggest that this waiting approach on the basis of questionable desistance/persistence rates risks professionals and parents neglecting the child’s experienced gender identity (Winters et al., 2018). What these studies also do is situate supportive parents and trans and gender diverse children as non-subjects; objects that assertions are made upon with a naïve consciousness about the potential of developing diverse gender roles, expressions and identities. This objectification predominates the research and results in proclamations with questionable substance, a nostalgia for tradition and the past and polemics from those who will
not form dialogical relations with the parents and children in light of their subaltern knowledge in an attempt at democratic reform (Freire, 2005) of gender roles, expressions and identities.

**Trans and gender diverse children in School Cultures**

Trans youth are considered one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups at school (Kosciw & Pizmony-Levy, 2016) and while some studies suggest that sexual minorities are seeing an increase in acceptance, trans and gender diverse students continue to face more hostile school climates compared to their lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer cisgender peers (Kosciw & Pizmony-Levy, 2016). However, Kosciw and Pizmony-Levy’s (2016) research also shows that cisgender students who have a chance to learn about gender-inclusivity are more aware of the difficulties that trans and gender diverse students face. Parallel themes have emerged elsewhere and indicate that when trans and gender diverse students have their gender expression affirmed, their engagement in school increases (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015; Seelman, Walls, Hazel, & Wisneski, 2012). Other recent contributions arguing for a democratization of schooling suggest that academic work suffers if teachers do not affirm a student’s gender in terms of language use, through pronouns, name or identity. Similarly, Jones et al. (2016) show that gender diverse students who do not receive support from their teachers were more likely to leave school, hide at lunch and experience increased harassment and abuse from peers (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton, 2016). This evidence shows that support is pivotal in improving psychological, social and academic outcomes (Seelman et al., 2015). Visible support in school is therefore important for trans and gender diverse youth; however, very little of this research shows how effectively providing a safe, equitable learning environment for trans and gender diverse students is manifested.
Notable in these studies however is the attempt to acknowledge the pedagogy taking place with gender diverse students, not as a problem to be resolved but in creating a student-centered culture that meets the needs of all children regardless of their gender role, expression and identity. Part of this student-centered culture that parents of trans and gender diverse children report consists of implementing non-discrimination policies, which they felt would break down barriers to their children’s future (Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

**Teachers’ Competence**

In order to effectively provide a safe, equitable learning environment for all students, it is critical (through advocacy by parents) that the voices of trans and gender diverse youth are heard by education professionals, reflected on and considered in their pedagogical practice (Case & Meier, 2014). To address some of these issues, some school districts in the US have implemented professional development workshops in which gender diversity issues are discussed and recommendations are given on how to become allies to gender diverse youth (Case & Meier, 2014). These approaches are underpinned by collective challenges and attempt stimulating a critical consciousness about the possibilities of gender and sexual diversity. However, these workshops are typically outside official educational training, and it is typically at the behest of school administrators to provide these resources (Fox, 2015). Thus, gender diversity educational resources are not likely to reach many educators and practitioners. Research suggests that it is therefore essential that trainee educators and other professionals (Case, Stewart, & Tittsworth, 2009; de Jong, 2015) working in schools are trained about gender diversity while attaining their degrees (Case & Meier, 2014; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014).

There is still a dearth of research about how parents who are supportive of their trans and gender diverse children in conjunction with teachers and schools are implementing changes to
lessen the limit-situations surrounding gendered possibilities in school cultures. This article adds new insights about how trans and gender diverse children and their parents become subjects in dialogue with school staff (also subjects) in I-Thou relationships and are generating significant school cultural changes with respect to beliefs about sex assignment and gender expressions and who has the right to determine them. We also demonstrate how school cultures are opening up spaces for a dialogue about gender expressions amid both interpersonal and structural limit-situations (Freire, 2000).

**Conceptual Framework**

Our analytic approach in this research is influenced by phenomenology, which acknowledges that the social world is actively perceived through every day experiences, understandings and practices, and people orientate from different thematic universes and may orientate towards different social horizons. Thinking, active subjects construct their realities through and within their lived-horizons (Shapiro, 1985). Particularly, Freire’s (2000) “personal limit theory” is used to explore the experiences of parents of trans and gender diverse children because it theoretically supports our demonstrations of how they began to work through and then attempt to realize their children’s equitable membership in (school) cultures. As suggested above limit-situations are not impassable boundaries but objective realities where all possibilities begin. Parents’ acknowledgment of the perceived and actual limit-situations as objective realities enables them to negotiate interpersonal and institutional limits related to their child’s gender (explorations). This results in the development of dialogically reasoned and appropriated practical solutions affecting the limit situation. These solutions are what Freire (2000: 113) calls “untested feasibilities,” which develop and then affect and shift the broader structural limit-situations. Furthermore, the parents’ experiences help us understand how they are working through the
oppressive structural and interpersonal limits applied to children’s gender self-determination.

