The post-primary school experiences of TRANSGENDER AND GENDER DIVERSE YOUTH IN IRELAND

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Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) has been working with both primary and post-primary schools in Ireland since 2013. During this period, we have experienced hundreds of individual and often complex situations relating to gender transition in the school environment. Our work focuses on providing a holistic wrap-around model of care, which encompasses a partnership element with key stakeholders in the care for young transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people, including their families. Often the initial step begins with the young person revealing their gender identity to either parent/guardian or school staff member, who then contact TENI for advice and support. Our Education and Family Support Officer liaises with school staff and parents/guardians to develop a wrap-around plan. Underlying our approach is to ensure that TENI facilitate the student remaining in school, rather than isolate themselves in a home environment during this vital period. We work in conjunction with the school, the student and the student’s family and aim to ensure family cohesion throughout the often-sensitive period of gender transition. TENI’s next step is consultation with the school principal and key members of staff linked to supporting the young person. Often at this point, we provide a brief overview training to all school staff, included in the content is:

- terminology
- legislation
- school policy
- trans young person’s experiences
- informing other students
- healthcare
- family support
- parental concerns
- school policy
- family support
- parental concerns

During the initial visit to the school we link with the young-person’s regional support team (e.g. CAMHS, Jigsaw, etc.) to ensure that they have essential information that is required for ongoing support. TENI also provide support for students who enter secondary school having already socially transitioned in primary school. Foremost and centre to our wrap-around approach, is that the young-person receives ongoing support. We provide information for TENI support groups for families (TransParenCtI) and young people (Transformers) and establish a robust connection with the family to ensure ongoing support and information. As part of this approach, we also provide support for other family members, including siblings, grandparents etc. In addition, we offer ongoing policy support, training, and consultation to schools as well as mediation between school and family. Furthermore, we provide both training to, and consult with, the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS).

Since 2013, TENI have worked with over 400 families, scores of schools, as well as many vital support agencies in relation to gender transition in the school environment. We have collaborated in shaping policy and guidelines for the many variations of schools in Ireland. We have collaborated with the majority of school management bodies and unions in Ireland, contributed to their annual and regional conferences and, in so doing, developed a cohesive relationship with them. A major milestone for TENI’s work in the education sector was holding Ireland’s first ‘National Transgender Education Conference’ in Waterford in 2019. This event was attended by over 200 school representatives from all regions across Ireland.

TENI’s ultimate objective is to ensure better integration of the TGD students within the school system when undertaking gender-transition and we believe a holistic wrap-around approach can achieve this objective.
Given that many Catholic schools have already been sensitively offering support to pupils who are beginning to express same sex attractions or raising personal questions about gender identity, it is timely to identify, develop and disseminate best practice in this area across all our Catholic schools.

Archbishop Eamon Martin,
Keynote address to JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference Galway, 3 May 2018.

Archbishop Martin’s comment suggests the need for a timely and appropriate response from the Department of Education and Skills in relation to young people experiencing gender identity issues in the school environment. Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people are one of the most marginalised groups in society. They often face insurmountable challenges in many sections of life including; family understanding, navigating appropriate healthcare services, transphobia, and all whilst trying to attain a proper school education. The sheer weight of these issues bearing down on the minds of TGD youths can be overwhelming for them and they often feel school is an unwelcome, unsafe, and anxiety-ridden space; and, many leave schools due to duress.

This report clearly demonstrates some of the negative experiences of TGD young people in an Irish school environment and one would need to be devoid of empathy to not find these experiences rendering. Although we have a better insight into the many challenges experienced by lesbian and gay young people in our schools, there is still a wide gap in understanding the needs of TGD young people; there are many complex differences between the experiences of sexual and gender identity.

TENI urge the Department of Education and Skills to develop and implement an inclusive policy for TGD students and their families. We call on the school management bodies, unions and teaching staff to initiate vital gender identity and expression changes to existing policies which will enable TGD young people to experience a feeling of safety and belonging in the Irish school system.

I want to express enormous gratitude to the authors and all involved in this study, they have succinctly helped to highlight the voices of our most marginalised. I am especially grateful to the participants in this study for their courage in speaking from the heart, I hope their voices resonate throughout and change is forthcoming.

Vanessa Lacey,
Health and Education Manager, Transgender Equality Network Ireland
SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. The marginalisation of gender diversity in post-primary schools inhibited transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth from coming out, which could have a detrimental effect on their well-being and academic attainment.

2. Some TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of school staff who invalidated their gender identity and obstructed their transition.

3. Most TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of school who affirmed their gender identity and facilitated their transition.

4. Following their transition, the majority of TGD youth experienced being called by their birth name (‘misnaming’) and by an inappropriate pronoun (‘misgendering’).

5. Following their transition, many TGD youth experienced their school uniform to be restrictive, while some were prevented from wearing a uniform that aligned with their gender identity.

6. Following their transition, most TGD youth experienced barriers accessing a bathroom facility that they felt comfortable and safe using.

7. Following their transition, some TGD youth encountered challenges with staff who asked inappropriate questions or made transphobic comments.

8. Following their transition, some TGD youth were subjected to transphobic bullying, many of whom felt that their schools did not respond appropriately to the incident.

9. Following their transition, many TGD youth faced barriers in relation to participating in physical education and school sports teams.

10. Following their transition, some TGD youth felt that their schools did not provide them, and their families, with an adequate level of ongoing communication and engagement.

11. Following their transition, some TGD youth left their school before completing their formal qualifications due to negative experiences, while other TGD youth felt it necessary to transfer to a new school after they had transitioned.

12. Among TGD youth, trans girls/women faced severe educational challenges due to heightened levels of prejudice against students who transition from male-to-female, while non-binary youth encountered challenges due to limited understanding of non-binary identities.

13. Some TGD youth experienced challenges that were linked to the religious ethos of their school, while others encountered particular difficulties because they attended a single-gender school.

14. The majority of TGD youth experienced barriers in relation to accessing healthcare assessments, however, some TGD youth faced additional healthcare barriers due to their age, region, mental health, and socio-economic background.
The Irish government’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI+) Youth Strategy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018) explicitly recognises that there is limited research relating to LGBTI+ youth in Ireland; and that the paucity of research evidence constrains our understanding of LGBTI+ young people’s lives as well as the challenges they encounter. Among LGBTI+ youth there is a particular dearth of research concerning transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students. Although emerging research grapples with how TGD children and their families are navigating everyday life in primary schools in Ireland (Neary and Cross, 2018; Neary 2019), to date there has been no published research into the experiences of TGD youth in Irish post-primary schools (for an exception see Dunne and Turraoin, 2015). As such, educators, school leaders and policymakers have limited empirical evidence of the specific challenges that TGD youth experience during their post-primary education.

This report outlines the findings of a qualitative research project (2018-2020) that investigated the post-primary school experiences of TGD youth (aged 15-24) in Ireland. The study was co-funded by the Irish Research Council and Marie Skłowdowska-Curie Actions as part of the “Collaborative Research Fellowships for a Responsive and Innovative Europe” (CAROLINE) programme. The research was undertaken as a collaboration between the School of Education, University of Limerick and Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI). Currently, TENI provide schools that contact them with a range of services including supporting TGD youth and their parents/guardians, advice and education to school staff, and liaison with other service providers. In 2019, TENI organised the first ‘National
Transgender Education Conference’ held in Ireland, which was attended by over 200 educators from across Ireland. This research project builds on and hopes to complement TENI’s pioneering work in Ireland’s education sector. The research questions that guided the study were:

1) What are the key challenges facing TGD students in Irish post-primary schools?
2) Are there differences among TGD students in relation to the educational challenges they encounter?
3) What recommendations for future policy and practice developments arise from the research?

The report begins with a description of the study design. This is followed by the 14 key findings. Finding 1 outlines how the marginalisation of gender diversity within post-primary school inhibited many TGD youth from coming out. Finding 2 shows how a minority of TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of school staff who invalidated their gender identity and obstructed their transition. Finding 3 examines how the majority of TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of school staff who affirmed their gender identity and facilitated their transition. Findings 4-11 detail the wide range of challenges TGD youth encountered as part of, or following, their transition. Findings 12-14 reveal how TGD youth’s educational experiences were shaped by their gender identity, the type of school they attended, and their access to healthcare. The report concludes with two sets of recommendations. The first come from TGD youth and outlines how schools can be made more inclusive and supportive environments for TGD students. The second set of recommendations has been formulated by the project team and are designed to direct future policy and practice developments at a national level.
The study design was qualitative and aimed at generating evidence of TGD students’ post-primary school experiences. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee. Participants were predominantly accessed through TENI’s network of youth and parent peer-support groups. Some participants were recruited via LGBTI+ youth groups and snowballing techniques. All potential participants were emailed an information sheet, which outlined the purpose of the study and the potential risks associated with participation. All participants provided informed consent. Participants aged under 18 provided signed consent from a parent.

