CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Exploring gender identity and gender norms in primary schools: The perspectives of educators and parents of transgender and gender variant children.
Authors	Neary, Aoife;Cross, Catherine
Publication date	2018
Original Citation	Neary, A & Cross, C 2018, Exploring gender identity and gender norms in primary schools: The perspectives of educators and parents of transgender and gender variant children. University of Limerick & TENI, University of Limerick .
Type of publication	Report
Rights	© 2018, Aoife Neary. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying and recording, without written permission of the author.
Download date	2026-10-10 01:44:45
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18574

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools

The Perspectives of Educators and Parents of Transgender and Gender Variant Children

Aoife Neary
Catherine Cross

University of Limerick
Ollscoil Luimnigh

IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Transgender Equality Network Ireland

Contents

Acknowledgements	01
Contact Details	01
Glossary of Key Terms	02
Introduction	05
Summary of Key Findings	06
Methodology	08
Key Finding 1	09
Key Finding 2	10
Key Finding 3	11
Key Finding 4	12
Key Finding 6	14
Key Finding 7	17
Key Finding 8	19
Key Finding 9	21
Summary and Questions Raised	23
References	25

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the parents and educators who gave so generously of your time, effort and reflections.
This study would not have been possible without you.

Thank you to the Irish Research Council 'New Foundations: Engaging Civic Society' strand for funding this study and enabling this valuable collaboration between the School of Education at the University of Limerick and the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI).

Contact Details

For further information about this report, please contact the Principal Investigator:

Dr Aoife Neary, Lecturer in Sociology of Education, School of Education,
University of Limerick, Castletroy, Limerick.
Email: aoife.neary@ul.ie
Tel: +353 (0)61-202075
Web: http://www.ul.ie/soedu/node/971

For more information about the research partner, **Transgender Equality Network Ireland**, please contact:
Transgender Equality Network Ireland
1 Ellis Quay
Dublin 7
Ireland
Phone: (01) 873 3575
Email: office@teni.ie

[Please note that office visits are by appointment only]
Copyright © Aoife Neary. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying and recording, without written permission of the author.

ISBN: 9781911620105

This report should be referenced to:
Neary, A., and Cross, C. (2018) *Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools: The Perspectives of Educators and Parents of Transgender and Gender Variant Children,* Limerick: University of Limerick and the Transgender Equality Network of Ireland.

Glossary of Key Terms (Adapted from http://teni.ie/page.aspx?contentid=139)

Introduction to Sex and Gender

Sex: The designation of a person at birth as male or female based on their anatomy (genitalia and/or reproductive organs) or biology (chromosomes and/or hormones).

The phrase "sex assigned at birth" (replacing "biological sex") is a more accurate and respectful way to acknowledge the process of sex assignation that occurs at birth through a perfunctory look at external anatomy. It might not be possible in all cases (e.g. intersex) to identify an individual as male or female at birth. For trans people, assigned sex may differ considerably from gender identity (see definitions of Transgender and Intersex).

Gender Identity: Refers to a person's deeply-felt identification as male, female, or some other gender. This may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender Expression: The external manifestation of a person's gender identity. Gender can be expressed through mannerisms, grooming, physical characteristics, social interactions and speech patterns.

Sexual Orientation: Refers to a person's physical, emotional or romantic attraction to another person. Sexual orientation is distinct from sex, gender identity and gender expression. Transgender people may identify as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, queer or asexual (see definition of Transgender).

Main Glossary

Androgynous or androgyne: A person whose gender identity is both male and female, or neither male nor female. They might present as a combination of male and female or as sometimes male and sometimes female.

Bigender: A gender identity that can be literally translated as 'two genders' or 'double gender'. These two gender identities could be male and female, but could also include non-binary identities.

Cisgender: A non-trans person (i.e. a person whose gender identity and gender expression is aligned with the sex assigned at birth). The term cisgender acknowledges that everyone has a gender identity (i.e. a non-trans identity is not presented as normal or natural which stigmatises a trans identity as abnormal or unnatural).

Cissexism: The assumption that a cisgender identity is more authentic or natural than a trans identity. The belief that a person's sex assigned at birth always remains their real gender (e.g. suggesting that a trans woman is 'really a man' or a trans man is 'really a woman').

Coming out: The process of accepting and telling others about one's gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. Many trans people will 'come out' as a different gender to the sex assigned at birth and may begin a social or physical transition (see definition of Transition).

Some trans people choose to 'come out' or be 'out' about their trans identities to raise visibility or acknowledge their experiences. Others do not want to 'come out' as they feel this implies that their gender identity is not valid or authentic (e.g. a trans woman who comes out as trans may be perceived to be less of a woman).

Crossdresser: In North America, the preferred term for transvestite is crossdresser. It is intended to sound less medicalised. It refers to a broad spectrum of experiences and there are numerous motivations for crossdressing such as a need to express femininity/masculinity, artistic expression, performance (e.g. drag queen/king), or erotic enjoyment (See also 'Transvestite').

Demigender: A gender identity that involves feeling a partial, but not a full, connection to a particular gender identity. Demigender people often identify as non-binary. Examples of demigender identities include demigirl, demiboy, and demiandrogyne.
FTM: A female-to-male trans person (see definition of Trans man).

Gender Identity Disorder (GID): In DSM-IV[2], GID is the psychiatric diagnosis used when a person has (1) a strong and persistent cross-gender identification and (2) persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex, and the disturbance (3) is not concurrent with physical intersex condition and (4) causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

This diagnosis was removed from the DSM-V and replaced with Gender Dysphoria. In the current Irish context, in practice a diagnosis of GID or Gender Dysphoria is required to access hormones or surgery through the public healthcare system.

Gender Fluid: Is a non-binary gender identity. Gender fluid individuals experience different gender identities at different times. A gender fluid person's gender identity can be multiple genders at once, then switch to none at all, or move between single gender identities. Some gender fluid people regularly move between only a few specific genders, perhaps as few as two.

Genderqueer: A person whose gender varies from the traditional 'norm'; or who feels their gender identity is neither female nor male, both female and male, or a different gender identity altogether.

Gender variant: People whose gender identity and/or gender expression is different from traditional or stereotypical expectations of how a man or woman 'should' appear or behave.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or Hormones: The use of hormones to alter secondary sex characteristics. Some trans people take hormones to align their bodies with their gender identities. Other trans people do not take hormones for many different reasons (see definition of Transition).

Hermaphrodite: Generally considered derogatory; has been replaced by the term intersex (see definition of Intersex).

Intersex: Refers to individuals who are born with sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, genitals, and/or hormonal structure) that do not belong strictly to male or female categories, or that belong to both at the same time.

A person with an intersex variation may have elements of both male and female anatomy, have different internal organs than external organs, or have anatomy that is inconsistent with chromosomal sex. These variations can be identified at birth (where there is obviously ambiguous genitalia), at puberty (when the person either fails to develop certain expected secondary sex characteristics, or develops characteristics that were not expected), later in adulthood (when fertility difficulties present) or on autopsy.

Most individuals who are intersex do not identify as transgender or do not consider themselves covered by the transgender umbrella.

MTF: Male-to-female trans person (see definition of Trans woman).