We will demonstrate how teachers – and other professionals working inter-professionally with parents and their trans and gender diverse children – attempt to go beyond the technical groundwork and preparations of curricula in order to provide dialogical spaces, which present opportunities for affecting limit-situations. With a range of people interacting, they contribute to developing more equitable and arguably, more democratic services for trans and gender diverse children at school. As such, equality of opportunity in contributing to the democratic process of establishing an equality outcome within schools is desired. If, as parents suggest, these dialogical processes are not implemented, it is impossible for teachers and other professionals in the school to talk about respect or dignity for the students’ developing identities. We show the importance of parents’ encounters with school cultures, their experiences and the significance of the knowledge that they bring with them (Freire, 2000), which broadens the gendered possibilities at school.

**Methods**

The current qualitative study addresses the following research question: What are the experiences of parents who support their children within school cultures? To do this, an interview tool was developed with a range of open questions that would help us understand the relationships between parents, schools and the structuration of genders. We asked about the experiences of parents in relation to school staff, the advocacy work they did within the school and their perceptions about how the school was supportive, or not, while supporting their trans and gender diverse children within a range of school cultures. The research tool also enabled us to explore parents’ perceptions of the gender limits imposed/allowed in schools, the school culture in relation to gender roles, identities and expressions and the school systems in place.
affecting their children’s freedom to determine their own gender roles, expressions and identities. Other sections focused on perceptions of teacher training and school policies about (trans)gender and gender diversity, which is not fully reported here. The research was funded by De Montfort University, UK, and was ethically approved by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Anonymization of the quotations used is rooted in the defining principle of research ethics and that participants in the research should not be recognized or harmed as a result of participation in this study. Due to the relative population size of parents with trans or gender diverse children in the UK, we understood the importance of providing pseudonyms and removing all identifying aspects of the parents, children and schools that feature in the analysis, including the parents’ and children’s actual ages, names and geography of schools that feature in the analysis. A decision was made to characterize the children as prepubescent (between 4 years-10 years old), pubescent (between 11 years-14 years old) and adolescent (15 years-18 years old) so that readers can get an approximate sense of the parents’ and children’s age. We did this after consulting the parents, because a few of them suggested that providing actual ages may identify them within the relatively small community of trans and gender diverse children in the UK. For instance, many of them knew each other from the support groups we recruited them from, which are the same support groups where we have also agreed to disseminate our research findings.

**Sampling**

Savin-Williams (2005) and others (McCormack, Anderson, & Adams, 2014) argue that collecting data from sexual minorities can encourage those who have had particularly troubled experiences, resulting in a skewed idea about the situation of LGBT people in general. Hartman (2011) also argues that there is selection bias locating bisexual research participants using
networks and self-help groups, because respondents tend to be those who have experienced discrimination. We attempted to mitigate some of the potential negative experiences that may be told to us by asking parents about positive aspects of school cultures that were facilitative of their child’s gender identities and gender explorations (see analysis below). We also decided to recruit 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. As such we acknowledge the potential bias of recruiting participants from social networks and that more isolated parents were less likely to participate. This is a potential limitation of the study.

We sent electronic research materials (posters, participant information sheets) to virtual and support networks in the UK: Mermaids, Gendered Intelligence, GIRES, Transgender Alliance and smaller support groups in Hull, Leeds and Leicester who pledged their support when contacted. The materials requested that parents of trans and gender diverse children to contact the first author if they were supporting their children and would like to tell us their experiences of providing this support within school cultures. Interview data were collected from 23 parents of trans and gender diverse children across the UK. Parents identified as men (n=4), women (n=17) and trans (n=2), six of whom were interviewed as couples. One adolescent trans child sat in on one interview and, within it, clarified some points raised. Ethnically, parents interviewed were white British (n=19), 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/nursery school to high school. A few children had moved through the school system as trans or gender diverse, with one going to college and another applying to university. One participant was home-schooling their adolescent child due to concerns about mental ill-health. This parent said that this was not connected to their
child’s trans identity; however, in retrospect home-schooling may have been beneficial.