**Terminology**
Throughout this report, we use the phrase transgender and gender diverse (TGD) to describe young people (aged 15-24) whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth and whose gender expression is different from the cultural norms associated with their birth gender. When discussing young people who transitioned male-to-female we use the term ‘trans girls/women’ and use ‘she/her’ pronouns. When discussing young people who transitioned female-to-male we use the term ‘trans boys/men’ and use ‘he/him’ pronouns. And, when discussing young people who did not identify as either exclusively ‘male’ or ‘female’ we use the term ‘non-binary’ and use ‘they/their’ pronouns. For a full glossary of terms see Appendix 1.
Participants
Nineteen TGD youth took part in the study (see Fig. 1-3 for demographic details). Of the ten TGD youth who were attending school at the time of the research, five attended a co-educational community school, three attended a single-gender denominational school, and two attended a co-educational denominational school. Thirteen TGD youth took part in individual interviews. Ten parents took part, eight mothers and two fathers. Eleven educators from ten different schools were interviewed (see Fig. 5 and 6 for details). Fourteen stakeholders were interviewed.¹

Data collection
An arts-based workshop was developed using existing manuals (Marnell and Khan, 2016; Renold, 2016, see Appendix 2 for a full outline of the workshops). The aim of the workshop was to creatively engage TGD youth in discussions about gendered aspects of their schooling and how these affect TGD students. Three workshops were held in which a total of 12 TGD youth participated (see Fig. 4). All workshop participants were aged 18 or under and were attending a post-primary school or Youthreach.² Creative outputs were documented and the notes made during workshop discussions were transcribed for analysis. A total of 54 interviews were conducted, which were transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition a scoping review of academic literature was conducted (see McBride, 2020).

¹ Representatives from the following organisations were interviewed: Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), BeLonGTo, Educate Together, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), Gaisce, Gender Orientation Sexual Health HIV (GOSH-H), the Joint Managerial Board Secretariat of Secondary Schools (JMB), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), and Youth Work Ireland.

² Youthreach is a national programme that provides opportunities for basic education, personal development, vocational training and work experience to those who have left school without formal qualifications.
The post-primary school experiences of transgenders and gender diverse youth in Ireland

**Fig. 1 - Age of TGD youth participants**

- 15 - 18: 5
- 19 - 24: 14

**Fig. 2 - Education status of TGD youth participants**

- Post-primary: 10
- Youthreach: 4
- Third level: 2
- Unenrolled: 1

**Fig. 3 - Gender identity of TGD youth participants**

- Boy/Man: 2
- Girl/Woman: 15
- Non-binary (AFAB): 2
- Third level: 1

**Fig. 4 - Number of workshop participants**

- Workshop 1: 5
- Workshop 2: 4
- Workshop 3: 3

**Fig. 5 - Educators’ role**

- Principle: 1
- Vice principle: 2
- Teacher: 2
- Chaplain: 2
- Counsellor: 1

**Fig. 6 - Educators’ school type**

- Single gender denom, school: 4
- Co-education denom, school: 4
- Co-education community school: 2
Data analysis

Data gathered during workshops and interviews were thematically analysed using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo). Thematic analysis involved coding data categorically to identify major themes (e.g. experiences relating to ‘names and pronouns,’ ‘uniforms,’ ‘bathrooms,’ etc.). Data coded under each major theme were then systematically analysed in order to determine sub-themes of importance as well as identify points of convergence and divergence among research participants. This process of analysis was iterative and involved in-depth discussions among the research team and TENI staff in order to refine analysis. A summary of research findings was circulated to TGD youth who participated in the project (March-April 2020). Six responses were received, which affirmed the findings to be an accurate reflection of the educational challenges encountered by TGD youth (see Appendix 3). Findings were then cross-checked against academic literature to identify examples of corroborating evidence.
I think I was really tired of being stuck in like this soul where I knew how I felt, but everybody else thought I was this pretty little girl, basically. They thought I was this thing that I wasn’t, and I knew that I wasn’t. I think it was really scary because the whole world thought I was something I wasn’t, and I knew I wasn’t. And then that made me think I was insane. Because, you know. If everybody is telling you you’re one thing, and this is how you should act, this is how you should behave, but you want to behave the opposite way, and act the other way, and look the other way, then you’re gonna think you’re crazy, ‘cause you’re not like everybody else. And that’s a big thing, actually. Not being like everybody else, and not fitting in, it’s major, because people are like, ‘Oh, you don’t fit in. You’re an outsider,’ sorta, you know? So I think what led to me to actually being able to come out is I was just really tired of waiting for another day that I was gonna be confident. Because I knew it was gonna be hard either way, so I just decided to do it.

Scott (16, single-gender voluntary school)
The marginalisation of gender diversity in post-primary schools inhibited TGD youth from coming out, which detrimentally effected some TGD youth’s self-confidence, well-being, social connectedness, and academic attainment.

Many TGD youth reported that neither gender diversity nor sexual diversity were discussed as part of their post-primary education:

“[Teachers in my previous school] wouldn’t discuss LGBT people at all, but especially not trans people.”

*Esme (17, Youthreach)*

The curricular exclusion of LGBT youth contributed to most TGD youth feeling that gender diversity was marginalised within their school:

“The fact that there are absolutely zero talks or information given about gender identity and expression and the differences between them – so virtually most of the people are uninformed on the topic.”

*Workshop one, activity one, note in a jar*

Only two TGD youth interviewed recounted discussing gender diversity in school prior to coming out. Both described the lessons they received about gender identity and expression as one-off events that lacked meaningful engagement. Alex (16, co-educational community school) highlighted how the only time TGD youth were mentioned was during his second year when his class were asked to debate which toilets TGD students should use. Jude (15, single-gender denominational school), meanwhile, described their Relationship and Sexualities Education (RSE) lesson about gender diversity as tokenistic:

“We just acknowledged they were there, read the definition and then that was it. [...] The teacher] didn’t discuss any issues that would be surrounding like the trans community and stuff. We should’ve had more time to talk about it.”

*Jude (15, single-gender denominational school)*
A number of TGD youth highlighted how they received information about lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) identities and experiences, but did not receive information about gender diversity. Shane (16, co-educational community school) felt frustrated because his Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) textbook included examples of LGB youth, but not TGD youth. He felt this was a “missed opportunity” that denied students an opportunity to gain awareness of “of being trans in school, which can cause a lot of issues.”

The majority of TGD youth felt that LGBTI+ identities were not visibly represented in their school; there were no LGBTI+ youth group posters nor were there activities around Pride or Stand Up Awareness Week. One workshop participant complained that: “The school has not allowed an LGBT+ week in our school ever before.” In addition, some TGD students explained how attempts by students to increase LGBTI+ representation were actively prevented by school staff:

“There was a group of people who […] wanted to put up posters for an anti-bullying week that’s very much geared towards LGBT, just because they never have anything, and were turned down, [staff] being like, ‘no, you can’t put that up. […] It’ll litter the hallways.’”

Martin (22, co-educational community school)

The majority of TGD youth explained how their school did not have a supportive space for LGBTI+ students. Furthermore, some interviewees felt that their school would not support the establishment of an LGBTI+ supportive space, while others stated that they were actively prevented from establishing an LGBTI+ supportive space:

“We tried to get [an LGBTI+ supportive space set up]. […] But [school leadership] said that there wasn’t enough people, that it would be inappropriate, it would be too time consuming, they would need a teacher to supervise it. And that it wasn’t happening, essentially.”

Esme (17, Youthreach)

Most TGD youth explained that curricular exclusion, non-representation, and the lack of supportive space combined denied them access to information that would have helped them to better understand their gender identity at an earlier age as well as appropriate terminology with which to discuss their gender identity with others. The marginalisation of gender diversity thus inhibited TGD youth’s self-understanding and left some feeling confused, frustrated and alienated from their peers. This was summed up by one workshop participant who felt that in their school there was “No way to be open and comfortable about your own gender.” Scott (16, single gender denominational school) explained how the marginalisation of gender diversity in his school led him to feel anxious about coming out:

3 Stand Up Awareness Week is an initiative aimed at encouraging people to take a stand against homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools across Ireland. It is led by BeLonG To Youth Services.
Some TGD youth described how the marginalisation of gender diversity prevented them from coming out and compelled them to present in an inauthentic manner. For some TGD youth, denial of their authentic gender identity led them to feel depressed:

I think because [gender diversity] wasn’t talked about, I was afraid of people not being accepting. [...] It took me so long to actually get to a point where I could actually tell people.