Multigender: Refers to individuals who experiences more than one gender identity. It can be used as a gender identity in its own right, or can be an umbrella term for other identities which fit this description. Multigender identities include bigender (two genders), trigender (three genders), quadgender (four genders), quintgender (five genders), polygender (many genders), pangender (all genders) and genderfluid (variable gender).

Neutrois: A non-binary gender identity that is considered to be a neutral or null gender. It may also be used to mean genderless, and has considerable overlap with agender - some people who consider themselves neutrally gendered or genderless may identify as both, while others prefer one term or the other.

Non-binary: An umbrella term for gender identities that falls outside the gender binary of male or female. This includes individuals whose gender identity is neither exclusively male nor female, a combination of male and female or between or beyond genders. Similar to the usage of transgender, people under the non-binary umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms (See definition of Androgynous, Gender Fluid, Genderqueer, Gender variant).

Sex Change: Generally considered derogatory; has been replaced by the terms 'transition' or 'surgery' (see definition of Transition and Surgery).

Surgery: A set of surgical procedures that alter a person's physical appearance or the functioning of their existing sexual characteristics. Other terms include Gender Confirmation Surgery, Gender Reassignment Surgery, Sex Reassignment Surgery, Genital Reconstruction Surgery, Sex Affirmation Surgery and so on.

Some trans people undergo surgery to align their bodies with their gender identities. Other trans people do not undergo any surgery for many different reasons.

Some trans people define themselves by their surgical status such as post-operative (post-op), pre-operative (pre-op) or non-operative (non-op). However, these terms place emphasis on genitals as a marker for gender identity and may be rejected by people who do not see their gender as related to surgical status.

Tranny: A slang term for many different trans identities. Some find this term highly offensive, while others may be comfortable with it as a self-reference, but consider the term derogatory if used by outsiders. It is recommended to avoid using this term.

Glossary (Adapted from http://teni.ie/page.aspx?contentid=139)

Transgender: Refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. This term can include diverse gender identities. Not all individuals with identities that are considered part of the transgender umbrella will refer to themselves as transgender. For some, this may be because they identify with a particular term (such as transsexual or genderqueer), which they feel more precisely describes their identity. Others may feel that their experience is a medical or temporary condition and not an identity (for example they feel they have gender identity disorder but are not transgender).

Trans or trans*: Commonly used shorthand for transgender. Avoid using this term as a noun: a person is not 'a trans'; they may be a trans person.

Transphobia: The fear, dislike or hatred of people who are trans or are perceived to challenge conventional gender categories or 'norms' of male or female. Transphobia can result in individual and institutional discrimination, prejudice and violence against trans or gender variant people.

Transition: A process through which some transgender people begin to live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the one assigned at birth. Transition might include social, physical or legal changes such as coming out to family, friends, co-workers and others; changing one's appearance; changing one's name, pronoun and sex designation on legal documents (e.g. driving licence or passport); and medical intervention (e.g. through hormones or surgery).

Transvestite: A person who wears clothing, accessories, jewellery or make-up not traditionally or stereotypically associated with their assigned sex. Some transvestites refer to themselves as male to female transgender people who do not wish to transition or change their assigned sex but prefer to live "dual role".

Transsexual: A person whose gender identity is 'opposite' to the sex assigned to them at birth. The term connotes a binary view of gender, moving from one polar identity to the other. Transsexual people may or may not take hormones or have surgery.

Use of the term 'transsexual' remains strong in the medical community because of the DSM's prior use of the diagnosis Transsexualism' (changed to "Gender Identity Disorder" in DSM- IV). The term 'transsexual' is hotly debated in trans communities with some people strongly identifying with the term while others strongly rejecting it. Moreover, for some, 'transsexual' is considered to be a misnomer inasmuch as the underlying medical condition is related to gender identity and not sexuality.

Trans man: A person who was assigned female at birth but who lives as a man or identifies as male. Some trans men make physical changes through hormones or surgery; others do not.

Trans man is sometimes used interchangeably with FTM (female-to-male). However, some trans men don't think of themselves as having transitioned from female to male (i.e. because they always felt male). Some people prefer to be referred to as men rather than trans men while others will refer to themselves as men of transgender experience.

Trans woman: A person who was assigned male at birth but who lives as a woman or identifies as female. Some trans women make physical changes through hormones or surgery; others do not.

Trans woman is sometimes used interchangeably with MTF (male-to-female). However, some trans women don't think of themselves as having transitioned from male to female (i.e. because they always felt female). Some people prefer to be referred to as women rather than trans women while others may refer to themselves as women of transgender experience.

Variation of Sex Development (VSD): Another term for 'intersex' preferred by some medical practitioners and intersex people in place of DSD as it removes the stigma of 'disorder' from the nomenclature (see definition of Intersex and Disorder of Sex Development).

Introduction

What is this Report About?

Funded by the Irish Research Council, this study is the result of a collaborative partnership between the School of Education at the University of Limerick and the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), a national non-government advocacy organisation that seeks to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of transgender people and their families.

This was an exploratory, in-depth qualitative study conducted between May and October 2017 with (a) the parents of eleven transgender and gender variant children (b) seven educators who have accessed the support services of TENI.

This is the first study of this kind in Ireland. It provides new insight into how transgender children and their families are experiencing and negotiating everyday life in primary schools. It also provides new insight into how primary school educators are supporting transgender children and their families. Drawing from these data, this report raises pertinent questions about how gender is constructed and lived in primary schools.

Who Might be Interested in this Report?

This report will be of interest to all education stakeholders including parents, young people, teachers, school leaders, management bodies, school leaders' organisations, teachers, teachers' union organisations, policy makers and anyone involved in curriculum design and professional support.

Background and Context

An emerging body of empirical research internationally has given particular attention to the everyday lives of transgender and gender variant children in primary school contexts. For example, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) note the potential in using transgender themed texts at school but are careful to underline how teacher subjectivities, knowledges and positionalities are key mediating factors. Countering claims that children 'are not ready' for such knowledges, Ryan et al. (2013) demonstrate how children productively learned to question restrictive social systems and think more inclusively in general. Payne and Smyth (2014) outline the fears and resistances of U.S. elementary school educators and how discourses of professional responsibility seek to 'accommodate' transgender and gender variant children but are simultaneously invested in and constrained by the protection of normative understandings of 'childhood innocence'. Bartholomaeus, Riggs, and Andrew (2017) explain how men teachers are more reluctant than women teachers in broaching the topic of gender identity and discuss the need for further training, resources and initiatives for teachers to adequately facilitate the inclusion of transgender pupils. Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, and Tompkins (2017) argue for the need to continuously challenge transphobia and gender stereotypes. But, while school communities are very often comfortable with reacting to transphobic bullying, they are much more uncertain about educating about gender identity in primary schools and discourses of 'childhood innocence' and 'age-appropriateness' shut down educative opportunities (Neary et al 2016; Robinson 2013).

In Ireland, the most common age for people to become aware of their sexuality identity is 12 years of age — the average age of a sixth class child in primary school (Higgins et al 2016). However, as this study suggests, awareness of gender identity appears to happen much earlier. Since 2013 in Ireland, all schools must include homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policies and document and implement 'prevention' as well as 'education' strategies. School related resources such as 'Being LGBT' (GLEN 2015) include guidance for supporting transgender students at school and a new set of lesson plans and resources entitled 'All Together Now' have been developed for use in primary schools. In 2015, we conducted an Irish Research Council study entitled 'Exploring Homophobia and Transphobia in Primary Schools' (Neary et al. 2016). One of the findings of this study was that while educators and parents in primary school communities appeared to understand homophobia and sexuality identity, they were very confused about transgender identity and transphobia. In the absence of published empirical research about gender identity and gender norms in primary schools in Ireland, this study sought to address the following questions.