**Positionality**

The first author was the interviewer. The interviews were conducted after a brief disclosure of her interest in the topic area, and her previous academic and political work. For instance, she disclosed that part of her professional life is taken-up by contributing to political praxis in relation to trans issues, such as sitting on legal and healthcare forums within government and health systems in the UK and Europe, and delivering trans equality workshops for professionals. The second author researches and teaches about gender, sexuality and language as a doctoral candidate and was involved in the analytical process.

Our desire for the study was to co-constitute a research context that was underpinned by empathy, thus we aimed to create dialogical spaces where participants felt comfortable disclosing their diverse stories. We followed the research schedule during the interviews, covering the aforementioned research questions. However, we also encouraged participants to take an active role in the research insofar as they were in control of what they disclosed to us at both the interview stage and the analytical stage.

All participants knew that the interviewer had extensively researched trans communities. They were also aware of the lack of research on parents of trans and gender diverse children and the fact that their voices and bespoke perspectives would be important contributions to the scholarship in this area. Parents were told that this research was underpinned by an “ethics of struggle” (hooks, 1994), which would attempt bridging research, praxis and activism on one level – the level of knowledge and theory that does some emancipatory work and on another level to develop a rigorous piece of research that is honest enough not to cleanse the representational work needed in this area.
Bridging academia and activism is nothing new in Transgender Studies (see Stryker & Whittle, 2006). The authors’ position as activist-academics undeniably affected the initial stages, processes and outcomes of the research, as did the discussions about coding and the co-writing; however, it is not possible to measure how much. As such, and following the feminist researcher Gayle Letherby (2003), we suggest our work should not just be about the Other, but about the interchange between the participants’ experiences and the researcher(s) political and epistemological position (see also Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). We interrogated the dialogical I-Thou relationships between the participants, their children and teachers in order to show theirs and our attempt at amplifying the debate as frontline allies. This is, of course, a difficult mission, especially in an environment that has been described as “disorientating, confusing, and exhausting [and feeling like] drowning in a sea of unknowns” (Nichols, 2019: no page number) by an online blogger who supports their trans child. As such, drawing on Letherby, we aimed to:

Enable the voices of Others to be heard, and to create social and political change for or on behalf of those Others [...] This create[d] a dilemma and involve[d] us in a struggle between acknowledgement of the impossibility of full representation and the assertion that our work makes a difference (Letherby cited in Letherby, 2003: 119).

Throughout the research process we acknowledged, as allies to trans and gender diverse people and their families, the relatively precarious lives of those who challenge the naïve consciousness about gender fixity within school systems. We also hope that this analysis will contribute to their empowerment, as well as the empowerment of other parents and teachers walking similar paths.

**Analytic Process**

Each recorded interview took place in either the parents’ home or via Skype, lasting between 60-
120 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interview data were managed using NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd.). Data were analyzed with a theory driven (deductive) approach from the thematic frame within the interview tool noted above, which materialized from the literature review as well as inductively (data driven) from each interview. Descriptive codes were developed then we searched for underlying themes, reflecting on deeper notions and conceptualizations (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These were underpinned by reflective notes taken immediately after the interviews, which recorded times that participants showed heightened emotions, such as hurt, laughter, anger and bewilderment, initial interviewer reflections, links to other interviews and literature. Both researchers analyzed the data separately and met regularly to discuss the codes and emerging themes. The researchers decided that we did not want to lose sight of the whole story told and re-read the transcripts a number of times to check whether our coding and interpretations could be conceived in different ways, until we finally decided that we had exhausted as many possibilities as we could think of. We then agreed on the main final themes based on the results.

Data were also analyzed concurrently with data collection. This concurrent process allowed us to explore new avenues of enquiry during the fieldwork, and to see whether parents had similar or disparate stories about the ways in which both (school/social) structures-agency function for parents supporting their trans and gender diverse children. We stopped the recruitment process when participants were not providing any new avenues of enquiry, i.e. data saturation was achieved. The final analytical step involved engaging with prior literature in the area of trans and gender diversity in schools and systematically iterating between the empirical data and the literature.

The credibility of our interpretation of the interviews was also important to us. Therefore,
we involved our participants in the research by sending them our preliminary interpretations after data analysis. This process enabled participants to (dis)agree with our interpretation, which Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest is a critical method in establishing credibility in qualitative interpretations. Approximately 60% of the participants responded to our request to review the sections in which they appeared. All participants who responded agreed with our interpretations and said that we had captured their stories and lived experiences. Only one of these parents requested us to rephrase a section in order to clarify what they meant and also asked us to remove the age of their child. After parents agreed with these interpretations, six main themes emerged and were consolidated at the final stage. We will outline these themes in the results section below.