*Scott (16, single-gender denominational school)*

Among TGD youth who had completed their post-primary education, some explained that the marginalisation of gender diversity led them to experience social isolation and peer alienation that continued to affect them psychologically and socially in their adulthood:

I realised it was almost like an overwhelming sense of beyond [hanging out with friends] I don’t fit in this [male] identity. When I’m out of this situation, there’s nothing there. That was what caused the major downturn.

*Molly (18, co-educational community school)*

Among TGD youth who had completed their post-primary education, some explained that the marginalisation of gender diversity led them to experience social isolation and peer alienation that continued to affect them psychologically and socially in their adulthood:

It was [...] infuriating when I realised that, because of the turmoil the silence put me through, being in school and feeling very, very different from everyone else, but not understanding why, and knowing that I should’ve been told things to avoid that. [...] It came out in ways that really harmed me, and have had a lasting effect on me.

*Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school)*

**Supporting evidence**

The marginalisation of TGD youth in Irish post-primary schools echo international studies that suggest that TGD youth often feel marginalised, stigmatised, and invisible within post-primary school settings (Kjaran and Jóhannesson, 2015) and, as a result, can experience a sense of shame linked to feelings of isolation, self-rejection, and low self-esteem (Rivers et al, 2018). The marginalisation of gender diversity within post-primary schools therefore makes it more difficult for TGD youth to navigate their gender identity and discuss it with others (see Austin, 2016).
2. Invalidating & obstructive responses

Some TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of school staff who invalidated their gender identity and obstructed their transition. Invalidating and obstructive responses left TGD youth feeling that their voice was not heard, that their best interests were not considered, and that they were discriminated against because of their gender identity.

The majority of TGD youth who participated in the research had discussed their gender identity, and their intention to transition, with at least one member of school staff. Of the TGD youth who disclosed their gender identity to a member of school staff a minority reported receiving an invalidating and obstructive response. In this section we present two illustrative accounts that highlight how invalidating and unsupported responses from school staff affected TGD youth.

Shane’s experience
Shane (16, co-education community school) explained how he disclosed his gender identity during his first year of post-primary school to a teacher he trusted and thought would be knowledgeable about gender diversity. However, the teacher responded by downplaying the significance of his disclosure: “She was just like [...] ‘Do your work,’ and ‘it’s fine because there’s not a lot you can do.’” This unsupportive response left Shane feeling unheard and that there was no support available. It negatively affected his confidence and he spent “the whole of second year just with nothing happening.” In his third year of school, Shane discussed his gender identity and the challenges he was experiencing with his vice principal who responded in an obstructive manner:

She was like, ‘Not really, we think well other people changed [their name] and then changed back, so ...’ [...] I mentioned the fact that it’s really stressing me out, people calling me she/her all the time. She’s like, ‘Oh, we can’t do anything about it.’

Shane (16, co-education community school)

The response of his vice principal left Shane feeling profoundly upset: “I ended up crying after that.” He explained how during his fourth year he disclosed his gender identity to his parents, who in turn contacted the school leadership about his need to transition. Following his parents’ intervention the school agreed to facilitate Shane’s transition. However, at the time of the interview Shane stated there had been no substantive changes to his school life, e.g. his teachers still referred to him by his (female) birth name and she/her pronouns.
Esme’s experience

Esme (17, Youthreach) explained how she disclosed her gender identity in second year, but school staff were unprepared to accept her identity, impeded her transition, and actively discriminated against her. School staff continually used her birth name (despite requests not to), were aggressive towards her, disproportionately punished her, and rigorously policed her behaviour. This experience of transphobic bullying left Esme feeling that: “they just really did not want to deal with me at all in that school.” Esme also experienced transphobic bullying from her peers, which she experienced as extremely upsetting.

In order to prevent future bullying, Esme’s parents asked school leadership to speak with incoming first years, but these requests were ignored. Esme and her parents felt that the school did not act in Esme’s best interests:

The hostility Esme received from staff and peers left her feeling extremely anxious about attending school. She began to have panic attacks when at school and her attendance levels fell as a result, which negatively affected her education. Esme considered transferring to another school. However, due to the discrimination and bullying she had encountered she was fearful about joining another school and decided to enrol in Youthreach. Esme explained how her experience in Youthreach was very different:

Supporting evidence

The experiences of Shane and Esme align with international research that suggests TGD youth may experience rejection as a result of disclosing their gender identity to school staff and that such rejection causes anxiety for many TGD youth (Jones and Hillier, 2013). TGD youth who lack support from a member of school staff have been found to be over four times more likely to leave school, to hide at lunch, and to receive harassment and abuse (Jones et al., 2016).
3. Affirming & facilitative responses

Many TGD youth disclosed their gender identity to a member of staff who affirmed their gender identity and sought to facilitate their transition. Affirming and facilitative responses left many TGD youth feeling recognised and that their best interests were considered.

The majority of TGD students reported that the school staff they discussed their gender identity with responded in an affirming manner. Many described how they took time to identify a trusted member of staff to disclose to, who affirmed their gender identity and offered them emotional support:

“It was the school chaplain who knew before anyone else knew, because I had her for English as well, so I already knew her very intimately, and it was like, right, I’m just going to confide in you, and she was very like, ‘yeah, this makes sense. You can come to me whenever.’

Martin (22, co-educational community school)

Some TGD youth described how the affirming and supportive response they received greatly enhanced their sense of personal safety and enabled them to make identity-affirming choices:

“I kind of opened up to one of my teachers. [...] It was like, okay it’s real now. So, what the fuck? But also, it’s okay because someone else knows and I’ll be safe, at least, because they know I’m not really okay so they’ll be kind of watching me and minding me while I figure this out.

Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school)

Some TGD youth felt that the affirming and supportive response they received spared them of unnecessary emotional pain. This shows how affirmation from a member of staff helped TGD youth to feel less anxious and be more open about their gender identity:
It was so nice and relieving for people to be like, ‘It’s okay [to be trans].’ But if they had said it wasn’t okay, I probably would’ve ended up just going back into a hole. […] And gone back to the place where I was just hiding my feelings about being trans.

Scott (16, single-gender denominational school)

All the TGD youth who received an affirming and supportive response from a member of staff went on to transition while at school. TGD youth described how school leaders played a pivotal role in facilitating their transition and ensuring members of staff were informed appropriately:

The principal was very considerate, very understanding. She knew I was having trouble, struggling a bit. She was just very understanding about it. She knew it was something that wasn’t really addressed by the school, and needed to be. So in that sense, she was very eager to please, she was very helpful.

Molly (18, co-education community school)

Despite receiving an affirming response and having their transition facilitated all TGD youth who transitioned during their post-primary school education reported experiencing one or more difficulties as a result. Common challenges encountered by TGD youth following their transition are outlined below (Findings 4 to 11, pages 19-39).

Supporting evidence

International literature shows that school staff who are committed to acceptance and affirmation can make a positive impact on the lives of TGD students (Ehrensaft, 2013). Acceptance and affirmation have been found to improve TGD youth’s of sense of belonging and safety as well as their well-being and participation in education (Shelton and Lester, 2018). As such, school staff play a critical role in the lives of TGD youth through the provision of emotional support in relation to life challenges and their transition (De Pedro, et al., 2017).
4. Names & pronouns

Following their transition, the majority of TGD students continued to be called by their birth name (‘misnaming’) and by their birth pronoun (‘misgendering’). TGD youth with a non-binary identity faced particular difficulties due to a lack of awareness of gender-neutral pronouns. Ongoing use of a TGD student’s birth name for official purposes led to uncomfortable situations for some and caused others anxiety about completing exams and applying for university.

TGD youth indicated that an essential aspect of their transition involved being called by their self-determined name and being referred to by their preferred pronoun. However, some TGD youth reported that school staff impeded them from changing their name on the school register/roll in a timely manner, while others described struggling with school staff to be referred to by their preferred pronoun:

The guidance counsellor was like, ‘okay we have to make a list of things that you want.’ So I was mentioning that I wanted to be called [Aaron]. […] The first thing he said was, ‘I don’t know what we’re going to do about the name because we can’t.’ […] I was just quiet, almost crying, going outside the class. Even though they told me they were on my side, I feel like they weren’t really.