Research Questions

How are gender identities and gender norms understood, experienced and negotiated in primary schools by:

(a) transgender and gender variant children and their families?

(b) primary school educators?

Summary of Key Findings

The following is a summary of the key findings from across the cohorts of parents and educators. A more detailed summary with questions raised appears at the end of this report.

Key Finding 1:
The children in this study were strongly gender non-conforming from the time they could communicate.

Key Finding 2:
Across the children in this study, there was a diversity of approaches to negotiating their gender identity and using names and pronouns.

Key Finding 3:
The parents and their children in this study experienced significant pressures related to the gender identity binary in society.

Key Finding 4:
In attempting to support their child, parents were in a vulnerable position, particularly because of the age of their child.

Key Finding 5:
Parents' everyday negotiations with schools and health services were affected by their economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources.

Key Finding 6:
Highly gendered systems, practices and language in primary schools caused particular difficulties for the children in this study.

Key Finding 7:
Educators lacked knowledge about gender identity diversity and the onus was often on the parents to support, educate and procure resources.

Key Finding 8:
An absence of national education directives — exacerbated by confusion and fear about the age of children, religious affiliation and religious ethos — caused reluctance and inaction among educators.

Key Finding 9:
The approach to gender identity in schools was largely reactive and focused on supporting an individual transgender child, often constraining broader learning and change related to gender.

Methodology

This study's design was qualitative, in-depth and sought to capture perspectives on how gender identity and gender norms understood, experienced and negotiated primary schools. First, ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee. Parent and educator participants were accessed via TENI. A letter of invitation providing information about the study was sent via TENI to the parents of primary school aged children and educators who had accessed the support services of TENI.

Participants

Parents of eleven transgender and gender variant children aged between 5 and 12, who accessed the support services of TENI, took part in the study. Four children had been assigned the gender identity 'boy' at birth but have always identified more closely and/or presented as girls (Ages 6, 6, 10, 13). Seven had been assigned the gender identity 'girl' at birth but have always identified more closely as a boy (Ages 5, 7, 8, 8, 9, 12, 12). Five children attended Catholic schools, two attended Church of Ireland schools and four attended Educate Together schools. Two of the parents involved were a couple.

Seven primary school educators who accessed the support services of TENI took part in the study (5 Multi-Denominational schools, 2 Catholic schools)

Contexts

Parents and schools were in both urban and rural locations across the country. In several cases, a parent and educator from the same school context were interviewed as part of this study. However, for anonymity purposes within school communities, these links are not identified in this report. Nor are they triangulated as part of the analysis. Each person's account was treated as an individual analytical unit. A total of thirteen separate school contexts are referred to in this study.

Data Analysis

Following reading of information sheets and signing of consent forms, one-to-one interviews were conducted with the parents and educators. Data analysis involved listening back to audio recordings, several readings of transcripts and writing of memos and discussing emerging ideas in the research team. From several analyses of the data, ideas were clustered into categories and themes were constructed. All identifying information was removed from the data and the names and place-names that appear in this report are pseudonyms. Many children used two names. For example, some used their preferred name at home but continued to use their birth assigned name at school. In these cases, I include both names (e.g. Shauna/Jason) throughout the text.

Key Finding 1

All the children in this study were strongly gender non-conforming from the time they could communicate.

The parents in this study outlined how their child was strongly gender non-conforming from the time they could communicate. Most were strongly identifying as a gender identity other than they had been assigned at birth. For example, despite having a slight speech delay, Fred was very clear in articulating his gender identity:

> *When he was about three years old, somebody had been saying to him in Montessori...he was a tomboy and he said "what's a tomboy?" and I said "a tomboy is a girl who likes boys stuff". At three years of age and not being a good talker — he was a late talker — said to me "on the outside I'm a girl but on the inside I'm a boy. I'm not a tomboy".*
>
> *(Eavan, Parent of Fred Age 9, Church of Ireland School)*

For many children, at a very young age, there was evidence of much anxiety and upset in relation to their bodies and many strongly expressed a desire for another body or other body parts:

> *But she's very obsessed with having a willy [penis] this past while...I see her looking in the mirror and... she's willing it to come on ... and she'll stand after the bath...And she'll be like "mam it's growing, I think it's growing it's going to come soon". So, sometimes I kind of go "oh yeah?" and other times ... once or twice I tried to address it. And I kind of said "look, you have a girl's body and I know in your heart and your brain you're a boy and I know that but...your body is a girl's body". Because I was afraid then of... giving her false hope as well. But she got so upset. She just sat on me sobbing, "I'm a boy, I'm a boy". I said "it's ok, you're a boy and that's all that matters".*
>
> *(Paula, Parent of Seán/Callie Age 10, Catholic School)*

These accounts outline the many ways that the children in this study were strongly gender non-conforming from the time they could communicate. Their parents described how they grasped every opportunity to express this, demonstrating the extent to which these children's identities have been lived and negotiated in every moment of every day since infancy.

Key Finding 2

Across the children in this study, there was a diversity of approaches to negotiating their gender identity and using names and pronouns.

Several children had made a full social transition and used a new name and pronouns. Some had decided to make a social transition when going to their next school while some used the move as an opportunity to live their affirmed gender identity without coming out. Some children continued to use their birth-assigned name and pronouns but articulated 'feeling' like and presented as a different gender identity. Some were very insistent on the correct pronoun being used:

> *He's so hyper alert about the right pronoun.*
> *(Jane, Parent of Justin Age 7, Educate Together School)*

Others were more flexible about pronouns but were most concerned with being accepted:

> *She doesn't mind at all. She doesn't tend to correct people but usually someone else in the house will correct them...She says she doesn't mind. She knows that people get it mixed up and I think if she feels accepted by the person is the most important thing for her...*
> *(Joni, Parent of Petra/Peter Age 6, Educate Together School)*

Several children identified as their affirmed gender identity and respective pronouns at home and their birth assigned name and respective pronouns at school. For some, this was complicated by their father's resistance to a social transition. For others, there were fears of what peers would think:

> *Occasionally when we're away... he'd say "I'm Callie now, you can call me Callie". And he goes to swimming lessons as Callie but other than that ... he's just a bit afraid of what the people who know him will think.*
> *(Paula, Parent of Seán/Callie Age 10, Catholic School)*

While there was a diversity of approaches to their gender identity, most children appeared to crave ordinariness. For example, Phil didn't want to have to come out. People assume that she's a boy and she's happy with that but, at the same time, she and her parents would prefer for people to know that she was birth assigned female:

> *she doesn't want to have that conversation with people to tell them that she's a girl. She'd rather people just know.*
> *(Anna, Parent of Phil Age 8, Catholic School)*

While all of the children in this study were gender non-conforming from a very young age, the accounts here highlight the diversity of approaches to negotiating their gender identities on an everyday basis. Such diverse experiences underscore how there is no one transgender experience, strongly countering essentialised and reductive stereotypes.