Results and Discussion

Six main themes were identified during the analytical process: children’s coming out, school receptivity, fears of moving between schools, bullying, difficult situations, and gender policing. This analysis will exemplify the various ways in which parents of trans and gender diverse children are dialogically negotiating school environments to better support their educational and emotional needs.

Coming out

The coming out as trans or gender diverse children resulted in a complex set of experiences for their parents – some of which found it challenging while others experienced a “that makes sense” moment. Nonetheless, the spectrum of experiences in this study relates well to Saeger’s (2006) case study in which parents go through stages of acceptance, including: discovery, turmoil, decision-making and attempting to find balance. These experiences, regardless of the age of the child, were co-coordinated by the child through dialogical processes with the parents, supporting
the reciprocal influence theories of childhood socialization (Jennifer Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986). Maintaining regular discussions with their child about names, pronouns, clothing, hair styles and the wishes they had about school proved to be an effective strategy that parents said helped them and other immediate family members make adjustments and plans, while recognizing their child’s freedom to explore their gender.

Most parents started to obtain as much information as possible to try better understand their child and what they may need to do to prepare the school. Three parents were cognizant of (trans) gender matters, potentially due to them identifying as non-binary or trans. However, these parents still sought practical information in relation to school environments and, similar to the other parents, started to research how best to develop the support needed to make their children’s schooling as safe and productive as possible. As such, each parent assumed an oppressive (school) culture that their trans or gender diverse child may face. This led them to reflect on how best to help facilitate their child’s freedom to explore their gender within their particular school culture.

A number of parents were interacting with others in trans support groups and organizations, gaining knowledge about trans and gender diversity. Parents’ understanding was often at a stage of naïve transivity (Freire, 2005) in which new knowledge about possibilities were being engendered, because they had never had to think about gender in such profound ways. Many developed strategies in light of this new knowledge, which resulted in the discovery of some new worrying limit-situations arising from these interactions including: difficulties with name and pronoun changes; antagonistic staff and parents; worries about gendered spaces; and the fear of bullying.

Armed with information, parents began to approach relevant people within the school for
them to begin acknowledging their trans or gender diverse child. The initial meetings with school staff created the space to start discussing the limit-situations and enact any changes needed in the school. Antonia Darder (2017) argues, following Freire, that those who are given the opportunity to be problem-posers and engage in a culture of questioning in the classroom foregrounds the crucial issue of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identities and authority are constructing particular sets of classroom relations. Most of the parents suggested that their perceived problems and questions were often acknowledged and used in pedagogical situations as concrete conditions relating to trans and gender diverse children’s daily lives. Throughout the coming-out period, dialectically leveraged decisions were made with their children about the actions needed in the school. These parents then were at the forefront of negotiating the gendered conditions at the school by developing suitable practices for their children’s coming out alongside the support from education professionals.

Nearly all the parents suggested that coming out to others in the school was a staggered process. These staggered processes were also associated with the age of the child and their ability to verbalize their gender experiences. Coming out was negotiated through time and to different degrees with different family members, friends, school staff, and parents of other children at the school. Rosalind’s quotation is representative of most parents in the study:

[W]e were wanting to support [name] in a more gradual way at school. […] so with the school we decided that we would first of all change [name’s] name, and the teacher did that in a very straight forward way, bearing in mind they were only six. The teacher just said her name, the way that she wanted it to be on the register one day, and said just to let you know this name is now going to be that name and she did the register and that was that (Rosalind, parent of AMAB prepubescent girl).
The gendered processes within the school system was regarded as a limit-situation by parents, where teachers may be reproducing and reinforcing gendered processes, yet these were seen as changeable, through engendering a critical consciousness (Freire, 2005) and bringing about re-evaluations of systems, such as name and pronoun changes on registers. Although it was relatively easy to change names and pronouns on the registers, thus establishing the student under a chosen name and gender identity, exam documentation still required the use of birth name and gender unless it had been recognized by the exam board through an official change of name. Parents reported that this was a source of distress, particularly for older children who were doing or about to do exams. Nonetheless, the measures taken within the classroom validated their child’s gender identity and expression.

Sometimes limit-situations were candidly acknowledged by school staff themselves. Following a school governors meeting about an equality and diversity policy that was going to be implemented in her child’s school, Katherine said:

I went to see the head afterwards and I said: ‘you do know that you have forgotten the trans bit’. She said: ‘oh yes I can see that, of course we will put it in’. She said, ‘this is personal, isn’t it?’ And I said yes. […] She was brilliant and she said that there are all sorts of things that we have to think about residential, where will she sleep? Which toilets will she use? (Katherine, parent of AFAB prepubescent boy).