Aaron (16, a co-educational denominational school)

Some TGD youth felt “invisible” and unable to focus on their school work because staff did not call them by their self-determined name. This sense of invisibility led some TGD youth to want to quit school:

I was like, ‘I can’t come here anymore if I’m going to be called my old name sometimes, and not be called anything else. I feel like a blank here.’

Eoin (21, single gender denominational school)
All TGD youth who had their self-determined name formally recognised by school staff reported that they continued to be misnamed and misgendered (see Fig. 7, pg 22). Many TGD youth felt that much of the misnaming and misgendering they encountered from staff were due to ‘unconscious error.’ Martin (22, co-educational community school), for example, expected staff to make “slip ups” despite knowing about his transition and was not surprised when staff he interacted with irregularly misnamed or misgendered him because they “didn’t really know me.” Many TGD youth explained that unintentional misnaming/misgendering could cause them hurt and embarrassment, and so it was important that staff offer a prompt and straightforward apology:

“All TGD youth who transitioned at school noted that, just like members of staff, friends and peers made ‘mistakes’ with their name/pronouns. As Alex (16, co-educational community school) put it: “A few people who I am friendly with […] just didn’t get it at first.” Many TGD youth explained that after a period of adjustment friends and peers used their self-determined name and preferred pronoun. However, some TGD students felt that they continued to experience misnaming/misgendering from peers because their school did not inform students about their name change and preferred pronoun. James (15, co-educational denominational school) explained how peers continued to misname and misgender him because they “didn’t even know. […] It’s like they’re still using my [birth] name, and two years after, the wrong pronouns.” This suggests that TGD youth may encounter habitual misnaming and misgendering if schools do not provide their peers with direction around names/pronouns.

Non-binary youth who prefer gender-neutral pronouns, such as ‘they’ (he/she) and ‘their’ (his/her), faced particular challenges related to misgendering. Felix (stakeholder, youth organisation) noted, “people struggle with definitions and [gender-neutral] pronouns, it’s a process of practicing and getting used to them.” Jesse (parent) explained that her 15 year-old child identified as non-binary and had been misgendered by school staff: “There’s certainly no nastiness behind it, or anything like that. It’s a genuine slip up.” Jude (15, single-gender denominational school) identified as non-binary. Despite feeling generally accepted and supported, Jude felt the ongoing misgendering they experienced was evidence that school staff and peers did not fully understand non-binary pronouns and identities:
When I changed my name, no one really asked too deep into anything. They never asked, ‘Oh, what are your pronouns? What do you identify as?’ […] I think they just accepted me as a trans guy, which at the time I was fine with because I was fine with anything that wasn’t female. But no one really asked me anything in particular. And sometimes they would still say she and they just don’t think about it.

Jude (15, single-gender denominational school)

Some TGD students encountered challenges in relation to their birth name continuing to be used officially on administrative records and forms of identification. Deborah (parent of a trans boy, 16) described how a bus inspector “made a big fuss” because her son’s male appearance was incongruent with the female name on his bus pass: “he came home from school very upset that day.” Some TGD explained how the ongoing administrative use of their birth name made them worry about conducting exams, receiving exam results and applying for university. These experiences highlighted how ongoing administrative use of their birth name caused some TGD to feel unnecessary anxiety and stress:

[The principal] told me I couldn’t change my name for my exams on the leaving cert. […] As I got into fifth year, I was thinking, ‘What about orals and stuff, when I have to go into my [foreign language] oral. Am I going to have to explain [my gender identity]? Do they want the role as me? But it’s not my name, I’m transgender! How do I explain all that in [foreign language] and Irish? Am I supposed to do that?

Seamus (16, single-gender denominational school)

Supporting evidence

These findings correspond with international research that has found names and pronouns to be central to how TGD youth negotiate their identity within school (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick, 2018) and that TGD youth commonly experience being called by their birth name and inappropriate gender pronouns, instead of their preferred name and pronouns (Sausa, 2005). TGD students that experience misnaming and misgendering have been found to be less able to concentrate while in school and more likely to cease participating in schooling (Jones, et al. 2016).
5. Uniforms

Many TGD students felt that their school’s uniform policy was restrictive, while some were prevented from wearing a uniform that aligned with their gender identity. Not being able to wear a uniform that aligned with their gender identity caused TGD youth considerable discomfort.

All TGD youth who transitioned while at school highlighted how uniform choice was an important aspect of their transition. The majority of interviewees noted that their school had a uniform policy that visually distinguished between boys and girls (see Fig. 8, page 24). Many felt irritated by the gendered nature of their school uniform. One workshop participant expressed their frustration about:
TGD students greatly valued being able to wear a uniform that aligned with their gender identity and that they felt comfortable in:

“From first year, I could wear pants, and I always did. I never owned a skirt. It was pants, shirt, tie, jumper. […] Nothing overly gendered, which was great. […] It made it a lot easier, yeah. If I had had to wear a skirt and they made me, I would’ve probably dropped out. Because at that time, that would’ve been a real trigger for me.”

Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school)

Conversely, not being able to wear a uniform that aligned with their gender identity was found to have a negative effect. Gabriel (stakeholder, youth organisation) discussed the experience of a student who identified as a boy and attended an ‘all-girl’ school with a restrictive uniform policy. She explained how the student was made to wear a skirt throughout his school years. Gabriel described how she saw the student walking to school every day “with his shoulders drooping” and that he was “visibly distressed and unhappy.” This evocative description highlights the mortification TGD youth can feel at being compelled to wear a uniform that is incongruent with their gender identity.

Seamus (16, single-gender denominational school) explained how his school’s uniform policy did not permit girls to wear trousers. Following his transition, Seamus was allowed to wear the school tracksuit bottoms as a substitute for trousers. He explained how he felt this was acceptable for a short time, but that he began to feel uncomfortable wearing informal attire while other students were dressed formally. He raised his concerns with his principal and explained the discomfort he experienced. Yet, his principal refused to make any further accommodations as she believed it would result in all of the female students wanting to wear trousers. Seamus explained that he was finally allowed to wear trousers after a year and a half of “fighting.” Seamus’ experience highlights how some TGD youth had to divert their attention away from their education in order to struggle with school leadership to be allowed to wear a uniform that aligned with their gender identity and that they felt comfortable in:

“It was very frustrating because […] [in the middle of fifth year the principal said] ‘I sent you a letter in the post saying you can get these trousers that are available in the shop that we buy our uniforms from.’ And I was, ‘Why couldn’t you have done this earlier?’

Seamus (16, single-gender denominational school)
Supporting evidence

These findings align with international research that suggests strongly gendered school uniforms are problematic for TGD youth, since they impose gender binary stereotypes and leave little room for autonomous expression of gender (Jones, et al. 2016; McBride and Schubotz, 2017; Ullman, 2014).

Fig. 8 – Restrictive school uniforms were raised consistently by workshop participants.
6. Bathrooms

Many TGD students experienced barriers accessing a bathroom facility that they felt comfortable and safe using following their transition. Consequently, some TGD students avoided using the bathroom while at school, which could negatively affect their education and result in physical health problems.

A prominent concern for many TGD youth following their transition was being able to access a bathroom that they felt comfortable and safe using (see Fig. 9, page 27). However, bathroom access was a common grievance among TGD youth:

The majority of TGD youth interviewed explained how following their transition they were offered access to a gender-neutral bathroom. Gender-neutral bathrooms were typically an unused wheelchair accessible bathroom that had been re-designated gender-neutral. For some TGD students this arrangement was unproblematic:

Very quickly they had an all gender bathroom. [...] It was kind of an unused disabled toilet. They kind of just stuck on the sign, and yeah, that was kind of it. [...] I do see the issues of it being a disabled toilet that then becomes all-gender, but I suppose it didn’t bother me too much.

Molly (18, co-educational community school)

However, many TGD students experienced barriers accessing the gender-neutral bathroom they had been provided access to. The main barrier encountered by TGD youth was that there was typically only one gender-neutral bathroom in the school, which made it impractical and/or time-consuming to access. Meanwhile, some TGD youth felt uncomfortable using the gender-neutral bathroom in their school because it was also used by school staff:

There’s an every-gender toilet, but I see teachers using it, so I’m not sure it would it be suitable for me to use it even though I’ve been told by another teacher that I could.

