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Trans and gender diverse youth resisting cisnormativity in school

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we demonstrate how the theory of vulnerability-in-resistance is manifest in the school experiences of trans youth in Ireland. Despite rapidly changing cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality diversity and increasing visibility of LGBTI+ youth, we show that trans youth in Ireland continue to be vulnerable to marginalisation, discrimination, and violence within school settings because of institutionalised cisnormativity. We explore how this vulnerability drives some trans youth to resist the conditions of their vulnerability. Strategies of resistance include naming their experience, mobilising their voice and building networks of solidarity. Enacting such resistances invariably exposes trans youth to harm but these same actions reveal their potentiality in disrupting and fragmenting educational cisnormativity.

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Introduction

In many respects, schools hinge on the presumption of a stable cisgender norm – the normalised assumption that everyone identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth; and, that sexed anatomy/gender identity congruence is immutable and fixed at birth (Simmons and White 2014). Cisnormativity permeates all aspects of school life. It is continuously reproduced through the binary, oppositional division of gender within schools and the assumption that a person's assigned birth gender corresponds with a mutually exclusive set of masculine or feminine attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires (Serano 2016). Institutionalised cisnormativity within schools privileges cisgender young people who identify with their assigned birth gender and fosters restrictive ideas about gender expression (Miller 2016; Miller, Mayo, and Lugg 2018).

At the same time, institutionalised educational cisnormativity stigmatises young people who identify as trans or gender diverse[1] and perpetuates prejudice against youth who transgress normative boundaries of gender expression (Meyer and Stader 2009; Miller 2016). School policies that perpetuate non-recognition and non-representation, conversational microaggressions that disregard and invalidate trans identities, pervasive bullying and physical harassment as well as educator bias are well documented factors that

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impinge upon the educational lives of trans youth (McBride et al. 2020). These educational inequalities, injustices and reprisals have been shown to detrimentally affect the emotional and psychological health of trans youth as well as their ability to participate in education (McBride and Schubotz 2017; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016).

Given this uncertainty and insecurity, trans youth are routinely labelled as one of most vulnerable cohorts of young people. These vulnerabilities are often individualised in deficit ways and measured through metrics of risk (see for example Grossman and D'augelli 2006). Dominant narratives of vulnerability-as-risk homogenously frame trans youth as passive victims in need of adult protection and, in turn, obfuscate how vulnerability is actively produced by school regimes (Bryan 2019). Consequently, trans identities are constructed as undesirable liabilities (Greteman 2018, 94), with trans youth's agency and capacity for critical thinking called into question (Fields and Tolman 2006; Sinclair-Palm and Gilbert 2018) as well as their capacity 'to negotiate, resist, and create new possibilities for alliance and community' (Mayo 2014, 4). Focusing on trans youth's vulnerability predominantly through risk lens thus detracts from, and fails to account for, the ways in which trans youth navigate and resist educational cisnormativity every day.

The denigration of trans youth's agentic potential to resist is challenged by research that suggests trans youth commonly engage in activism. This growing body of scholarship outlines the broad range of actions – having conversations, writing letters, giving speeches, attending rallies – trans youth undertake in an attempt to increase equality within their schools and society more generally (Jones et al. 2016; Jones and Hillier 2013; Meyer and Stader 2009). Importantly, research is emerging that forefronts the voices of trans youth activists (Iskander and Shabtay 2018) and provides evidence of trans youth's agency to resist subjugation (Hillier et al. 2020). Yet, much of the research into trans youth activism is presented descriptively as a sub-theme within studies into the general experiences of trans youth. As such, trans youth's resistance in school settings remains under-theorised. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence of trans youth resistance outside of north American and Australian contexts.

Guided by the question 'How do trans and gender diverse youth resist cisnormativity at school?' this paper draws on qualitative research exploring the second-level school experiences of trans youth (aged 15–24) in Ireland. Drawing on recent theorising (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016), we provide new insight into the vulnerability-resistance nexus in schools, exploring how trans youth's embodied vulnerability is structured by cisnormativity and the various strategies of resistance they employ to disrupt cisnormativity. In so doing, we provide critical insight into the complexity, messiness, and contradictions of trans youth's vulnerability-in-resistance, showing how trans youth expose themselves to harm whilst at the same time disrupting and fragmenting educational cisnormativity.

This paper is organised as follows. First, we theorise the links between precariousness, vulnerability and resistance, situating existing research that grapples with the agency and resistance of trans youth. We then provide a description of the methods used, before moving to detail trans youth's experiences of vulnerability-in-resistance. We then show, following Butler (2016), how trans youth's vulnerability is an essential component of their resistance and outline the different ways trans youth mobilise their vulnerability to resist educational cisnormativity. To conclude, we argue that through individual and collective acts of resistance, trans youth are disrupting institutionalised cisnormativity within schools.