The process for non-binary identified people was different to those children who identified within a binary gender system, and similarly complex in relation to gendered freedoms. One parent said that their child “went under the radar,” because at that point they did not need any structural changes, e.g., changing their registered name or using spaces that were outside those that they felt comfortable using. As such, parents of gender diverse children
suggested that their child’s identity was officially unrecognized, even though their gendered aesthetic was highly visible and often accommodated at school. Following the school’s positive reception of their child coming out as a girl, Sally and Peter speculated that, if in the future their child came out as non-binary, while it would not be an issue for them, it may cause a situation within the school that would have to be thought through again:

Sally: Because [name] is 100 per cent girl [now], I am not sure as she gets older there is a potential to consider something that is not now in her terms of reference, like non-binary, gender fluid or anything like that. I think that would be challenging. So while she is 100 percent gender binary, it’s kind of easy. But if she stepped into an in-between space, it will be difficult (Sally, parent AMAB prepubescent girl).

What this analysis suggests is that changes in school practices that reconfigure gender identities to include those that go from one gender to the ‘other’ may not at this moment in time bring about change for those who do not identify within the binary system of gender. Generally, the democratization of binary gender transitions has permeated into school cultures. The language of human rights, equality and diversity for all children was reported to be widespread in school cultures in this research. This is not to say that all schools facilitated these transitive processes easily. Parents worked hard at demonstrating that the rights of their trans and gender diverse children are of the utmost importance. This was enacted through the development of a critical consciousness about gender binary ideology and their work to accommodate their children’s gender transition through dialectical interactions (Rahilly, 2015). Most of the parents however suggested that although there were many complex situations to be negotiated while coming out, the schools generally supported their children on the basis of how the child wished to be referred to. The schools’ reception of the children’s coming out varied from total support and being
facilitative towards the child’s needs to not making a big deal out if it – and only very rarely with antagonism.

**School receptivity**

Nearly all of the parents interviewed suggested that on the whole the interactions with school staff were extremely positive. The collective process experienced by parents through their ability to assert their children's rights to grow fully as human beings in an education system free from disapproval and violence was often upheld on democratic grounds. The equality principle and the international right of self-determination allowed a gradual emergence of the critical consciousness necessary to analyze what potential limits may manifest for their child’s struggle for identity, self-respect and self-determination (Appel, 1988). Leticia said:

I trusted them really, but with something this big you do not know how they are going to respond. Luckily they had been doing lots of information days on LGBT and so I knew they were kind of on board with it. Obviously when you are saying that your child is transitioning and they have never met anyone like that, it is worrying. But not worrying enough not to face it (Leticia, parent of AFAB pubescent boy).

These kinds of procedural contributions by school staff commonly instilled a sense of fortuitous acceptance in parents about their child’s situation. Nonetheless, many parents said that school staff were reactive rather than proactive in their responses to their children. Some found this to be a positive dialectical experience, which enabled parents to contribute to the school’s gender democratization, and sometimes to the development of bespoke procedures for their child. However, others want schools to be more proactive:

I think they have been reactive rather than proactive. They have dealt with this because they have had to. My child identifies as this and they [the school] are like: “we’ve got to
“deal with this.” I’ve always said that my child is not the only child that will go through your school, and so I suppose we’ve been a bit trailblazing and that’s fine (Victoria, parent of AMAB prepubescent girl).

A few parents saw this reactiveness by the school as a limitation in terms of how much time and energy had to be spent on highlighting the structural and interpersonal gender inclusive adaptations needed at a time that was immensely challenging for them. Within these (reactive) times, parents also reported that some head teachers, members of staff and other professionals who worked within the school – nurses and psychologists – demonstrated ample support, while others within the same schools were occasionally oppositional to their children’s gender expressions; conflicts which had to be resolved.

Although rare in this research, there were a few schools that had previously supported trans and gender diverse students. Staff at these schools tended to be more proactive. Being proactive was understood as having procedures already in place, such as unrestricted name and pronoun changes, uniform choice and toileting and changing facilities. The parents who said that staff were proactive in these ways nonetheless also suggested that discussions were necessary in relation to the ways that children were addressed during class and how the curricula was taught, which tended to be gender segregating or gender-normative. However, parents were often grateful about the procedures already in place because it made their lives easier and allowed more time to care for their children in usual ways.

Conversely, some parents reported some initial oppositions to their children. A number of parents suggested that their children introduced trans and gender diverse bodies into the classroom, forcing (head) teachers with little knowledge and confidence to address diversity issues in classroom and residential contexts. Parents suggested that teachers were anxious about
trans and gender diverse bodies and how they ought to introduce this to other students, especially in relation to sex segregated spaces. After discussing the preliminary fears, lack of understanding and occasional obstructive behaviors that head teachers and school staff had, parents said that many started affirming the children’s gender identities or supporting their gender explorations.