James (15, single-gender denominational school)
Some TGD students felt uncomfortable using gender-specific toilets and encountered access barriers in relation to the gender-neutral bathrooms. As a result, some TGD youth felt extreme anxiety about using school toilets and consequently avoided using them. Some parents expressed considerable concern that in order to avoid using the bathroom their child limited the food and drink they consumed and that this, in turn, detrimentally affected their ability to concentrate and learn while at school:

> [My child] wouldn’t eat breakfast and wouldn’t have had a cup of tea, so that he wouldn’t have to use the toilet. Which is pretty dire, isn’t it?

*Esther (parent of a trans boy, 15)*

Bathroom avoidance also led some TGD youth to experience physical health problems. As Joanna (parent of a trans man, 21) explained “So, [he] would try and hold it the whole day. He’d get very, very stressed about it. It’s very painful, it’s not good for you.” Over time bathroom avoidance could lead TGD to youth experience serious physical health problems that could have long term consequences:

> That caused a lot of problems in itself regarding UTI [Urinary Tract Infections], bacterial infections, stool-wise. If you’re not drinking or eating during the day, there’s a huge problem there as well.

*Gary (20, co-educational community school)*

**Supporting evidence**

These findings reflect international research that shows TGD youth commonly experience discomfort and anxiety in school bathrooms, which can leave them feeling unsafe using school bathrooms (Ullman, 2014). Low-levels of bathroom safety have been found to negatively affect TGD youth’s self-esteem and academic attainment (Wernick et al., 2017).
7. Challenges with staff

TGD youth perceived most school staff to lack adequate knowledge about gender diversity. In order to increase their knowledge some staff asked TGD youth to educate them about gender diversity, which resulted in staff asking inappropriate questions and causing hurt. Some TGD youth experienced staff who made prejudicial comments about and acted discriminatorily toward TGD youth.

Many TGD students encountered challenges with school staff following their transition. For some, these challenges stemmed from what they perceived to be a lack of awareness and understanding among school staff about gender diversity (see Fig. 10, page 29). One workshop participant put it bluntly: “teachers are clueless.” The majority of school staff who took part in the research highlighted how they had received limited pre-service and in-service education around gender diversity. Some school staff expressed concern that their lack of preparedness would lead them to cause the young person harm:

“A student transitioning] was brand new to us, we just wanted to not screw it up.

Abigail (school leader, co-educational community school)
Many of the school staff interviewed described how they sought to increase their awareness about gender diversity by talking to TGD youth:

“I had not really thought about [gender diversity] until this particular student [transitioned]. […] My initial reaction was I do not understand. I do not understand that. You need to explain that to me more, and I had a conversation with her, and it made sense, it just made sense.”

*John (school leader, co-educational community school)*

Some TGD youth were happy to answer questions about their gender identity. However, others felt uncomfortable discussing their personal experiences with staff. A workshop participant noted that one of the gendered aspects of his school life that he did not like was: “Questions from teachers.” Some TGD youth explained how teachers asked them questions that they considered intrusive and inappropriate:

“So because she’s a [member of staff], she can’t ask me [questions about my sexuality] because it’s very unprofessional. And she wouldn’t ask that to anyone else. Because she wouldn’t want to know anyway. 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.”

*Aaron (16, co-educational denominational school)*

Some TGD youth reported experiences in which school staff acted prejudicially. This included staff who stopped calling out the class register in order to avoid using a TGD student’s self-determined name as well as staff who were perceived to intentionally misgender and misname TGD students:

“One staff 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 kid and he has experienced the same thing as well with her.”

*Scott (16, single-gender denominational school)*
Scott’s experience highlighted how school staff can discriminate against TGD youth indirectly and without overt aggression. However, some TGD youth experienced teachers who directly and openly expressed prejudicial views about LGBTI+ people:

“No one stands up to the only homophobic teacher – called trans people an illusion, called same gender marriage nonsense. Says this to young classes and no student / teacher stands up to him.”

This statement highlights how some TGD youth experienced teachers who questioned the legitimacy of TGD identities and same sex relationships in the classroom. For some TGD youth, the hurt experienced when a teacher made a homophobic/transphobic statement in the classroom was exacerbated because neither students nor other staff challenged the prejudice. Students and staff who did not challenge homophobic and transphobic staff were therefore considered by some TGD youth to implicitly condone homophobia and transphobia.

Supporting evidence

Findings into the challenges TGD youth encounter with staff are in line with international research that shows that due to a lack of education school staff attempt to learn about gender diversity through TGD students (Meyer et al. 2016) and that having to explain their gender experience to others can be emotionally difficult for TGD youth (Austin, 2016). Findings also mirror evidence that TGD youth can experience discrimination and abuse from school staff (Sausa, 2005) as well as feel that transphobia that goes unchallenged is implicitly condoned (Ullman, 2014).
8. Peer harassment & violence

Some TGD students were subjected to transphobic harassment and violence from peers, which left them feeling unsafe while at school. Some TGD youth felt that their schools did not respond to incidents of transphobic bullying in a meaningful way, which could intensify feelings of insecurity.

Following their transition, some TGD youth encountered harassment from their peers due to their gender identity. Some TGD youth explained how they became the object of rumours:

“Technically the only way [my peers] were told was that we all came into the morning register, and just like that, my name was changed, and they were all like [...] ‘Oh okay,’ and then the uncomfortableness happens, and then the sneaky questions happen.”

Martin (22, co-educational community school)

Many TGD students experienced direct forms of transphobic prejudice from peers following their transition. This included purposeful misnaming and misgendering, verbal abuse, being outed, and threats of violence. Some TGD students experienced being physically assaulted by other students because of their gender identity:

“I know there was definitely a guy that I got to know [...] and he’d be telling me, ‘oh, yeah, no, I’m not really in school. The last time I was in school, I got whacked over the head with a skateboard.’ [...] [He was] having to proper fight his own battles, and physically fight, because people had a serious issue [with his gender identity].”

Martin (22, co-educational community school)

Transphobic bullying was experienced in a variety of school spaces, including classrooms and hallways. However, bathrooms and changing rooms were identified as being particularly unsafe school spaces for TGD youth. Esther (parent of a trans boy, 15) explained how her son was subjected to non-physical bullying because he used the male changing room: “I think they’d thrown his stuff on the floor. I was just so upset about that.” A workshop participant explained how he was physically assaulted in the male toilets:
I had been using the guys toilets, I’d been walking in with a friend and nobody noticed me. This one time they did and they trapped me in a stall and they started to throw books and pens, pour water over me. A sixth year had to intervene.

*Jack (19, Youthreach)*

Transphobic bullying also occurred online, outside of school hours and could have profoundly damaging effects on TGD youth:

[The online bullying] started on a Friday evening. I was made aware of it, first of all, at half past one on Saturday morning when I got a call from a [police] station [to tell me] that the [transgender] student had self-harmed who was being bullied.

*John (school leader, co-educational community school)*

Workshop participants underscored the damaging effects of transphobic bullying when they highlighted the link between the verbal harassment and suicide among TGD youth (see Fig. 11, page 32). In recognition of the seriousness of transphobic bullying, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2013) *Anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools* explicitly requires schools to mention transphobia in their anti-bullying policy. However, some interviewees noted that their schools do not name TGD identities or transphobia in their anti-bullying policy:

[The staff] do talk about anti-bullying, that they don’t accept it at all. But it never comes up for gender. Like there’s nothing about ‘No bullying trans people.’

*Scott (16, single-gender denominational school)*

Some TGD youth felt school staff responded inappropriately to transphobic bullying. James (15, co-educational denominational school) explained how he was left feeling aggrieved because the staff member to whom he reported a transphobic incident to did not provide him with information about what was done nor was he offered follow-up support: “maybe something was done, I just didn’t know. [...] I resented it.” Others explained how staff were present when they were abused, but failed to intervene appropriately:
Kieran (16, co-educational community school), meanwhile, explained how school staff did not intervene when he was assaulted in the changing room. This left him feeling that school staff condoned the violence enacted upon him:

“There’s been times when literally I was called a fagot or queer, or tranny […] in class with a teacher there. The teacher was just like, ‘Shut up. […] Be quiet.’ To the other student, and that’s it.

Shane (16, co-education community school)

They knew who did it and what happened, but. They could prove it, they had cameras. But they didn’t really care.