Key Finding 3

The parents and their children in this study experienced significant pressures related to the gender identity binary in society.

Some parents talked about the difficulties related to public situations where their child presented as one gender but their names and pronouns did not match their gender presentation:

> *looks ridiculous calling a boy Harriet and she hated it. And she used to be embarrassed and I used to shout "Harriet, come here!" [and the response would be] "Mam shut up!"*
> *We call her Phil now.*
> *(Anna, Parent of Phil Age 8, Catholic School)*

Parents acknowledged that it is much easier to identify as either a boy or a girl and that gender fluidity is very hard to negotiate given how everyday life is predicated so ubiquitously on the gender binary:

> *I think she still struggles a bit socially because she doesn't properly fall in either group...I would prefer if we could make a definite decision and move forward in a definite direction...I think if we said "ok, you're Jason in September" or whatever I think it would make the coming years a lot easier...I worry that if we go along like this the whole Shauna/Jason girl/boy thing...it's gonna become a bigger issue.*
> *Siobhán, Parent of Shauna/Jason Age 5, Educate Together School)*

One parent reflected on this pressure to choose a gender and speculated about this:

> *society is so gendered male and female, if you didn't have to pick one what way would things pan out then?*
> *(Eavan, Parent of Fred Age 9, Church of Ireland School)*

One child was gender-fluid and his parent asserted that the open-mindedness of their immediate family and school community facilitated such fluidity:

> *He started school with long hair, skirts and dresses. So it was funny there's never been a transition because Darren still uses male pronouns and identifies very much as a boy but presents very much as a girl and mainly his female friends, is into unicorns and fairies and power rangers and fighting ... yeah I suppose our story is just lots and lots of fluidity. And then we've been in a context where that's been a very easy thing to do.*
> *(Ailbhe, Parent of Darren Age 6, Educate Together School)*

The accounts here underline some of the effects of the rigidity of the gender binary in schools and society. This causes restrictions and negative effects not only for transgender children but for all those children whose bodies and lives do not fit neatly into the gender binary.

Key Finding 4

In attempting to support their child, parents were in a vulnerable position, particularly because of the age of their child.

The majority of parents described feeling judged by others for supporting their child and noted that it would be different if their child were older:

> *There's one thing when an older child, a teenager or whatever comes out and says they're transgender and I think you kind of go "oh well ... you've obviously been dealing with this for a while and you're sure in yourself if you're coming out and telling us". I think a child of that age you're second guessing because you're making a lot of those decisions then for them and you're kind of saying to people "yeah well...we're now looking for a different secondary school" and people going "why would you do that – why not let them go for a few years and decide themselves?". And you're kind of going ... because I think it would be cruel and unusual to sen them to [single-sex school] and put them in a skirt. Especially after what they've told us quite clearly.*
>
> *(Helen, Parent of Kevin Age 12, Catholic School)*

Some parents expressed frustration that other people didn't understand the everyday lived realities of life for their child and their family and how they would not have wished for this:

> *BCC Northern Ireland contacted me there to follow Daire for a few months and do a programme. Now, I didn't go for it because I just think it might have been a little bit too invasive but...in a way I think it would have been a good thing because ... I want to be able to show I didn't create this ... I was like I didn't do it ... I feel like jumping up and down saying I didn't want it! Didn't want my boy to be a girl.*
>
> *(Patricia, Parent of Daire Age 13, Catholic School)*

Some parents were judged by family and friends to be somehow 'indulging' their child:

> *So initially she started refusing...to wear knickers that were pink. Then he wouldn't wear knickers with a bow then couldn't have a frill. And so I just bought underpants. To me, I didn't care I'd buy whatever. But her dad has always struggled, he's been back and forth with it. And my family didn't agree and everyone thought I was ... kind of indulging in her you know ... whatever ... her tom boyishness or her phase. But she gets so worked up so I give her what she wants to wear and then she's happy.*
>
> *(Siobhán, Parent of Shauna/Jason Age 5, Educate Together School)*

Parents were continuously treading the fine line between 'supporting' their child and 'encouraging' their child and all were very conscious of this:

> *We just want to support him and walk by his side through this without encouraging or discouraging. But the encouraging and discouraging are so subtle as well. Because you could be seen to be discouraging by not supporting and not doing things too.*
>
> *(Eavan, Parent of Fred Age 9, Church of Ireland School)*

These accounts powerfully illustrate the difficulties that parents face in supporting their transgender or gender variant child. Made particularly vulnerable by the age of their children, many parents were continuously subject to the judgement of family members, friends and professionals. As a result, most were left wishing that all people, before casting judgement, could know the realities of their everyday lives; of their simple intentions to assuage their children's anxieties and upset and give them the support that they need.

Key Finding 5

Parents' everyday negotiations with schools and health services were affected by their economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources.

Parent vulnerability was significantly affected by the kinds of resources available to them. Most of the parents in this study were middle class and drew on their economic, cultural and social capital to support their child. Some parents drew on their social networks, including school board members, clergy, principals and other parents, in order to advocate for their child. Some parents' status or place in the community aided their everyday negotiations:

> *I've...grown up there. My family have been there for 100's generations. Maybe it's like "oh well she's one of them she must be ok".*
> *(Paula, Parent of Seán/Callie Age 10, Catholic School)*

Most parents used their own culturally acquired skills of communication to deal with schools in ways that ensured support for their child:

> *Now my mum was a teacher, both of her parents were teachers so I kind of get that maybe more than the average parent does. So I was really conscious when I was down with the school I was saying "what do you suggest should be done? How can we assist you? ... it's your school it's how you run your school" and that goes along way with the school because at least it allows them to stay in the driving seat. Other parents I understand are going in saying "do this and do this and do this" which makes it very difficult for the school I would imagine and I'm not criticising them, not saying I'm wonderful or anything. I'm just saying I understand the system perhaps a little bit better.*
> *(Sarah, Parent of Richie, Age 8, Church of Ireland School)*

Similarly, certain children's processing and articulation of their gender identity affected the reactions of adults:

> *I don't know any other kid who's made it as easy for all the adults. Put it that way. Like the teacher said if Richie hadn't been so clear, she recognised that she might have been reticent if she thought this was coming from the parents for instance...She said if she wasn't seeing it herself she would be thinking "oh gosh is this the right thing to do?".*
> *(Sarah, Parent of Richie, Age 8, Church of Ireland School)*

Conversely, some parents had very difficult, judgemental experiences while accessing some support services:

> *There were five professionals sitting around a room with me Tadhg [child] and John [partner] in the middle. They were all asking us questions... it was just so daunting for all of us. And at the end of it, it was "our parenting", it was "anxiety" – they were picking things out of the air around Tadhg...They didn't look at gender at all. She said "this is so rare, the team will see it once in its life time". And I remember her saying that. And then, thank God, we got moved. I had to go off on a parenting course...I had to go to X for a parenting course as a recommendation.*
> *(Geraldine, Parent of Tadhg Age 12, Catholic School)*

Broken relationships also constrained mothers' abilities to advocate for their child. For example, one educator explained the complexities of this:

> *...In this particular case, Mum and Dad are separated. Mum is very much on board and is very supportive of what's happening at home. But Dad I suppose still sees [child's birth assigned identity] and is not even at the stage where he's acknowledging [affirmed gender identity] and that is really challenging. Because Mum would like us to be doing more in school whereas Dad has categorically said I'm not allowing this to the point where there's been solicitors letters saying this is not to happen.*
> *(Róisín, Educator, Educate Together School)*

The economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources that parents had available to them significantly affected their ability to advocate for their child at school. Such experiences alert to the urgent need for comprehensive educational supports to ensure that all transgender and gender variant children, irrespective of background, have equal opportunities to flourish in primary schools.