Rosalind said:

[T]he teacher invited me in to the staff room to speak and he felt that it would be better coming from the parent than from him. I went in and spoke to all the teachers about what was happening and what I was hoping for her from them, what I was hoping for from the other children and from the school and that was great. I think we have all just educated ourselves really, we have all done it as a wee community (Rosalind, parent of AMAB prepubescent girl).

According to the parents, this in-class affirmation of their children became less and less daunting for teachers. Teachers were able to then reflect on their practice with respect to gender and began to set specific developmental tasks and goals for themselves, some taking-up training from trans organizations, which in turn provided them with more confidence. Moreover, interactions with others in the wider school community were pursued, enabling them to take counsel from those who had previous experience of supporting trans and gender diverse children, which simultaneously took a lot of time-pressure off the parents.

Many parents reported that the anxious school staff had said that the challenges and changes required to support the children were not actually as difficult and risky as they had first envisaged.

We put our head [teacher] in touch with other heads and they think it is much easier to support [name] than they thought that it would be. I think they thought it was going to
be scary. It has been easy really. But really it is no different to adapting to other
individuals in the school, but they needed the confidence that they were not going to get
accused of doing something wrong. […] Anyway, he came round; he sent one member
of staff to get Stonewall training that cascaded through. He talked to all members of
staff (Sally, parent AMAB prepubescent girl).

A number of parents said that many of the staff fears centered on making mistakes with the trans
and gender diverse children in relation to gender and language.

The school had a bit of a panic attack, so we had to get all the information, take it in and
say this is what’s going to happen. So actually it was quite good because we got to
dictate to the school how things should be, what they should be doing. So they took our
lead and that was good in a way, because we set the bar for them and the next
generation. (Katherine, parent of AFAB pubescent boy).

In these circumstances, school processes were challenged, and untested feasibilities were
‘experimented’ with, resulting in changes to the ‘business as usual’ approach in school cultures.

**Fears of moving between schools**

All of the parents who were supporting younger trans and gender diverse children in
nursery/preschool and infants school had some reservations about their children moving to
different schools when they were older. Even though many parents and children had had positive
experiences, many had heard from trans support groups what they described as “horror stories.”
Parents suggested that, through these transitional stages, their trans and gender diverse children
would have to come out again to school staff and other children, and they lived in hope that the
new schools would be as receptive and positive as the current school. Sally and Peter describe a
situation when their daughter moved schools:
So that was really easy [at nursery]. The opposite situation really was the preschool. She had been there two days a week, and when she started there in the September, she didn’t know any of the children in the class and she wasn’t as vocal because she didn’t know them, and she had gone in wearing increasingly girl’s clothing. Started off leggings and her clothing increasingly became more girl’s clothing, which we definitely got funny looks for […] From the teachers, the teaching assistants particularly, the parents, no one said anything. But there were vibes and looks that suggested that we were terrible parents, and particularly by the older members of staff (Sally, parent of AMAB prepubescent girl).

Additionally, parents hoped that the new schools would have trans-friendly procedures in place by the time their children moved school, as Katherine said:

[H]e is only in year one, going into year two, I cannot see it being a phase, but some sort of building a relationship with going to secondary school. I would like some support with that from the school; there would be some face-to-face meetings with both schools and perhaps the child, a nominated contact (Katherine, parent of AFAB pubescent boy).

Moreover, they perceive children to be slightly more gender-segregated at primary school than they were at nursery school. Similarly, the transition from primary school to high school is perceived to culminate into more extreme gender segregation in relation to school spaces, sport and curricula, as well as through children “policing” other children’s gender expressions. As such, parents also feel that there is the possibility that families with trans and gender diverse children will oscillate between gender critical conscious and naive conscious views throughout the child’s school career.

Bullying
Some parents suggested that the school where their child went was a toxic environment in relation to the bullying of trans and gender diverse children. Gender and sexuality policing from other children elevated into severe forms of bullying. These children were all in high school. One of these parents said:

There has been a massive issue recently because he has been attacked. Even today somebody shut a library door on him and he fell over and bashed his head on a desk and the teacher didn’t do anything. He has had all sorts of physical and verbal abuse, really quite severe. I am really concerned about him from that perspective. I think there is only so much you can take before the mental health starts to suffer. And his school work tends to suffer […] it was just really, really toxic (Simone, parent of AMAB Genderqueer person).