Kieran (16, co-educational community school)

Supporting evidence

Our findings relating to peer harassment and violence correspond with international research, which has consistently shown that TGD youth experience disproportionate levels of peer bullying compared to cisgender peers (Sterzing, et al., 2017); and, that this impairs TGD youth’s sense of safety while at school (Toomey et al., 2010). TGD youth who experience homophobia and transphobia have been found to be more likely to self-harm and attempt suicide (Jones and Hillier, 2013). Furthermore, our findings correspond with research that suggests that staff intervention is limited and that non-intervention is perceived to pardon the transphobic abuse (Ullman, 2014).

Fig. 11 – Workshop participants developed an advocacy poster that highlighted the detrimental effect transphobic bullying has on TGD youth.
9. PE & sports participation

Many TGD students faced barriers in relation to participating in physical education and/or sports teams because of safety concerns around changing facilities and the gender-segregated nature of sporting activities.

TGD youth highlighted how physical education (PE) and sports participation were important aspects of their schooling. Workshop participants commonly felt that teachers privileged students who were good at sporting activities and participated in school teams (see Fig. 12-15, pages 35 & 36). However, many TGD students encountered barriers in relation to participating in PE and sports. A workshop participant noted that they felt “uncomfortable” playing sport, that they “weren’t encouraged to [take part],” and as a result felt “left out.” This point was reaffirmed by some school staff:

“The number of schools [that] would be very much focused, maybe exclusively is a bit harsh, but there would be a very strong focus on I would say sports, particularly [Gaelic Athletic Association] […] and sometimes students that are not integral in those areas can feel a little bit left out.”

Peter (school leader, co-educational community school)

The most common barrier to sports participation TGD youth reported was accessing a changing facility that they felt comfortable and safe using. Many interviewees who took part in sports following their transition noted that they were granted access to an unused wheelchair-accessible bathroom or a disused office/staff changing room. For some the changing room they were provided with was far from the sports field and difficult to access:

“It’s a bit annoying for PE [to change in the wheelchair accessible bathroom], to trek across the school to it. And it’s a trek back.”

Alex (16, co-educational community school)

Some TGD youth felt that the changing room they had access to made them stand out as different from other students and inadvertently made them feel marginalised:
So, they had allocated [him] the wheelchair-accessible toilet and changing area for getting ready for PE. [...] And the boys and girls then got changed up the corridor, [...] Either they would come down from the corridor dressed for PE, and he’d already be just standing in the gym waiting, or they would be there, and he’d have to walk out of his different room into them. So, either ways, he was very much ‘othered,’ different, not with the gang. And it was really tough.

Joanna (parent of a trans man, 21)

Felix (stakeholder, youth organisation) noted how he “had yet to meet a trans young person who was [...] just able to go and do sports and do PE without a feeling of dread and anxiety.” Felix felt that this stemmed from TGD youth’s feelings of negative body image and of unsafety when in gender-segregated changing facilities. Felix stated barriers to PE and sports had “massive effects” on TGD youth’s “mental health and physical health” and that TGD youth’s avoidance of PE and sports, in turn, created anxiety about “how do I explain that I don’t want to do it?”

Some TGD students also felt discomfort and anxiety because of their school’s PE uniform. Jude (15, single-gender denominational school) explained they disliked their sports uniform because it emphasised aspects of their body that they were uncomfortable with: “the PE uniform would be tight fitting and stuff. It’s very female orientated.” Grace (stakeholder, youth organisation) highlighted that a common concern among trans boys/men that she worked with was: “How are you going to run around with a binder on?” Many trans boys/men wear binders in order to compress their breast tissue and have a more masculine appearance. ‘Binding’ was a barrier to sports participation for some trans boys/men because on the one hand they were concerned that wearing a binder would restrict their movement and cause them breathing difficulties; and, on the other hand playing sports without a binder triggered feelings of bodily discomfort.

The gender-segregated nature of sporting activities was a barrier to participation for many TGD youth. As Grace (stakeholder, youth organisation) put it: “schools’ binary approach to sport causes extra problems.” She highlighted how many young people she worked with stopped playing sports because of concerns around: “What team do you go in? Who do you participate with?” Esme (17, Youthreach) explained how she felt unable to participate in her school’s sports day because she thought her school would obstruct her from participating with other girls and she did not want to participate with the boys. Meanwhile, some TGD youth were put-off from continuing to participate in gender-segregated school sports teams after their transition:
[He] had always played on the [sports] team but felt really uncomfortable this year about playing with the girl’s team. I think he’d felt that through last year that everyone had got to know who [he] was and no one was asking questions about, “if you’re a boy, why are you on the girl’s team?” […] And so he really, really didn’t want to play. And he doesn’t do any other physical activity so I was really disappointed about that.

Esther (parent of a trans boy, 15)

Supporting evidence

The barriers to PE and sports participation identified correlate with international research, which has shown that TGD youth’s gender presentation, the normative gender culture of PE, and gendered sports uniforms affect how TGD youth use sports facilities and can lead to experiences of exclusion and harassment (Caudwell, 2014). Such harmful experiences have been shown to lead TGD youth to feel marginalised and disengage from PE and sports (and therefore miss out on the health and social benefits that come with participating in physical activity) (Devis-Devis et al., 2018).
Figure 12-15: Workshop participants were asked to draw ‘ideal pupil’ from the perspective of educators. Almost universally workshop participants described the ‘ideal pupil’ as being good at sports and how they felt excluded from participating in sports.

10. Tokenistic engagement

Some schools did not provide TGD students with proactive and periodic support following their transition. A lack of regular communication placed responsibility on TGD students to come forward with the challenges they encountered, which could lead to minor issues developing into major problems with serious consequences.

Most TGD youth felt that school staff did not listen to TGD students (see Fig. 16, page 38). This sentiment was put succinctly by one workshop participant, who stated that school staff should: “stop making assumptions [and] start listening.” Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school) stated that the most important thing schools could do to support TGD students was: “I think listen to them. Just be engaged with them.” Gary (20, co-educational community school) stated that for school staff to be “aware of the issues and if something arises” they needed to “talk to the person and see what they want to do.” Many TGD youth felt that school staff should regularly ‘check-in’ with TGD students in order to provide them with emotional and practical support:
If it’s in school [TGD youth are] teenagers. They’re young, they’re emotionally minors. They are young people that need to be supported and not everything can be left to them.

*Esme (17, Youthreach)*

Not being listened to and a lack of regular check-in sessions was also a concern for many parents. Some parents explained how school staff were initially supportive, but then failed to follow-up meaningfully. Limited, or poor communication, left parents feeling frustrated and perceived school staff to be minimising the gravity of their child’s experience:

Last April [my child] came out as trans and I called the home school liaison teacher […] and she was great, I have to say. She was on speed, she knew all about it. And I said that he wanted to wait up to September to make the change. But I heard nothing then, and even when he was due to go back in August, I was trying to ring her to get on to her and I couldn’t get of her.

*Deborah (parent of a trans boy, 16)*

Many parents explained how a lack of regular communication placed an undue level of responsibility on their child to come forward with issues or challenges that they encountered. However, a number of parents highlighted how their child experienced an issue or challenge in school, but did not tell anyone or inform the school:

Because he still wouldn’t like me to go banging heads you know, creating any kind of an issue. He’d rather just stay in the background and not stick his head above water. And so, I didn’t go up and say that to [the principal because I wanted to respect his wishes.

*Patrick (parent of a trans boy, 17)*
Esther (parent of a trans boy, 15) explained how she felt aggrieved because a minor issue that her son experienced snowballed into a major problem that negatively affected his educational participation. She felt that the minor issue could have been resolved had there been periodic, ongoing dialogue between the family and school staff. She stated “it would have been nice if [school staff] had been a bit more proactive” and that she felt schools should designate a member of staff to be responsible for having regular check-ins with TGD youth. Building on this point, Zoe (parent of a trans girl, 17) felt that better communication between school staff, TGD youth, and their parents would ensure that the school was “tuned into the situations that are likely to arise.” She also felt school staff needed to be prepared to ask reflexive questions: “what should we do in this situation? What’s appropriate, what’s not appropriate?”

The need to listen more to TGD students, and their parents, was also recognised by school staff. Paul (teacher, single-gender denominational school) felt school staff needed: “To actually listen to their transgender students and hear what they’re saying and hear what it is that they’re looking for.” He felt schools needed to meet with TGD youth both independently and collectively to determine how schools can best support TGD youth:

“Let’s say you have three or four [TGD youth] in a school, gathered them together, talk: What is it that you like? Are we doing enough? Are we not doing enough? Are we doing too much? Are we exposing you too much? Do we need to step back? Listen more.