Key Finding 6

Highly gendered systems, practices and language in primary schools caused particular difficulties for the children in this study.

Most parents and educators in this study explained that their schools had uniform options. Parents were very grateful when there was no uniform or when there was gender neutral uniform options like a tracksuit and t-shirt. Others described the upset caused to their children by gender segregation and gendered uniforms:

> *For the first two years ... they're mixed so it's first and second infants and then the boys and the girls [separate]. So he was really upset he wasn't with the boys he was with...but then he got used to being with the girls ... but the shorts always had to go on under the pinafore. And as soon as we were at the gate it'd be coming off. The skirt would be gone.*
>
> *(John, Parent of Tadhg Age 12, Catholic School)*

There was a diversity of approaches to toilet facilities across the schools referred to in this study. Some parents talked about how gender segregated toilets caused much upset for their children:

> *Because there's two toilets in the classroom a girls and a boy's toilet. So Shauna ... it was like she consciously took a stand when she started school that she was using the boys' toilets. And it became a thing because the other girls would be like "oh Shauna's using the boy's toilet". And so initially the teacher would try and make her go to the girls and she would but it ... but she kept going and then she'd get upset and it'd become a thing.*
>
> *(Siobhán, Parent of Shauna/Jason Age 5, Educate Together School)*

Some had been given access to individual ability-adapted toilets and for many this was not a satisfactory option:

> *I don't want him to have a special toilet. And for Darren I don't think that would resolve the issue at all. He doesn't want to stand out. So having a special toilet doesn't make it any easier.*
>
> *(Ailbhe, Parent of Darren Age 6, Educate Together School)*

For most, the presence of a transgender or gender variant child in their school had resulted in changes/accommodations in practices around toilets. Some now had gender neutral classroom toilets. Others had gender neutral toilets for younger classes but segregated for the older classes. Some had gender-neutral classroom toilets but segregated communal toilets. However, as one parent explained, changes in uniforms or toilets were no guarantor of a change in wider gender practices:

> *Boys over here, girls over here — that kind of thing ... and again it's just a lack of awareness. They're not even aware that they are doing that. I mean her [principal] comments around the toilets were "it's really progressive, it's really quite trendy to have gender neutral toilets"...So it looks, good, I'm progressive because I have gender neutral toilets. Box ticked. But we have no awareness around the fact that we still are stereotyping and you know placing children into boxes.*
>
> *(Eavan, Parent of Fred Age 9, Church of Ireland School)*

Pedagogical practices and language that continuously divided boys from girls were deemed to be particularly problematic by parents.

> *There would be a lot of subtle and not so subtle sort of gender stereotyping that happens and "now boys and girls" and that kind of language.*
>
> *(Joni, Parent of Petra/Peter Age 6, Educate Together School)*

Key Finding 6 *(continued)*

Gendered sports teams and activities caused drop-out:

> *So he was out on the road... playing football with the boys and then going in [to school] playing football with the girls!...Tadhg had always been into sports and he'd been on girls' teams but he just gave them all up. Because he wouldn't play with the girls.*
> *(John, Parent of Tadhg Age 12, Catholic School)*

Several parents described particular difficulties with the gendered nature of religious sacraments:

> *Geraldine: the First Holy Communion...the poor child was roaring crying ... at the dress and had the boxer underneath ... it was probably the worst days of our lives, mine anyway. Looking back...*
>
> *John: Yeah, well he had a choice of wearing a white robe or a white dress. And I wanted ... he wanted the robe and I wanted to have him in the robe because I knew he didn't want the dress. But kind of Geraldine and her mam went with the dress. I think...everyone was just looking at each other on the day going ... this isn't right.*
>
> *Geraldine: I hate photographs of that day.*
>
> *John: I was cross about it for a long time to be honest like. Because ... I just felt no one listened to me in it. Felt like everyone .... No one listened to me and no one listened to Tadhg in it. So it was hard like.*
> *(Geraldine and John, Parents of Tadhg Age 12, Catholic School)*

Birthday parties were another very significant site of gender segregation. Parties were often organised for only the girls or boys in the class and this caused much upset for several children and their families. For example, Siobhán's account powerfully highlights the exclusionary effects of such gendered practices:

> *Siobhán: Well we had a birthday party ... her birthday is the 16th December and we had a birthday party the week before and no body came. So two children were sick. They came back to me they were sick but no, no one came.*
>
> *Aoife: how many did you invite?*
>
> *Siobhán: A lot.*
>
> *Aoife: Of boys predominantly?*
>
> *Siobhán: Yeah, she wanted a boys only party. Girls were not allowed. She agreed to allow me invite these two girls we know so that Cara would have someone to play with. Thank God we did cos they were the only ones who showed up...Horrific. But Shauna just didn't really acknowledge it and just went along ...*
>
> *Aoife: Braved it.*
>
> *Siobhán: She's extremely resilient. Too much so...Two people said they were sick. That was it. and I was only thinking recently now she got an invitation last week but that was the first invitation she got this year. Now, it's a class of 23.*
> *(Siobhán, Parent of Shauna/Jason Age 5, Educate Together School)*

Gendered classroom activities were deemed unnecessary and caused upset for the children in this study, forcing some educators to reflect on and change their practices:

Key Finding 6 *(continued)*

there was an incident where she had like a song thing on and you'd follow actions. Now she said, in hindsight...she wouldn't have put it on but it was a boy-do-this, girl-do-that type of song. But she said she observed Shauna very definitely only did boy actions. And some kids ... the girls again were like "Shauna's doing boys' actions — you're not a boy!" And I think the teacher said "you can do whatever you want".

(Siobhán, Parent of Shauna/Jason Age 5, Educate Together School)

Some educators proactively interrupted gendered practices, language and stereotypes but most agreed that this was informal, random and dependent on individual staff who were sensitised to the restrictiveness of highly gendered systems. It was also acknowledged that even where there was a concerted effort by school staff to improve these practices and systems, children themselves were so conditioned by gender in their social worlds that they defaulted to gender segregation in playground activities:

his core four mates and they're the boys and he's on the boys team and they call it the boy's team. So that'll show you a little bit maybe in the playground. I know the girls chase the boys sometimes too, that's one of their games. So there's definitely separation there where the girls are chasing the boys and the boys are chasing the girls. It's definitely not the school now you know. It's the kids... he's [the main offender as well you know. He's had to fight with them for how many years to tell them he's a boy. So I suppose he's not going to turn around and let them think anything otherwise you know.

(Jane, Parent of Justin Age 7, Educate Together School)

The highly gendered nature of primary school life is potently evident in these accounts. This rigid architecture of gender extends to all aspects of primary school life through both overt and subtle means. Such systems have restrictive effects for all children, limiting current lives and future pathways. Furthermore, the experiences of the parents and educators in this study underline how tokenistic changes to gendered systems can actually reproduce further inequalities by detracting from the pervasive ways that gender polices all children in primary schools.