Vulnerability, precarity and resistance

A vulnerability is commonly understood to be an exploitable personal weakness. As such, young people deemed vulnerable are framed within a deficit model, which assumes their vulnerability negates their agency. Read through this lens, cisnormativity operates as a process of 'subtraction' whereby processes of exclusion, every day microaggressions and acts of transphobic violence diminish trans youth's agency (Jones 2013). Yet, purely focusing on the deleterious effects of educational cisnormativity runs the risk of essentialising the educational experiences of trans youth as inexorably bound to suffering and victimhood (Bryan and Mayock 2017). This one-dimensional representation caricatures trans youth as indelibly wretched subjects who lack the capacity for self-advocacy (Miller 2016; Shelton and Lester 2018).

Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016, 1) assert that vulnerability is not simply a site of victimisation, passivity and inaction, but 'one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance.' They argue that vulnerability is not an individual characteristic, but the product of unequal and unjust social and material relations. People made vulnerable by precarious living conditions, often have little option other than to mobilise their embodied vulnerability and act to resist the precarious conditions that induce their vulnerability (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). This conceptualisation of vulnerability-in-resistance builds on the insights of Bornstein (1994) and Stryker (1994) who argue that the systemic oppression trans and gender diverse people experience compels them to 'fight back' and, in many instances, undertake social justice activism. In this paper, these insights facilitate consideration of the ways in which cisnormativity renders trans youth vulnerable and how some trans youth mobilise their embodied vulnerability to disrupt cisnormativity within schools.

Visibility is central in the structuring of vulnerability and in the politics of resistance of vulnerable populations (Gambetti 2016). Power relations render some bodies visible and bestow them with legitimacy, while others are rendered invisible and deemed obscene (Dorlin 2016). 'Invisible minorities' are thus often compelled 'to demand to be seen, to be recognised and to exist publicly' (ibid, 245). In/visibility is a central component of cisnormative power in schools, rendering trans youth as 'invisible minorities' (O'Flynn 2016; Palkki and Caldwell 2018). The cultural rendering of gender diversity as invisible means that transgressing gender norms is an inherent form of activism (Bornstein 1994). Therefore, researchers have argued that by being 'out', trans youth engage in daily acts that resist cisnormativity and queer their school (Hillier et al. 2020).

Speech acts are also integral to the relationship between vulnerability and resistance. As Butler (2016, 16) notes, not only do we 'act through the speech act; speech acts also act on us.' She outlines how speech acts help determine what is considered recognisable (legitimate, normal, healthy) and what is unrecognisable (illegitimate, deviant, pathological). Consequently, speech acts and the naming of experience, Butler argues, become an essential strategy of resistance for marginalised people/groups who lack recognition. For trans people, speaking back and verbally enacting the very subjectivity often denied to them is central in their resistance to the coerciveness of gender (Stryker 1994). With a primary goal of trans-theorists and activists being to 'break the silence' of the violence inscribed on trans bodies (Stryker and Currah 2014). Research has identified how trans youth respond to curricular exclusion by engaging in speech acts that attempt to increase

recognition of trans youth in school settings. In the US, trans youth have been found to educate their educators about their identity, needs and experiences (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016). Meanwhile, trans youth have been found to educate their peers and educators by making speeches and getting involved in school-based anti-prejudice activism (Jones et al. 2016; Jones and Hillier 2013). Trans youth have also been found to use their voice to challenge cisnormative school policies and practices, including undertaking legal cases to be allowed to wear clothing that expressed their gender identity (Meyer and Stader 2009) and leading petitions for the installation of gender-neutral bathrooms in their schools (Porta et al. 2017).

People also resist structurally induced vulnerability by establishing networks of solidarity and formulating collective political demands (Butler 2016). Spade (2015, 55) highlights how networks of solidarity commonly provide personal support as well as undertake consciousness-raising activities that 'encourage people to question standards about how they see their bodies and identities, and replace those norms with ideas that they consider better.' Joining consciousness-raising groups can provide trans people with a space to discuss gender systems oppression and how they can be dismantled (Bornstein 1994). While safe spaces, networks and forums can off young people opportunities to learn about gender expressions and become involved in gender activism (Bragg et al. 2018). In the US, school-based LGBTI+ groups, often called gay-straight alliances (GSAs), have become increasingly common since the mid-2000s. GSAs offer trans youth the chance to meet supportive peers in a space where they feel protected from identity-based discrimination (Poteat et al. 2016; Woolley 2017). Within GSAs, trans youth resist educational cisnormativity by discussing their gender identities and undertaking campaigns against structural discrimination (Poteat, Calzo, and Yoshikawa 2018). However, GSAs are not always tolerated (Iskander and Shabtay 2018; Meyer and Stader 2009) and the success of GSAs vary depending on the level of support school staff provide (Porta et al. 2017).