Paul (teacher, single-gender denominational school)
11. Push out, transfers, and stealth

Following their transition some TGD students felt pushed out of their secondary school and as a result either exited education completely or transferred to a new school. On transferring school, many TGD students kept their transition history private and attended their new school in ‘stealth.’ Attending school in stealth enabled some TGD youth to avoid harassment and bullying. However, it also left them feeling anxious about beingouted and rejected by friends.

This report thus far has highlighted the wide range of educational challenges TGD youth encountered following their transition. Some TGD youth reported how they felt ‘pushed-out’ of their secondary school as a result of the challenges they encountered:

And I see such a huge difference between schools that get it right, it changes a whole young person’s life. And the school that gets it wrong and their level of stress, and the kids aren’t turning up to school. I’ve got so many [TGD] kids who just aren’t going to school, just don’t turn up, because it’s just too fucking hard, it’s too stressful.

Grace (stakeholder, youth organisation)

TGD youth who left their school found it difficult to find another school due to logistical issues and/or because they were worried that they would encounter difficulties whichever school they attended:

The fight is to try and get them somewhere that will work for them and that’s really hard. Because often your school is your local place and then families have to consider, ‘Well how am I going to get to school all the way over there?’, or ‘Do we know if that school’s going to get it right?’

Grace (stakeholder, youth organisation)
Lois (stakeholder, youth organisation) highlighted how many of the TGD youth she worked with disengaged from education for a period before returning to education later in life: “What I would typically see then is that, they might drop out for a couple of years and just simply do nothing. But then they’ll re-engage.” However, some TGD youth did not leave education completely, but transferred to another school instead:

“\[Some TGD students\] move school and they move school. The same thing happens over and over again. […] And the [staff] are going, we’ve done everything you’ve told us, but it’s because [TGD students] need more than that. They need a lot more empathy and a lot more support. One-to-one support. And they do need just one important adult, they do need that.”

Lois (stakeholder, youth organisation)

Daniel (stakeholder, patron body) highlighted how for many schools their first interaction with a TGD student was “generally [...] a transfer. We haven’t heard of too many cases where a [TGD] student has stayed within the school.” He went on to highlight how “most” schools lack preparation prior to having a TGD student transfer to their school: “I think it would be fairly honest to say that most schools aren’t being overtly robust about preparation until there’s a point at which they may have a transfer.” Some stakeholders felt that TGD students undertook multiple school transfers partly because schools were ill-prepared to provide the support they needed:

“A lot of young trans people end up changing school at least once or twice through secondary school. They end up changing schools to start somewhere else after their transition. [...] I’ve known someone that’s been to like four different secondary schools, in like four years.

Esme (17, Youthreach)

Some TGD youth transferred school and only informed a small number of people (typically school leadership) about their transition history. Transferring to a new school in such a way is known as ‘going stealth.’ Attending school in stealth was considered to be beneficial by some TGD youth since it meant they avoided inappropriate questions and having to explain themselves:
I go kind of like stealth in school so they all just know me as [Esme]. [...] So they’re not aware of [my transition]. So it’s a lot easier as well coming into that situation because it’s never talked about, it’s never commented on.

Esme (17, Youthreach)

Going stealth meant TGD youth were better able to avoid transphobic bullying: “they move to a new school and they enter in their preferred gender identity with their preferred gender expression” (Felix, stakeholder, youth organisation). Yet, attending school in stealth was found to create social difficulties for some TGD students. Patrick (parent of a trans boy, 17) explained how his son felt guilty about not telling his new friends about his transition history, but feared they would reject him if he came out. Transferring to a new school in stealth thus had contradicting implications for some TGD youth. On one hand, attending school in stealth protected TGD youth from misnaming, misgendering and transphobic bullying, yet on the other hand it generated anxiety about being outed and rejected.

Supporting evidence

Findings related to TGD youth feeling pushed out of school correspond with international research that suggests that TGD youth commonly leave school before completing their education because of feelings of discomfort around school uniforms and experiences of harassment and abuse from peers (Krishna, 2018; McGuire, et al., 2010). Meanwhile, findings related to the contradictory effects of going stealth align with research that suggests that although going stealth respects the need of the young person’s privacy and safety, it may leave them as “a sort of gender fugitive” (Ehrensaft, 2013: 25).
12. Gender differences among TGD youth

Trans girls/women faced greater levels of prejudice than trans boys/men. As a result, trans girls/women faced severe challenges in relation to uniform restrictions, bathroom access, and greater exposure to transphobic harassment and bullying. Meanwhile, students who identified as non-binary encountered particular challenges in relation to staff having less understanding of non-binary identities and gender-neutral pronouns.

Across research participants (i.e. TGD youth, parents, educators, stakeholders) it was widely recognised that trans girls/women experience greater levels of prejudice than trans boys/men. Ciaran (parent of a trans boy, 15) stated there “there’s a lot more discrimination, a lot more prejudice against trans girls.” Elizabeth (parent of a trans boy, 16) explained that there was “a lot of talk from parents […] about school not being supportive […] particularly more so when they’re transitioning from male-to-female.” Many participants felt that the heightened prejudice against trans girls/women made their transition more difficult: “What I have found in my limited experience, the transition to male appears to be a little bit easier than the transition to female” (John, school leader, co-educational community school).

For example, there was greater contention around trans girls/women wearing skirts at school than there was trans boys/men wearing trousers. Some schools permitted students assigned female at birth to wear either trousers or skirts, but only allowed students assigned male at birth to wear trousers. Such uniform restrictions made it more difficult for trans girls/women to wear a uniform that that aligned with their gender identity and that they felt comfortable wearing:

“So what we did in the last two years was change [the uniform policy] whereby girls are able to wear trousers. Now, we haven’t changed it in terms of boys wearing kilts. […] Now, could we be potentially open to a discriminatory and equality challenge by a parent of a boy who wants to wear the kilt? Yep, absolutely. I think every school in the country could be.”

Jim (school leader, co-educational denominational school)

Trans girls/women also faced heightened restrictions around access to bathrooms and changing facilities due to ‘concerns’ among peers, parents and school staff. Typically, such ‘concerns’ were linked to an unfounded and transphobic assumption that trans girls/women are a danger to other girls/ women in female-only facilities. The heightened restrictions around bathrooms and changing facilities meant trans girls/women were more likely to be compelled to use bathrooms and changing rooms that caused them to feel uncomfortable and unsafe, or that were difficult to access and othering:
We took what was initially a downstairs disabled toilet, we removed the signage, we re-corroborated the toilets to be suitable for this young lady. [...] We then had the absolute request then to use the female toilet and the female changing rooms. And then that’s where you get into difficulties. Some students were concerned about that and some parents were concerned about that.

Jim (school principal, co-educational denominational school)

Trans girls/women were also found to face greater levels of peer harassment and violence. Elizabeth (parent of a trans boy, 16) felt that “it’s harder for male-to-females, and I know parents are very, very worried about [...] the agro that they get.” Likewise, Esther (parent of a trans boy, 15) stated: “there’s a much higher risk of getting beaten up because I think it’s men who have a real problem with trans women.” One school leader highlighted that of the five TGD students at the school the only one who experienced significant problems in relation to peer harassment and bullying was a trans girl:

[She was] walking down the corridor, [and] there were comments made about ‘Who does he think she is?’ and there was things like ‘weird.’ Just comments within earshot.

John (school leader, co-educational community school)

Among TGD youth, those who identified as non-binary faced lower levels of awareness and understanding than those who identified with a binary gender category, e.g. trans girls/women and trans boys/men. Jesse (parent of a non-binary youth assigned female at birth, 15) noted: “I had never heard of non-binary. [...] It was all very, very new.” Due to the ‘newness’ of non-binary identities, many school staff lacked understanding and rejected the legitimacy of non-binary youth’s gender identity:

I think a young person who is trying to explain that their gender isn’t to do with [binary] experience, then it becomes more difficult to get people to understand and to be accepting. And I think, often, non-binary young people are more privy to being told that it’s a phase than binary trans young people.

Felix (stakeholder, youth organisation)
A lack of awareness and understanding of gender-neutral pronouns among school staff and peers heightened the likelihood of non-binary youth being misgendered (see Finding 4, page 19). Meanwhile, participants noted that non-binary youth may encounter difficulties around what uniform to wear and what bathroom to use as well as face prejudice due to a lack of understanding: “[In my school] they don’t understand what non-binary is, you know? And when people don’t understand, they hate, you know?” (Scott, 16, single-gender denominational school).