Key Finding 7

Educators lacked knowledge about gender identity variance and the onus was often on parents to support, educate and procure resources.

While there were varying degrees of sensitivity towards and interest in the topic of gender, educators in this study said that they had had no formal training in this area. Any knowledge about gender was not garnered as part of their formal teacher education experience but instead from personal experiences or independent research.

> *I did a thesis in sexism in language so I am quite aware of it in my own world ... I don't know the meaning of all the terms necessarily. I thought I did and then recently I realised...there's a whole load of new terms I don't really know...so I don't know as much as I thought I did. But I would be quite aware of those things. And it does interest me. So I would read about stuff. In terms of in-service or training no, nothing. There's nothing.*
>
> *(Sally, Educator for 10 years, Educate Together)*

The Educate Together *Learn Together* curriculum created opportunities for children to learn about gender and for teachers to interrupt gender stereotypes:

> *we talk about it a lot at national level and I think that most schools will at least pay some sort of notice to it. I'd be very surprised if there was an Educate Together school ... that didn't at least mention gender identity or even discuss it. I'd be surprised if there was a denominational school that didn't discuss gender identity in some way or another*
>
> *(Fergus, Educator for 17 years, Educate Together)*

But, one educator explained that the quality of this teaching and learning was reliant upon individual knowledge and sensitivity and she often heard worrying gender stereotypes being reinforced by staff in primary schools:

> *I've never been told by anyone to do that [interrupt gender stereotypes or teach about restrictive gender norms]. And I've seen other teachers **encourage** for want of a better word, reinforce it. So..."you wash the baby while you go off to work", that sort of thing. Or "I bet you're going to dress up as a princess"... you know that predicting or "I bet you're going to wear a lovely dress now tomorrow"... you see it quite often actually... I think we as a society need to you know cop on a bit to gender and we need to stop doing this to kids for all sorts of reasons. Need to stop labelling them all the time.*
>
> *(Sandra, Educator for 8 years, Educate Together)*

All educators admitted to an absence of knowledge about transgender identities or gender identity variance before the transgender or gender-variant child was enrolled in their school:

> *I knew nothing. And I was as confused as everybody about all the labels. The whole transsexual, transgender ... the confusion with the homosexuality and I was completely confused... well my reaction was ... wow, four years of age, imagine a four year old that knew themselves ... that well. That was my first thing, wasn't that amazing and I had never heard. I mean we had had children here before who were obviously gender confused. And that ... I mean there would have been issues ... I suppose as the child went up the school. But we had never had ... a four year old coming in ... who had ....Absolutely decided I am not a boy I'm a girl. And everybody was very taken aback, including myself mostly about their age.*
>
> *(Frances, Educator for 39 years, Educate Together School)*

This lack of knowledge about gender identity caused fear and reluctance amongst staff:

> *staff to be honest were quite fearful of it [the idea of a transgender child in their school]. Because I think...they were afraid of making a mistake of what if they use the wrong terminology, what if they say the wrong thing.*
>
> *(Róisín, Educator for17 years, Educate Together School)*

Given such lack of knowledge and confidence in supporting transgender and gender variant children, it is unsurprising that educators looked to parents to educate them about these issues:

Key Finding 7 *(continued)*

Because what we've been doing is linking in with that particular family and saying what are you doing at home – how are you tackling this at home? How would you advise that we would maybe start these conversations in school?
(Róisín, Educator for17 years, Educate Together School)

Parents' educational activities included making a handbook, buying books for the school library and having on-going conversations with principals and class teachers. Again, echoing key finding five, such efforts are dependent upon parents having the economic and cultural capital to effect such changes in their school community.

The educators in this study who had received training from TENI were very positive about it, explaining that it had opened their eyes about aspects of gender identity that they were not familiar with:

I probably would only have known about transgender. Just as the T of LGBT...when Catherine came in a lot of new vocabulary and a lot of ways of seeing things. I wouldn't have been aware of a lot of things she was talking about.
(Sandra, Educator for 8 years, Educate Together)

However, these training sessions were short and educators vehemently underlined the need for more in-depth and widespread professional development in this area:

Now it's not easy to access training and I think because we're in [rural county] we're a little bit isolated too...I would like to see that filter...into all schools... I wouldn't like to think our school is the only school that is being open with children and that are educating children around this and families...
(Róisín, Educator for17 years, Educate Together School)

Parents echoed this need, emphasising the exclusionary effects of ignoring these issues:

So I think the school ... teachers to have training in inclusion...I don't know whether they do or not but they need to have training in inclusion to include all diffferent groups of people. I think that's a huge thing that they're trained in that area...There is social inclusion for people who come from deprived backgrounds but there's no social inclusion if you're ...transgender or even if you're in 5th and 6th class identifying as being gay. There's no inclusion for people like that.
(Patricia, Parent of Daire Age 13, Catholic School)

While acknowledging the need for training, resources and guidelines, one parent cautioned that caring, empathetic educators were necessary for this to happen in a meaningful way in practice:

I think you can have all the guidelines in the world but if you don't have the people behind it ... sure we'll adhere to these guidelines - I'm ticking this box here ... but you have to have the heart behind it. And that's all it is.
(Paula, Parent of Seán/Callie Age 10, Catholic School)

It is clear that the primary school educators in this study lacked knowledge in relation to gender identity. This caused reluctance, confusion and inaction and placed an inordinate responsibility on parents to educate their children's teachers and principals. These experiences alert to the urgent need for comprehensive education, resources, support and space for critical dialogue.

Key Finding 8

An absence of national education directives – exacerbated by confusion and fear about the age of children, religious affiliation and religious ethos – caused reluctance and inaction among educators.

The educators in this study emphasised that they had no direction from the Department of Education and Skills related to supporting transgender and gender variant children in primary schools. For example, one principal said:

> *I remember ringing the Department of Education because we were trying to fill in for the Department's database and you know you have to fill in the gender. And like everything is gender based. When you print out a class group it's the boys and the girls. So I rang the Department... the POD – Pupil Online Database, I rang the help desk and said I was looking for some advice around... inputting for a child who...was born a boy, on their birth cert they're a boy, but they're now a girl and what could the Department advise and she said "ohhh, that's a first!" She said "I'll call you back". So she did and said "oh we don't have an opinion, that's a matter for your Board of Management".*
>
> *(Frances, Educator for 39 years, Educate Together School)*

Another principal explained the difficulty in the transition from primary to second-level school and the lack of clarity in relation to admissions:

> *I'm already working with the secondary school Principal for next year. But just to give you an idea...it's a single sex boys school ... in their enrolment policy 'we accept boys'...they have to factor something in to their enrolment policy. There is no guidance on this even for that.*
>
> *(Declan, Educator for 33 years, Catholic School)*

A lack of training combined with a lack of direction from the Department of Education and Skills caused fears and reluctances to be proactive in relation to supporting transgender and gender variant children, particularly because of the age of the child:

> *I know that people have said ... and...people who are in the same job as me in other schools have said things like "there's no way a child of four is going to be able to decide that. That child could easily change their mind in a few years and where will the school be then in terms of what our actions have been?"*
>
> *(Frances, Educator for 39 years, Educate Together School)*