Butler (2016, 22) suggests that the deliberate exposure of one's body to harm is a crucial aspect of political resistance enacted by marginalised people and communities. Correspondingly, being seen, being heard, claiming space and forming networks of solidarity are acts of resistance because they expose trans youth to harm. Cisnormativity, like heteronormativity, 'is policed through […] invisibility and hyper-visibility' (DePalma and Atkinson 2006, 344). Put simply, people who transgress gender norms 'get into trouble' (Bornstein 1994, 241). Marginalising and exclusionary educational processes force many trans youth to remain out of sight, while trans youth who come out and openly resist cisnormativity risk becoming identifiable and targetable. Likewise, educating others can be 'awkward, emotionally exhausting, and often painful' (Austin 2016, 223) and require trans youth to sacrifice their right to privacy (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016). Furthermore, trans youth who seek to form a network of solidarity and/or engage school-based activism may face backlash from conservative peers, parents, teachers and/or administrators (Iskander and Shabtay 2018). The 'optics of activism' therefore often require trans youth to forego the safety of 'going stealth' (Jones et al. 2016) and expose themselves to personal dangers (Iskander and Shabtay 2018). Yet, participation in activism also contributes to trans youth feeling empowered, developing a critical consciousness, and having opportunities to effect change (Wernick, Kulick, and Inglehart 2014), which can improve their self-esteem and ease feelings of anxiety and depression (Jones et al. 2016). Consequently, trans youth who resist educational cisnormativity may be 'both

empowered and made vulnerable by their participation' (Iskander and Shabtay 2018, 344).

Building upon this emerging theme in research with trans youth internationally, we explore how by being, speaking, and congregating in community, trans youth expose themselves to harm as they fashion more secure and inclusive schools. Through this very work, they break 'citational chains of gender normativity, making room for new forms of gendered life' within schools (Butler 2016, 18). Drawing on queer and trans theory, we make a new contribution to this field, by considering that it is precisely the ambivalence of *vulnerability-in-resistance* that animates the actions of trans youth as a political force capable of disrupting institutionalised cisnormativity.

Methods

This article draws on data collected as part of the 'Achieving Equality for Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth in Schools' project, which was undertaken in Ireland between 2018 and 2020 (see McBride et al. 2020). The project explored how trans youth experience everyday life in second-level schools in Ireland. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), a non-profit organisation that provides supports to the trans people and their families and campaigns for their rights and equality.

Context

Ireland is somewhat unique internationally in terms of the intertwined relationship between church and state in education, a relationship that has become increasingly complicated as Ireland becomes more diverse (for an overview see Rougier and Honohan 2015). The influence of religious morality is particularly evident in the exceptionally late introduction of sexuality education in Ireland (Sherlock 2012). Nevertheless, mirroring many contexts worldwide, Ireland has seen an increase in the visibility of trans youth (Neary 2018) and a heightened concern for the welfare of trans children in schools (Neary 2019). Furthermore, in the midst of on-going debates about lowering the age of gender identity recognition law, the potentiality of change in the context of the world's first National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2018) and a review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2019), second-level schools in Ireland offer an investigative site of international significance.

Data collection

The research design was qualitative and used arts-based workshops as well as semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of trans young people in second-level schools. Participants were predominantly recruited via our research partner organisation, the Transgender Equality Network of Ireland (TENI) . Recruitment involved advertising the research at a TENI residential for trans youth and their parents as well as advertising through TENI'smailing lists. A small number of trans youth were also recruited via LGBTI+ youth groups. In total, 19 trans youth took part in the research project. Six

Table 1. Trans youth participant demographics.

Age	15–18	10
	19–24	3
Education status	Second-level school	8
	Community training centre	1
	University	3
	Unenrolled	1
Gender identity	Male	10
	Female	2
	Non-binary (AFAB)	1

trans youth took part in both interviews and workshops, six took part in a workshop only, and seven took part in an interview only. In addition, 10 parents of trans youth, 11 educators with experience of working with trans youth, and 13 educational stakeholders (including, social workers and representatives of education bodies) were interviewed.

In this article, we analyse data drawn from the 13 interviews conducted with trans youth (see Table 1 for demographic details). All participants were White and Irish, except for one who was an EU national. Interviewees were not compensated for their participation but had their travel costs incurred reimbursed (if requested).

Of the 13 included interviews, twelve were conducted in person and one was conducted by phone. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. A topic guide was used, which covered a broad range of areas including general school experiences, uniform policies, facility accessibility, curriculum, and their experience of transitioning at school. Interviews were audio recorded. All participants were required to provide signed informed consent. Participants aged under-18 were required to provide the consent of a parent/guardian. Ethical approval for the research was sought and obtained from our University Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. A coding framework was developed based on a review of international literature. The coding framework had 10 primary codes, including 'parents,' 'peers,' 'teachers,' and 'school environment.' Each of these primary codes had various sub-codes that aimed to capture specificities within the theme, e.g. second-level codes for school environment included 'facilities,' 'policies,' 'curriculum,' 'ethos and culture,' and 'peer support.' This article draws on data that were coded under the primary code of 'trans youth experiences' and the second-level codes of 'activism,' 'explaining work,' 'peer support,' 'vocality' and 'visibility.'