Parents who reported severe forms of bullying said that they engaged with the school regularly, and attempted to show that their child needed their support. Many other parents said that bullying was “relatively low level” but, nonetheless, extremely harmful to their children. Parents frequently telephoned or went into the school to have the bullying addressed.

Lucy’s child was excluded from school because of a suicide attempt on school premises. Lucy said according to the head teacher, “he had traumatized the other children,” but went on to say:

On the whole, [name] has had positive responses, and most of the kids are very accepting and adapting. However, in the first year, he had clear transphobia directed at him, such as footballs kicked at him, saying they would give five pounds to the first who hit the tranny and that sort of thing. He’s had abuse shouted at him and he’s been routinely being called a lesbian and on the day he tried to hang himself a little kid came
out of the toilet and called him a lesbian. […] But that’s the school’s responsibility to train and show how damaging it is (Lucy, parent of AFAB adolescent boy).

Lucy is convinced that her son’s suicide attempt transpired because of the constant low level and extreme forms of bullying which staff at the school did not address. Lucy said: “I will be able to log a timeline eventually about what was said, what didn’t appear to be done by them and what I think went wrong, because they have got to learn from what has happened with [name], they have to, but at the minute I am too weak and tired.”

Lucy’s child’s attempted suicide was an isolated case in this research. However, a few other parents said that the bullying was nearly a daily experience. Bullying, according to the parents, interferes with many of the children’s developmental and educational processes. Parents feared that their child’s social ostracism and lack of social support may put them at high risk for suicidal thoughts and actions (Kim & Leventhal 2011). Nonetheless, many of the parents in this research reported that gender-based bullying in the schools was often addressed immediately, as many schools had a zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of bullying. However, there were some ongoing isolated incidents.

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).

Then we came home one time and one of the seven year olds had started calling [name] a girl-boy, and we told the head and he said we are not having this this is unacceptable.
The teacher said: ‘What’s the problem? Boys can look like girls and girls can look like boys and that’s it, end of; and let’s have no more talk of this.’ Then as the drama class went on, the older girls became more protective of her, they started telling people off for being mean and saying: ‘Come over here, I’ll look after you’ (Katherine, parent of AFAB prepubescent girl).

While this teacher did not directly affirm the student’s gender identity, her demonstration about gendered aesthetics seemed to halt the abuse from peers, and also foster a sense of care towards the bullied child. According to other research, the success of anti-bullying interventions is evaluated on reducing the frequency of bullying behaviors; however, a decrease in attacks may only indicate that the bullying has been managed, rather than addressing the social processes and the subtle ways in which schools are complicit in sustaining them (Payne and Smith, 2013). Our data supports the research of Payne and Smith (2013), who argue that opposing transphobic and homophobic statements by challenging gender-normative assumptions can address wider social marginalization of trans and gender diverse children and can create supportive and an equitable school culture for everyone.

**Difficult Situations**

There were different levels of questioning directed at both parents and their children. For instance, Amelie was questioned about her support for her daughter. Amelie said:

> Some parents have asked me: why are you doing that? Well because that’s how my child identifies, and some parents do not genuinely understand and I can’t control that. I’m not going to give them a lesson (parent of AMAB girl).
Only one participant in this research said that the school had a complaint from a parent about their child being “subjected” to gender diversity:

[The head teacher told] the [complaining] family that if they had any problem with [name’s] transition and [name] being transgender in their class, they would have to find another school to go to, because this school was operating in a fully inclusive way. And it would be their choice if they were not happy to have their child in the same school (Rosalind parent of AMAB girl).

Parents did reflect on how to negotiate these kinds of difficult situations with other parents, while not losing sight of their children as their primary concern. For instance, some of the parents asked for letters to be sent out to other parents anticipating some challenges:

Then they put out a letter at that point, because we were trying to avoid making a big thing out of it really. […] We just wrote a general letter saying that there is a child in your child’s class who has been diagnosed with gender dysphoria, has always expressed as gender variant, and has now transitioned in terms of pronouns, and if you have any other questions please come and contact us (Rosalind, parent of AMAB girl).

If people were antagonistic towards parents and their support of their children, however, friendships were broken or placed on-hold until they were able to have a dialogue about the situation and that these attitudes were changed. In spite of the few negative challenges, many parents suggested that their group of friends and the parents of other children were on the whole supportive and kind. Their children’s friends at school were generally reported to be extremely sympathetic and that this was connected with parents finding sense in their life (Weinhardt et al., 2019) and an indication that they were doing right by supporting them. This also shows that the potential antagonisms that school staff were often fearful of in relation to the other children and
their parents were generally groundless.