Parents also noted how principals and teachers in primary schools are operating in the dark because of this lack of direction, causing reluctances and very slow processes of support, if any:

> *I was asking our school to do something they had never heard of. I was asking them to do something that as far as they were concerned had never happened before and when I asked them to reach out to other schools...they were getting utterly contradictory experiences and advice. So there was no common guidelines... it's about having an SOP — Standard Operating Procedure. So school gets advised that, or school raises a flag that ... here's what people do. And it can be the broadest most whatever guideline possible. But a sense as to what the related legislation is...there's the educating from the youngest stage possible ... and then there's the empowering and supporting which is having SOPs and guidelines and legislation ... and I don't mean new legislation ... I mean if an issue comes up here is the underpinning legislation which is the gender recognition act.*
>
> *(Sarah, Parent of Richie, Age 8, Church of Ireland School)*

Some parents reported how principals were very reluctant to facilitate a social transition at school and were particularly worried about the reactions of other parents:

> *the Principal was worried about bullying...Well that's all he brought up. And to me, with bullying, it's like ... yeah well, then deal with the bullying or show me the parents...So you address the person who is doing the bullying...I don't think he wanted the hassle of parents approaching him.*
>
> *(Helen, Parent of Kevin Age 12, Catholic School)*

Key Finding 8 *(continued)*

There was also some confusion around whether or how to facilitate a transgender child who didn't want to come out or openly declare their birth assigned gender identity. Some educators were satisfied with these situations, declaring that information about the child should be on a 'need-to-know basis'. However, one educator was very worried about other children and parents finding out about the child and put pressure on the parents to help him come out:

Aoife: did everybody know he was trans?

John: No, not starting off I don't think.

Geraldine: There were rumours. It was kind of bubbling...And the teacher was absolutely petrified. She didn't know how to handle this and the teacher wanted him to come out and Tadhg didn't want to come out.

John: And the teacher was putting pressure on us for him to come out and tell everyone and just kind of have it out on the open. Whereas like Tadhg didn't want that. So we weren't going to force him to come out...you can't force someone to come out. It has to be when he's ready.

(Geraldine and John, Parents of Tadhg Age 12, Catholic School)

Another significant issue contributing to the lack of direction in supporting transgender and gender variant children was religious affiliation. One parent described a harrowing situation where they had been receiving solicitor's letters since an email went around to parents flagging that their child would be transitioning at school. Religious ethos was also an issue. The two educators in this study who were in a religious school also acknowledged being constrained by their Catholic religious ethos:

Declan: you've the whole Catholic Church over this as well. Ok, our bishop in our dioceses at the moment ...

Elaine: Well this current bishop sent people to do a retreat in secondary school, a girl's secondary school who last week told them that gay and lesbians...he absolutely ridiculed gay and lesbians. And that's the patron of the school.

Declan: That's one factor here sitting in the background as well....the Altogether Now programme...the catholic church hasn't agreed to those ... they haven't ... sanctioned them...from our point of view the catholic church hasn't sanctioned them. You don't do it in a Catholic school.

(Declan, Educator for 33 years, and Elaine, Educator for 27 years, Catholic School)

These accounts demonstrate how a lack of clarity and direction from the Department of Education and Skills caused reluctance and inaction from educators. This was made all the more difficult by fears around the age of the children concerned, worry about reaction from other parents, religious ideals and beliefs that learning about transgender identities and gender variance was contrary to the religious ethos of a school. The accounts above point to the need for openness and clarity from the Department of Education and Skills because, currently, some children and their families are receiving the message that they don't fully belong in our primary schools.

Key Finding 9

The approach to gender identity in this study was largely reactive and focused on supporting an individual transgender child, often constraining broader learning and change related to gender.

Across the schools referred to in this study, the approach to gender identity was reactive and focused on supporting particular individual transgender or gender variant children in their school:

> *the fact that this is new now ... it will evolve. It will start conversations and... that's healthy, I think that's good. It's when to start them, where to start them...like ok would we be having this conversation if [transgender child] wasn't in our school – the answer is no. We wouldn't need to.*
>
> *(Declan, Educator for 33 years, Catholic School)*

Some educators talked about the positive impact that a transgender child had had in their school, allowing them to focus in a more meaningful way on learning about gender identity:

> *having a transgender child in your school...gives you that catalyst in a way to kind of really work hard at it. And, in a way, yes, it's a bit proactive because you set the scene ... this is a place for equality in all aspects ... but you get opportunities to sort of say well now we have an actual ... we have the foundation and now we have a reason to do something a little bit more solid or whatever.*
>
> *(Fergus, Educator for 17 years, Educate Together)*

However, exacerbated by a lack of guidance, the changes brought about by reactive approaches had upsetting effects for some children and their families. For example, some parents struggled with the idea that changes in school practices were interpreted by other parents, children and staff as being about accommodating their individual child as opposed to being a good practice in and of itself:

> *... with no heads up...with no input from us, the Principal went into the school probably a couple of weeks before Fred officially transitioned in school, before that letter went out to parents and she announced one day the toilets were all going to be gender neutral (before, the toilets had been male and female). But they're all cubicles...There was a bit of uproar about that from different classes, older classes, because she gave no notice to any parent. She just told kids at assembly and kids were coming home and going what! And then of course I felt ... I was really upset at that...what the fuck are you doing now people are going to think...she said "it's nothing to do with your child"...well I didn't request this, we could have discussed it, could have been communicated better ...*
>
> *(Eavan, Parent of Fred Age 9, Church of Ireland School)*

Furthermore, because heretofore there had been silences around gender identity in their school, some educators were extremely reluctant to talk about this in the classroom now because it would draw attention to the individual child:

> *in an ideal world you wouldn't do it [learning about gender identity] when the transgender [child] is in your room...It becomes a lesson about [the transgender child].*
>
> *(Elaine, Educator for 27 years, Catholic School)*

In the face of such reactive, individualised approaches and given the absence of guidance and lack of knowledge amongst educators, there was the worry that the positive impacts would only last while the child was in the school. This was alluded to in the following account:

> *Will we have it [professional learning about gender identity] in a year's time? I don't know. When X is gone until the next one ...put that transgender thing over there until the next one arrives [said facetiously]*
>
> *(Elaine, Educator for 27 years, Catholic School)*

Key Finding 9 *(continued)*

Declan also cautioned of the limits of the impact on the wider school community when teaching and learning about gender identity is confined to reactively supporting individual transgender and gender variant children:

> *I never heard of Catherine [TENI Education and Family Support Officer] before. Until this happened...I didn't have to go there. Any of the staff...it's class teacher's problem – now I don't mean it like that. But class teacher is dealing with it. The rest of the staff drive on as normal.*
>
> *(Declan, Educator for 33 years, Catholic School)*

Educators and parents acknowledged that such approaches were problematic because they were minoritising and individualising. They underlined the need for learning about gender and gender identity to be proactively addressed and embedded in primary school life:

> *So I think ... we as a whole we need to look at it. It's not about a specific child because it's unfair to make it about one child because that's just too much...it's a bit like...making buildings accessible, it's not about the child in the wheelchair it's like ... it's about the world has to be accessible for all of us.*
>
> *(Sally, Educator for 10 years, Educate Together)*

Because, gender identity had not been addressed in most schools, either as part of the formal curriculum or informally, it was inevitable that any training about gender identity became about supporting that individual child as opposed to learning more broadly about gender, gender norms and gender identity. Subsequent changes in gender practices were perceived to be about supporting the individual child and this brought unwanted attention, causing upset for many children and their parents. These experiences draw further attention to the need for proactive and embedded education in relation to gender identity diversity and equality both formally and informally. In that way, the presence of a transgender or gender variant child in the school would not be so out of the ordinary.