Neither author identifies as trans and so we approached our analysis with an acute mindfulness of the pervasive nature of cisnormativity and how it moves around and within us in ways that can be impermeable to the most in-depth forms of reflexivity. We worked in close partnership with TENI and were driven by a commitment to forefronting the voices and experiences of trans and gender diverse youth. With these principles as our continuous reflexive backdrop, Author 1 read each of the transcripts line-by-line and coded them using Nvivo 12. Preliminary analysis of these sub-codes yielded insight into why and how trans youth resisted cisnormativity in their schools. Author 1 and 2 then met several times to discuss and revise interpretation of data, refined by literature in the field and key theoretical tools.

Vulnerability-in-resistance at school

Below we detail the character of trans youth's vulnerability-in-resistance. First, we outline the conditions of vulnerability actively produced by educational cisnormativity schools. Then we go on to outline five strategies of resistance trans youth adopted: (a) self-education and coming out; (b) educating others; (c) classroom interventions; (d) challenging school structures and practices; and, (e) creating space and building solidarity.

Educational cisnormativity and conditions of vulnerability

Most trans youth did not receive any information about gender identity and gender expression during their primary or second-level schooling: '[Teachers] *wouldn't discuss LGBT people at all, but especially not trans people*' (Orla, 17, co-education community school). The students who did report discussing trans identities as part of a planned classroom lesson described the lesson they received as tokenistic: '*We just acknowledged they were there, read the definition and then that was it*' (Jay, 15, single-gender denominational school). Curricular exclusion and, to a lesser extent, tokenistic inclusion reflected the presumption that all students were cisgender and that knowledge about trans identities was considered irrelevant. Trans youth described how this routine denial of knowledge meant that for a long time trans identities were unknown and unrecognisable to them: '*Not only are people who aren't trans not being educated, but people who are trans don't know it exists and are suffering inside*, […] *in silence*' (Conal, 16, co-educational community school).

Many trans youth described feeling unable to name their experience and a deep-seated sense of confusion as a result. Toby (20, single-gender denominational school) stated: '*I couldn't explain to* [my friends] *what was happening in my head, I didn't even know*.' He went on to explain how his unknowing led him to feel '*extremely isolated*' because of '*feeling very different*' and '*not understanding why*.' The rendering of trans identities as unknowable left many trans youth vulnerable to profound feelings of insecurity: '*Because nobody talked about it, it made me scared to tell anybody that I was even thinking this.* […] *I thought being trans was this crazy thing that you could never be*' (Luke, 16, single-gender denominational school).

Silence and omission were not the only means by which conditions of vulnerability were produced at school. Some trans students described moments in which teachers refuted the legitimacy of trans identities. Malachi recalled how one of his teachers '*called trans people an illusion*' during class. For Malachi this transphobic utterance was compounded because no '*student or teacher stands up to him*.' Non-intervention was therefore interpreted as implicitly condoning the view that trans people do not really exist. Other interviewees recalled examples of teacher prejudice:

> *One teacher goes out of her way not to use the right pronouns and not use the right name as well. I know it's against trans kids because there is one other trans kids and he has experienced the same thing with her.* (Luke, 16, single-gender denominational school)

For many trans youth the active prejudice they encountered contributed to feelings of internalised shame, which compounded anxiety they felt about coming out/being outed.

Reflecting the findings of a review of international research (Jones et al. 2016; McBride and Schubotz 2017; Porta et al. 2017), the marginalising effects of curricular silences, pedagogical

omissions and staff prejudices were reinforced by other elements of trans youth's schooling. Most trans youth attended schools with a gender-specific uniform policy that explicitly distinguished boys from girls. All trans youth attended schools that had single-gender communal bathrooms and changing rooms (e.g. Porta et al. 2017). Sporting activities were typically gender-segregated. Gender-specific uniforms, gender-segregated spaces, and binarised norms of practice were elements of everyday school life that signalled that there are only two genders, which are distinctive and distinguishable from one another; and, that students will be either one or the other. Furthermore, the large majority of trans youth noted that their school had no LGBTI+ group and little, to no, visual representation of LGBTI+ youth (e.g. no LGBTI+ youth group posters or anti-bullying campaigns). As such, trans youth's vulnerability to uncertainty and insecurity were effects of an accumulation of cisnormative educational processes and pedagogical practices, which frame trans identities as unrecognisable, unnameable, and undesirable within second-level schools.