**Gender Policing**

Nonetheless, parents did report that they were having to support their child when they returned from school because of frequent gender policing in the classroom, which sometimes came from the child’s friends, but generally came from other children outside their friendship network. Social conventions in regard to people expressing non-normative gendered appearances, mannerisms or activities have often been shown to be catalysts for gender policing amongst peers (Butler, 1990; Horn, 2007; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Similarly, parents said that policing and reaffirming the hierarchal position of heterosexuality as the norm (Butler, 1990) was done more often by older children. Challenges about gendered clothing and activities from older children were reported by parents to be in conjunction with (homo)sexuality policing. However, in the cases of parents of younger children they often reported that gender policing was rarely based on sexuality but about gender expressions, demonstrating that there was, at that age, little understanding about the differences between sexuality and gender identity.

Well, there were a few things when coming home. Well, being upset. And then when they finally said what was going on it was: “I’m not lesbian and everyone at school says I’m lesbian” (Nicola, parent of AFAB adolescent genderqueer person).

She will have comments from others about “why do you want to be a boy and why does [name] want to be a girl? because [name] wears a cardigan and you have short hair and wear trousers” (Paul, parent of AMAB and AFAB pubescent and adolescent gender fluid children).

On both counts, parents had to respond to their children, by uplifting them from feelings of
sadness and encouraging them to go to school. These concerns emphasize parents’ ability to only partly ensure the protection of their children at school. Parents often talked about the pressure they regularly felt to defend their child’s gender explorations and their ongoing commitment to advocacy for them within school cultures (Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2011, 2013). While there is much work to do in challenging gender policing and bullying in schools, negative perceptions about trans and gender diverse children at school are being confronted by parents, teachers and children through engendering a transitive critical consciousness about gender diversity, and hopes are manifest towards an equitable gendered life for all children.

Conclusion
We found that the majority of parents and their trans and gender diverse children are being supported by schools in an ad hoc and reactive way rather than many having clear procedures and strategies in place. Most of the parents nonetheless valued this support, but suggested that there was some way to go in developing equitable school cultures, policy and procedures in relation to future generations of trans and gender diverse children. Dialogical flexibility was often established between parents and school staff. Parents generally welcomed this flexibility because they realized that the limit-situations were indeed changeable and/or malleable – that is, possibilities for their child to explore their gender in a safe school could be pursued. These limit-situations often developed into untested feasibilities, through a shift from naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness, which was effective in supporting changes and producing more equitable school cultures at a structural level. The ability to inform school cultures through negotiating procedure change, while reducing fears about retribution from the school against their trans and gender diverse children were seen as child-centered by parents, suggesting that agency, in these relations, is dialogical and not an individualized process. Theoretically and
empirically, the data emphasize a relational understanding of agency within school cultures.

Parents’ knowledge base from internet and social networks also underpins these changes. It was through supportive and informed parental involvement that the schools became reactive in supporting trans and gender diverse children. School staff and parents consider these changes to be helpful for future generations of trans and gender diverse children who will inevitably come through the schools’ gates. Because children’s identities were developing, parents acknowledge that it was important for school staff to be cognizant of the conditions in which the trans and gender diverse students are living in relation to school receptivity and when they move between schools so that procedural changes could be in place before moving so that the limit-situations surrounding gender do not have to be renegotiated or reversed in negative ways.

Considerations about the ways that other children in the classes and their families are responding positively to trans and gender diverse children’s gender elevates the level of importance of these parents and children’s subaltern knowledge derived from their life experience, and which they bring with them to school cultures. This elevation, alongside other children’s experiences, would also go some way in affecting how school staff perceive gender determination. Only then, parents suggest, their child would be happier, treated equitably and succeed academically.

This article has examined the ways in which parents are actively negotiating their trans and gender diverse children’s wellbeing at schools through their dialogical engagements with school staff. We have demonstrated that, while these processes are not easy, children who are supported by both their parents and their schools show positive academic and emotional outcomes which are crucial to their overall wellbeing. Our research recommends schools to take a more active role in supporting trans and gender diverse students by (re)creating some of the
affirming policies that these parents have helped to develop. By doing this, school will not only be more affirming for trans and gender diverse children, but will also alleviate some of the emotional labor and burden placed upon these supportive parents. We believe that it is likely that the mere possession and application of gender diversity policies within schools can also help those parents who are at the early stages of understanding and supporting their trans and gender diverse children, which will potentially benefit the entire school environment.

Notes

1 (see for example Nagesh, 2017; Reed, 2017; Roberts, 2017)).

References