Summary and Questions Raised

The children in this study were **strongly gender non-conforming from the time they could communicate.** Such experiences alert to how children are processing gender identity and affected by gender norms from very early on. This points to the need for primary schools to be proactive in creating supportive and informed spaces for all children to talk about gender. Countering claims that children are not able for such conversations, much research highlights how, given the right scaffolding, children can productively explore and question systems of privilege and disadvantage (Ryan et al. 2013).

Across the children in this study, there was a diversity of approaches to negotiating their gender identity and using names and pronouns. Echoing Halberstam (2018) these diverse experiences emphasise that **there is no one transgender experience.** At the same time, all parents and children in this study experienced **significant pressures related to the gender identity binary** in society and such experiences highlight the ways in which societal pressures to identify and present clearly as either a boy or a girl limit what is possible for young children as they process and begin to express their gender identity.

In attempting to support their child, **parents in this study were in a vulnerable position,** particularly because of the age of their child. Parents were concerned first and foremost with the happiness and welfare of their child and their emotional labour in this endeavour was incessant. Many parents were continuously judged and monitored by family members and health professionals. Such experiences led to constant internal struggles about how to support their child without over-encouraging or over-discouraging pathways, decisions and choices. Their everyday negotiations with schools and health services were also **affected by their economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources.** Various factors such as the complexity of the issues faced, the age of the child, inconsistencies in professional knowledge and an absence of school guidelines meant that parents had to draw upon all of their resources to advocate for their child. The necessity to have such resources in order to advocate for one's child undoubtedly results in **grave inequalities of experience and treatment for some children and their families.**

This study affirms the idea that primary schools are very often **highly gendered places with particularly exclusionary effects for transgender and gender variant children.** Pedagogical language and activities, playground games, uniforms, toilets, religious sacraments, textbooks and resources, extra-curricular sports and activities and birthday parties are all aspects of primary school life that were gendered, often in subtle and 'unthinking' ways. Such activities have a significant impact on the messages that children receive about gender, often restricting hobbies, interests and ultimately future career pathways for all children (Skelton et al 2006). They also have exclusionary and particularly upsetting effects for transgender children who want to make a social transition and for children whose lives and bodies do not fit neatly in a gender binary system. **Reductions in the often needless gendering of primary school life would open up more possibilities for all children.** Importantly, it would also lessen the difficulties that transgender and gender variant children and their parents experience in negotiating everyday school life. However, the experiences of the parents and educators in this study underline how **tokenistic changes to gendered systems can actually reproduce further inequalities by detracting from the pervasive ways that gender polices all children in primary schools.**

Echoing research in other contexts (Payne and Smith 2014; Robinson et al 2014; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016), this study reveals **significant gaps in the knowledge of primary school staff in relation to gender identity.** Most reported to have had no formal education about gender in their teacher education programmes and those who were educated in relation to gender had done independent study, had taken an Educate Together course or drew from personal experience. Before the transgender or gender variant child had enrolled in their school, no educator had specific knowledge about transgender or gender variant people. The TENI support training was very positive and 'eye-opening' but not deemed to be enough and thus educators called for **more comprehensive training and resources.** In the circumstances, it is unsurprising that parents were called upon to educate staff. While such an approach values the parent as an expert source of information about their child, **reliance on individual parents for education about gender identity places inordinate responsibility on parents.** Furthermore, this causes inequities because this kind of work is more possible for some parents than others.

This study also reveals **an absence of clear national education directives and guidelines** for supporting transgender and gender variant children in primary schools. While some principals referred to in this study were supportive, others were reluctant, cautious and slow in enacting any processes of support for the transgender child and their family. Some were particularly concerned about

Summary and Questions Raised *(continued)*

reactions of other parents, particularly given the age of the child. What sits in the backdrop here is the myth that other children might become 'confused' about their own gender identity. Others, while supportive of an individual child, were very cautious that they **could not educate about gender identity more broadly because of their school's Catholic ethos.** Given the absence of education guidelines and the uncertainty around the impact of religious ethos, it is unsurprising that the **support given by educators and received by the children and their families in this study was inconsistent, unpredictable and was subject to the random presence of individual staff members who were particularly caring and empathetic** in their school communities.

The parent and educator accounts across thirteen schools in this study confirm that the **approach to gender identity was largely reactive and thus individualised.** The vast majority of schools had had no specific education about gender identity until a transgender or gender variant child enrolled in their school. Furthermore, schools had not reflected formally on the system of gender in their school, how this was experienced by all children or how this might be encountered specifically by a transgender or gender variant child. Given such a reactive approach, any changes to practices and/or any school community teaching and learning in relation to gender identity inevitably became linked to and associated with the individual transgender or gender variant child. Such associations were upsetting for some children and their families because they became the focus of unwanted attention. In other schools, educators' reluctances to draw attention to the individual child created new silences around the topic of gender and gender identity. The experiences of such reactive approaches underline the **urgent need for schools to proactively and comprehensively address how gender operates** in primary school life in Ireland. Until this happens, there will continue to be **restrictive and exclusionary effects for all children.**

References

Bartholomaeus, C., Riggs, D. W., & Andrew, Y. (2017). The capacity of South Australian primary school teachers and pre-service teachers to work with trans and gender diverse students. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 65, 127-135.

Halberstam, J. (2018). *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Vol. 3). Univ of California Press.

Kearns, L. L., Mitton-Kükner, J., & Tompkins, J. (2017). Transphobia and cisgender privilege: Pre-service teachers recognizing and challenging gender rigidity in schools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 40(1), 1.

Martino, W., & Cumming-Potvin, W. (2016). Teaching about sexual minorities and "princess boys": A queer and trans-infused approach to investigating LGBTQ-themed texts in the elementary school classroom. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37(6), 807-827.

Neary, A., Irwin-Gowran, S., & McEvoy, E. (2016). *Exploring homophobia and transphobia in primary schools in Ireland.*

Gay and Lesbian Equality Network. 2015. *Being LGBT in School: A Resource for Post-Primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying in Primary Schools.* Dublin: Gay and Lesbian Equality Network and the Department of Education and Skills.

Robinson, K. H., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G., & Davies, C. (2014). *Growing up queer: Issues facing young Australians who are gender variant and sexuality diverse.*

Robinson, K. H. (2013). *Innocence, knowledge and the construction of childhood: The contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's contemporary lives.* Routledge.

Ryan, C. L., Patraw, J. M., & Bednar, M. (2013). Discussing princess boys and pregnant men: Teaching about gender diversity and transgender experiences within an elementary school curriculum. *Journal of LGBT Youth,* 10(1-2), 83-105.

Skelton, C., Francis, B., & Smulyan, L. (Eds.). (2006). *The SAGE handbook of gender and education.* Sage.

Payne, E., & Smith, M. (2014). The big freak out: Educator fear in response to the presence of transgender elementary school students. *Journal of homosexuality,* 61(3), 399-418.