Self-Education and coming out

Trans youth invariably described gaining insight into gender identity development and diverse gender expression online. For many trans youth, self-educating online gave them access to vital knowledge that enabled them to better understand their gender identity and name their experience as well as providing them with the terminology with which to express their identity and explain their needs and rights to others:

> *I was looking at YouTubers and stuff on the internet.* […] *So, that's where I started educating myself.* […] *Yes, my mental health just got so much better. After I realised that this is who I am, I just felt so much more relaxed, like I didn't have to be stressing*. (Malachi, 16, single-gender denominational school)

All but one interviewee came out to a member of school staff and transitioned while at school. The imperative to 'come out,' and the weight of the work in doing so, signals the systemic workings of normativity (Neary 2013). Yet, the speech acts involved in coming out and transitioning at school are nonetheless disrupt the normative presumption that all students are cisgender:

> [The substitute teacher] *was going around, asking everybody their name and something about them. So, I thought I'd be funny and I said, "My name is* [Malachi] *and I chose it myself because I'm transgender."* […] *And she just, straight out, asked me "And what was your name before you were* [Malachi]*?" I was just so shocked*. (Malachi, 16, single-gender denominational school)

Malachi's experience illustrates clearly trans youth's vulnerability-in-resistance, as even playful attempts to name a non-cisgender identity can illicit public invalidation that causes embarrassment and hurt.

A number of interviewees explained that, following their transitioning, their schools provided students with an educational opportunity about gender identity, which disrupted the silence that had existed until then:

> *They're having an LGBT week for the first time this year, and that's the first time they'll ever have a gender identity person coming in to talk about gender identity. It's never really discussed. It's only discussed if someone like me comes out and says, "I'm trans*." (Luke, 16, single-gender denominational school)

Many interviewees noted that the educational events arranged following their coming out and transitioning were tokenistic, once-off events. Such reactive approaches represented a commitment to tolerance and an attempt to accept trans youth at school, with limited effects on broader systemic, institutionalised aspects of cisnormativity. Nevertheless, these examples show how by self-educating and coming out, trans youth disrupt cisnormativity and begin to alter the gender possibilities within their school (Neary 2018).

Educating others

In the midst of silence and tokenistic inclusion, trans youth were compelled to assume responsibility for informally educating their peers about gender identity and expression: '*It's very weird, because typically if anyone wants any information they'll come straight to me. So suddenly I become a teacher for all of it.*' (Conal, 16, co-educational community school) Some trans youth described how they were compelled to educate their teachers: '[My principal] *just wanted to know everything that I felt she needed to know* […] *so that she could help me.*' (Toby, 20, single-gender denominational school).

Trans youth commonly recounted receiving unsolicited questioning about 'being trans', revealing how students and staff alike sought to overcome their unknowing and expand their gendered horizons through personal insight. Trans youth felt that by engaging in educative dialogue they could shift knowledge, attitudes and intentions within their school. Mobilising their lived experience to provide a deeper understanding of trans identities, trans youth challenged cisnormative assumptions and motivations among peers and educators. Some trans youth were enthusiastic advocates and derived a sense of purpose from educating others: '*I wanted to talk to* [my teachers]. *I wanted them to know what was okay and what wasn't.* […] *I never felt the responsibility to do it, but I was always open to doing it*' (Toby, 20, single-gender denominational school). For others, however, educating peers and staff was a burden:

> *I don't think I've actually had one person that was* [asking me questions] *in a hateful, spiteful way* [… but] *there's just some days when I just don't want to talk about that type of thing, you know?* […] *It does get exhausting*. (Conal, 16, co-educational community school)

Some trans youth recounted being asked inappropriate questions related to personal matters such as periods, masturbation, sex, and surgery. Echoing Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton (2016), the need to educate peers and staff therefore exposed some trans youth to incredibly uncomfortable situations in which they felt pressure to discuss aspects of their body that they felt dysphoric about and/or elements of their life that they considered private:

> [My teacher] *can't ask me* [about my sexuality] *either because it's very unprofessional. And she wouldn't ask that to anyone else.* […] *But she just asked me because I'm trans.* […] *I know she didn't mean to do it in a wrong way, but she lost my trust. I just don't go and talk to her anymore.* (Aaron, 16, co-educational denominational school)

Following Butler (2016), we can see how the silences and omissions that structure trans youth's vulnerability enlivened some trans youth and compelled others to challenge cisnormative ways of thinking within their school communities, cultivating new understandings of trans identities . Yet, experiences such as those described by Aaron alert us again to the vulnerability in trans youth's resistance, with the continuous potential for moments

of informal education to slide into fetishisation and other forms of cisnormative micro-aggression.

Classroom interventions

Besides the informal education of their peers and staff through private conversation, some trans youth recounted making classroom interventions. For some, this was spontaneous. Malachi (16, single-gender denominational school) explained how, since his transition, his teacher '*asks me to explain stuff because he doesn't know everything*.' Unplanned classroom interventions had transformative potentiality, yet could be fragile and fleeting:

> [During the class] *they did do a small thing where it was just like, "Oh work in little groups of three and try and list as many genders as you could."* […] *And, I was going off with loads of different types and everyone was like, "Whoa, this is so cool. I've never heard of these." And they were really into it and then we were cut short* [and had] *to move on*. (Jay, 15, single-gender denominational school)

Some trans youth used planned class projects to educate their class about gender identity and expression:

> *In English we had to write a speech, so I did do my speech* […] *basically just explaining gender identity and the different types that we have.* […] *That would have been probably the first introduction that everyone would've gotten.* (Jay, 15, single-gender denominational school)

By mobilising their voices, some trans youth resisted silence by teaching their entire class about trans identities. Other trans youth made classroom interventions in order to give voice to the discrimination trans people experience:

> [My Religious Education project] *was about ways trans people are excluded, like, from religious circles.* […] *A lot of people were very interested by it, especially when I brought up the fact there's no proper hate crime legislation when it comes to trans people. They were like, "What?" Because the regular cis, straight guy or even cis straight girl would not know that, you know? They just assume of course they have something for it*. […] *Everyone was just like, "Oh that was cool. I learnt something."* (Conal, 16, co-educational community school)

Conal sought to elicit the empathy of his peers by voicing trans people's shared experiences of inequality and injustice. By mobilising the collective vulnerability of trans people as a pedagogical tool, he resisted cisnormative erasure and thus challenged the very structural conditions generating trans youth's collective vulnerabilities.

The moments described here illustrate how these young people drew upon their embodied experiences – and oftentimes vulnerabilities – to educate others about the diversity of gender. These moments are pedagogically generative and filled with promise of reshaping perceptions and understanding of gendered possibilities within schools. Yet, the imperative to devise classroom interventions to explain one's minority identity potentially exposes the young person to negative feedback and comments. Unsurprisingly then, not every trans youth will be willing to resist cisnormativity in this way.

Resisting cisnormative structures and practices at school

Interviewees described how they resisted cisnormative structures and practices within their school. Many trans youth interviewed were required to wear uniforms that did

not align with their gender identity, provoking embodied dysphoria. As a result, many trans youth felt their school uniform policy restricted their freedom of expression and reinforced their 'otherness.' Some felt their uniform required them to conform to cisgender binary norms of appearance, which caused them significant emotional distress. In response, some trans youth undertook personal 'battles' with their school leadership in order to be allowed to wear a uniform that they felt comfortable in:

> *In the school, girls can wear either skirts or trousers and the boys have to wear trousers.* […] *And I wanted to wear the skirt. And* [… school leadership] *just constantly fought us saying like, wouldn't it be easier if I waited until after school?* […] *It took us about three months to get them to let me switch to the skirt*. (Orla, 17, co-educational community school)

By demanding her right to wear a skirt, Orla asserted her self-determination and resisted her school's cisnormative uniform policy and the need to adhere to constrictive norms of appearance. Similarly, Cole challenged the binary gender norms embedded within his school's uniform policies:

> [I wrote a letter to my principal] *saying that people shouldn't be confined to just the girl or the boys' uniform. That what if people are trans and they don't feel comfortable doing it.* […] [The principal] *called me into his office and talked to me about it and then, the year after* [the change in uniform policy] *became a thing*. (Cole, 15, co-educational denominational school)

Cole's complaint was due to his school uniform visually distinguishing between boys (grey jumper) and girls (green jumper) (the school was established as an amalgamation of an 'all-boys' and an 'all-girls' school and the uniform of each was retained). Cole used his voice to draw attention to the violence that cisnormative uniform rules act on trans youth. By resisting their school's uniform policy, young people like Orla and Cole, contested the symbolic essentialisation of binary gender differences and, in so doing, worked to dismantle an important node of cisnormativity within their school.

Alongside uniforms, trans youth described gender-segregated school bathrooms as another site of cisnormative violence. Most interviewees felt extreme discomfort about using a bathroom that was incongruent with their gender identity and were prohibited from using (or felt unsafe using) the toilets that aligned with their gender identity. Following their transition, the majority of trans youth were provided with access to a 'third option' toilet, which was not designated as either for boys or girls. Typically, third option toilets were unused wheelchair accessible toilets that had been re-designated as 'gender-neutral' or 'all-gender.' While there are many problems with such reactive accommodations (Porta et al. 2017), the establishment of gender-neutral toilets revealed how, by coming out and transitioning, trans youth induced material changes that undermined the cisnormative binarisation of educational space. In this way trans youth actively contributed to the reimagining of their school environment:

> [For the class assignment] *you pick a social issue and you do a project on it. My teacher happened to pick LGBT issues, so we did a whole report, we educated our class, our year, and we discussed it a lot.* […] *Stuff like the bathrooms were discussed and our school is getting an extension. And, the principal said that there's bathrooms on every floor* [of the new school building], [and] *that they could just make gender-neutral bathrooms*. […] *At first people just didn't know a lot. But by the end of* [our project] *everyone just came around to the idea.* (Frankie, 16, co-educational community school)

Frankie's experience shows how some trans youth are actively helping to remould their school beyond the binary. Yet, as with educating others and classroom interventions, resisting cisnormative educational structures exposed trans youth's vulnerability. For instance, Frankie explained how some younger students gave the gender-neutral toilets a homophobic nickname ('*the gay toilet*'). This highlights how attempts to dismantle cisnormative educational structures can provoke prejudicial backlash, with marginalising and exclusionary effects.

Creating space, building solidarity

Trans youth also resisted cisnormativity by establishing LGBTI+ supportive spaces and building networks of solidarity within their schools. The large majority of trans youth attended schools that did not have an LGBTI+ group. Benn (20, single-gender denominational school) felt that this had consequences for trans youth since: '*There is rarely a space for them to just be.*' LGBTI+ groups were perceived as providing spaces in which trans youth could exist without the overbearing necessity to negotiate binary assumptions and the threat of microaggressions and violence. LGBTI+ groups were also valued for facilitating peer-support, advice and information sharing. As such, LGBTI+ groups created spaces in which trans youth challenged the knowledge deficit produced by educational cisnormativity:

> *To have a group of people to confide in, and be like, this is what's happening, and then having someone be like 'I completely understand what you're on about. I completely understand what you're feeling.'* […] *And then, just being able to have that open space to get that information that I was searching for.* (Jamie, 22, co-educational community school)

Jamie had completed his second-level education and was reflecting on the benefits of the peer-support he accessed outside of school. In recognition of the benefits peer-support, some trans youth sought to establish an LGBTI+ group in their school:

> *I just thought it was important because I knew that* […] *I was going to be the only transgender student in the whole school.* […] *I wrote a letter to the principal asking if I could set this up.* […] *We're trying for one Wednesday a month to do* [talks]. […] *We have a different topic every time. So, I've done gender and pronouns and stuff. And the juniors, they did the support of friends and family. We've done sexualities.* […] *We announce* [the talk] *over the intercom and we say, "Anyone who wants to come, please do.*" (Malachi, 16, single-gender denominational school)

Malachi's account highlights how some trans youth set about generating 'queer' sites of educational rebellion, which afforded LGBTI+ youth and allies opportunities to access prohibited/vital knowledge and subvert cisnormativity collectively by creating visibility and promoting recognition. In so doing, the group established ties of solidarity, collectively began formulating a political agenda, and undertook consciousness-raising initiatives aimed at the whole-school community. Through co-operation, the LGBTI+ group created a transgressive platform of knowledge exchange in order to provide their school community with an alternative gender and sexuality curriculum, one based on the sharing of personal experience.

Malachi's group, however, experienced challenges. Meeting regularly was difficult and they were running out of ideas of things to do. This reflected how many trans youth encountered barriers establishing an LGBTI+ group: '*we looked at do we want to have*

[an LGBTI+ group]*, but there wasn't much we could do with it'* (Frankie, 16, co-educational community school). Many young people felt that the LGBTI+ school group they tried to establish was not fully supported by staff, reflecting staff's passive disregard for the group's success. Meanwhile, some trans youth were actively prevented from establishing an LGBTI+ group:

> *But* [school leadership] *said that there wasn't enough people, that* [an LGBTI+ group] *would be inappropriate, it would be too time consuming, they would need a teacher to supervise it.* […] *We tried and tried but that never happened,* […] *they did not want it.* (Orla, 17, co-educational community school)

Orla's experience highlights how within cisnormative school environments, trans youth's attempts to create queer spaces can be stifled. Coming forward to establish an LGBTI+ group thus opened trans youth up to invalidating responses that reinforced their marginalisation and exacerbated feelings of exclusion. The likelihood of an invalidating response meant the very idea of establishing an LGBTI+ group was unimaginable for some:

> [An LGBTI+ school group] *never ever been even organised or thought of.* […] *I think it would be very beneficial, but the likelihood of them actually creating that is very slim. And there might not be other people coming out, as well, because people are scared for other people to know*. (Luke, 16, single-gender denominational school)

Luke's ambivalence towards the potential benefits of an LGBTI+ group being established in his school hinged on the insecurity others felt about being out. This highlights how the threat of prejudicial harassment can both hinder the establishment of queer educational spaces as well as inhibit trans youth's participation in them:

> *I feel like a part of* [not attending the school LGBTI+ group] *was to avoid any bullying that could come from it, you know? I remember seeing some first years opening the door to the room before, and shouting in there and closing it, and then running.* (Conal, 16, co-educational community school)

Homophobic and transphobic targeting of LGBTI+ groups deters some trans youth from attending and thus inhibits them from forming bonds with like-minded peers and engaging in affirmative action. An accumulative effect of the homo- and transphobic targeting of LGBTI+ schools groups is a reduction in the potentiality of queer educative spaces to foster network of solidarity capable of undertaking consciousness raising activities within their school.

Discussion

We have argued that, mirroring international research, the harm trans youth encounter in second-level schools are the by-product of cisnormative school curricula, policies, architecture and practices that render trans identities unrecognisible and undesirable (McBride 2020). Institutionalised cisnormativity within schools, we have shown, harms trans youth by provoking a painful sense of unknowing oneself and a profound insecurity about their gender identity (Austin 2016). In this paper, we have built on emerging research into trans youth activism (Jones et al. 2016; Jones and Hillier 2013; Meyer and Stader 2009) and their resistances to exclusion and marginalisation (Hillier et al. 2020; Iskander and Shabtay 2018), by exploring the character of trans youth's vulnerability-in-

resistance (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). We have illustrated how the very vulnerability of trans youth produced tactics of resistance such as coming out, educating peers and staff, making classroom interventions, campaigning for policy changes, generating queer spaces and building networks of solidarity. At the same time, these acts increased precarity and vulnerability and in some cases even caused harm. Thus, we can see how trans youth's vulnerabilities to educational injustices and their acts of defiance were not oppositional but intertwined as part of their everyday survival (Bornstein 1994; Butler 2016; Stryker 1994). The trans youth in this study resisted erasure and silence, challenged gender-segregation, and congregated as a community thereby exposing themselves to cisnormative power, risking micro-aggressions and harassment. Trans youth's educational vulnerabilities are thus 'part of the very meaning of [their] political resistance as an embodied enactment' (Butler 2016, 22). This reflects the ambivalence and messiness of transformations in the politics of gender and sexuality (Neary, Gray, and O'Sullivan 2016), as gender is constantly being made and remade in a myriad of ways by young people (Bragg et al. 2018). We suggest that it is precisely this perpetual tension of vulnerability-in-resistance, that is the catalyst that enlivens trans youth's everyday acts into a political force capable of disturbing institutionalised cisnormativity. The dangers associated with being, speaking, and congregating were generated precisely because, in undertaking those acts, trans youth were embodying a new form of gendered life that ruptured the citational chains of cisnormativity within their schools (Butler 2016). The rebellious acts undertaken by trans youth – private conversations, classroom questions, speeches, letter writing, event organisation – at once made visible and undermined the legitimacy of cisnormativity by educating their school community about gendered possibilities beyond the binary. Trans youth's embodied acts of resistance thus not only revealed their own vulnerability, but also exposed the tenuous nature of institutionalised cisnormativity within schools.

By expressing their gender identity in school, trans youth disrupted the naturalness of cisnormativity within their school, provoking peers and staff to reflect. Reflections crystallised into questions, which formed parts of informal conversations (Austin 2016; Hillier et al. 2020; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016). Conversations accumulated, knowledge was exchanged, and the gender paradigms of some students and staff began to shift. By giving speeches in class that explored gender identity and the experiences of trans people, trans youth cut through cisnormative silence. Using words typically unsaid, and highlighting collective experiences of injustice, trans youth challenged the structural antecedents of their vulnerability: the unrecognisability of trans identities and the disregard of trans people's status as a marginalised group. In this way, trans youth articulated 'critical knowledge from embodied positions that would otherwise be rendered pathological, marginal, invisible, or unintelligible' by the dominant and normative cisnormative organisation of power/knowledge within schools (Stryker and Currah 2014, 9). As such, many trans youth were found to be actively directing learning about gender diversity in their schools (Bragg et al. 2018). Trans youth also undermined the binarisation of students by critiquing gender-specific uniform policies and gender-segregated facilities. By undertaking personal, and collective, 'battles' against symbols of cisnormativity, trans youth sought to transform the gendered materiality of their schools. Through the establishment of an LGBTI+ group, some trans youth generated queer microclimates that fostered networks of solidarity that embarked on school-wide conscious-

raising activities. By claiming the right to congregate as a community, trans youth helped to cultivate novel educational geographies in which new gendered possibilities could not only *be*, but potentially flourish. Through acts of solidarity with their peers, some trans youth moved beyond their 'situational agency' to individually negotiate and challenge their structurally induced educational precariousness (Hillier et al. 2020) and enacted a 'collective agency' characterised by interdependency and public action (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016, 7). As such, it is also crucial that we recognise trans youth's vulnerability-in-resistance not in terms of atomised acts, but as a slowly-growing, inter-connected social movement founded on a sense of community and an ethic of mutual care (Spade 2015).

In this paper, the concept of vulnerability-in-resistance has allowed us to pay close attention to the ambivalences present in the everyday lives of trans youth at school. Attending to their accounts in this way provides a more nuanced, agentic picture of their subjectivities that goes some way towards interrupting the reductive deficit discourses that circulate around the lives of trans and gender diverse people. Moreover, trans youth's vulnerability-in-resistance clearly reveals the tenuous nature of educational cisnormativity and the potential for its interruption and destabilisation. Such ambivalences are a reminder of the messiness of the project of social change. Indeed, gender is itself messy and its terms are constantly shifting. It is within these complex, ambivalent entanglements that there is hope for schools to be reimagined and realised as truly reflective of gender diversity.

Note

1. Herein we use the term 'trans' to describe youth (aged 15–24) who self-determine their gender identity to be other than their birth-assigned gender. This encompasses youth who identify with both binary and nonbinary gender identities.

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