Supporting evidence

The gendered differences among TGD youth identified in this research correlates with international research that shows trans girls/women are more likely to experience harassment and violence than trans boys/men (Goldblum et al., 2012; McGuire et al., 2010); and, that non-binary youth face specific challenges due to a lack of understanding of their gender identity (Aparicio-Garcia, et al., 2018). As such, it is essential that school staff recognise that TGD youth are a heterogeneous group of young people and that their gender identity will shape the educational challenges they encounter.
13. Barriers related to school type

In some schools religious ethos acted as a significant barrier for TGD youth transitioning. Students who attended a single-gender school experienced specific transition challenges, including enrolment barriers, gendered language, restrictive gender norms, and bathroom access. TGD youth who attended boarding schools faced challenges in relation to boarding staff and gender segregation.

Some TGD youth encountered transition challenges due to their school’s religious ethos. Anna (stakeholder, statutory body) highlighted her experience with an “inner city girls’ school where they had a […] perception that we are a Catholic school, so therefore there’s things we can’t talk about.” Bernice (stakeholder, youth organisation) highlighted how school staff at one school refused to make changes around uniform, toilets and changing rooms due to their school’s ethos: “The counsellor who I was talking to, and the principal, were just under no circumstances was [a student transitioning] going to happen because of the school ethos.” Scott (16, single-gender denominational school) felt that the lack of discussion around gender diversity in his school was “’cause it was a Catholic school, and the religion is pushing it back a bit more.” A number of TGD youth highlighted troubling experiences that they had with religious teachers in their school. This included intentional misnaming and misgendering as well as homophobic and transphobic comments: “I have had one such young person that stood up [in religion class] and said, ‘So are you saying that I’m going to hell then?’ The teacher said, ‘I am not saying that, but if you practice gay sex, yes,’ to the young person in the classroom” (Bernice, stakeholder, youth organisation). As a result, some TGD youth perceived schools with a strong religious ethos to be hostile toward TGD youth:

One of [the local schools] would be extremely religious, and we’ve been a non-religious family. And again [my child] would’ve been the first transgender person to go. So, I was afraid you would have the same thing, and [my child] was very fearful about changing school.

Zoe (parent of a trans girl, 17)

TGD students who attended single-gender schools also encountered particular educational challenges. Some interviewees stated that transitioning could be particularly difficult for trans girls attending ‘all boy’ schools and that “boys’ schools are worse than girls’.” No research participants attended an ‘all-boy’ school, which may be indicative of the undesirability of attending an ‘all-boys’ school following one’s transition. Many participants, however, attended ‘all-girl’ schools. Some trans boys/men felt that their transition had been obstructed in order to preserve the single-gender status of the school:
My principal [...] would not budge on the name or the pronouns because she thought that if parents found out, that they would come in and say, ‘Well, this isn’t an all-girls school, and you’re not giving me what I expected or what I was told I would be given.’

Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school)

Some ‘all-girl’ schools were found to facilitate the transition of trans boys/men, but were unwilling to enrol trans girls. Bridget (school leader, single-gender denominational school) felt that trans girls would not be accepted in the same ways as trans boys in her school: “I would think that that would raise the hackles a little bit more [...] on a staff level, and even on a student level.” Lydia (school leader, single-gender denominational school) highlighted how she felt there would be “more resistance” to a trans girl joining the school due to a perception among parents that the student could be ‘pretending’ in order to gain entry to an ‘all-girl’ school. This again highlights the heightened prejudice directed towards trans girls/women due to the unfounded and transphobic belief that trans girls/women pose a danger to other students.

Trans boys/men who attended ‘all-girl’ schools commonly experienced being misgendered because school staff used overtly gendered language (see Fig. 17, page 47). They also felt their school curriculum promoted restrictive gender norms. Workshop participants for example discussed how they: had to undertake etiquette classes to learn ‘lady-like behaviour’; were required to study home economics, but had no opportunity to take classes in woodworking; and, had fewer sporting options than students in co-educational schools. Some TGD youth felt that the overtly gendered and restrictive nature of single-gender schools inhibited TGD youth from coming out and led them to feel socially isolated:

I think they [TGD students] are scared to tell others [about their gender identity] because they have been put into a box and they feel like they can’t come out of it. Especially in segregated schools. I think there’s more mental health problems because of the fact that they feel like they can’t tell people.

Scott (16, single-gender denominational school)

In addition, some TGD boys/men who attended a single-gender school encountered challenges in relation to uniforms and accessing bathroom and changing facilities. Due to the difficulties they encountered some trans boys/men felt it necessary to transfer to a co-educational school:
Well the ultimate decision [to transfer school] was … [because] he was still the only boy there. So, every time the teacher would kind of say ‘Come on girls.’ […] It was better for him to take the next step and be amongst boys, and not be the only boy in a girls’ school.

Patrick (parent of a trans boy, 17)

TGD youth who attended a boarding school also faced specific educational challenges. One TGD student who attended a boarding school highlighted there was a difference between how his school staff and boarding staff responded to his gender identity. Another experienced forms of exclusion due to the gender-segregated nature of boarding school environments and facilities.

Supporting evidence

Findings that TGD youth experience barriers linked to school type align with international research that has shown that TGD youth experience problems in schools with a conservative religious ethos (Jones and Hillier, 2013; Wozolek et al., 2017) and those that are single-gender (McBride and Schubotz, 2017; O’Flynn, 2016).

Fig. 17: Workshop participants who attended single-gender schools complained that school staff used overly gendered language and advocated for them to use gender-neutral terminology.
Most TGD youth discussed how they were either waiting for a healthcare assessment related to their gender identity or had been assessed and diagnosed with gender dysphoria. In addition, many TGD youth described accessing professional mental health support due to their experiences of exclusion, discrimination and violence. Common mental health concerns discussed by TGD youth included feelings of anxiety and depression as well as self-injury and suicidal ideation. Consequently, access to healthcare assessments and mental health support were issues of concern for TGD youth and their parents. Most TGD youth reported that they had encountered significant delays in relation to accessing healthcare assessments, particularly gender identity assessments:

There isn’t a gender clinic in Ireland […] I know we are a minority, but we still have rights as citizens of Ireland, and one of the rights is to healthcare. And right now […] the government isn’t providing that healthcare system that we deserve as citizens.

Seamus (16, single-gender denominational school)

Long waiting lists, constant delays and the lack of a clear healthcare pathway for gender identity services were common complaints. Felix (stakeholder, youth organisation) felt that the “unfathomable amount of time” it takes TGD youth to access healthcare assessments and supports “would massively affect how they will perform in school.” Judith (parent of a trans woman, 18) explained how healthcare delays negatively affected her child’s self-esteem: “[My child] keeps strong, then when there’s nothing happening, she feels she’s not been made worthy of them taking the time.”

Some TGD youth encountered age-related barriers in relation to accessing healthcare assessments. Eoin (21, single-gender denominational school) described his experience with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as “an absolute nightmare.” He waited for a referral to a specialist gender identity service, but felt “[CAMHS staff] pushed it out and out and out, until I turned 18. Then my GP just had to do it for me.” Eoin felt this took “about a year off” his transition. As such, age-related barriers were experienced as obstructing TGD youth from accessing vital healthcare support:
We got child services. We went through interviews, basically forms to be filled out, everything from what date and minute [my child] was born. We went through everything with them. [My child] went through the same, only to be told that when [she] turned 18 that [she would be transferred to adult services]. ... We still never had a psychologist.

Judith (parent of a trans woman, 18)

Some TGD youth encounter barriers to healthcare assessments as a result of where they lived. Patrick (parent of a trans boy, 17) explained that his general practitioner (GP) referred his son to CAMHS for a “second opinion that [he] has gender dysphoria” and that it took months before they were told that CAMHS could not conduct the assessment and that they would have to go to a specialist gender identity clinic in London. Patrick “couldn’t believe it” and felt that the staff of CAMHS in his region lacked awareness of healthcare assessment options in Ireland. Abigail (school leader, co-educational community school) highlighted that a TGD student at her school experienced healthcare barriers because the CAMHS team in the region was chronically understaffed and “very non-existent at the moment.” These experiences highlighted how some TGD youth encounter barriers to healthcare assessments because of regional variations in CAMHS.

Maura (teacher, co-educational community school) highlighted how a trans boy at her school was waiting to conduct an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) assessment for which there was a two year waiting list. She explained that the student would be unable to get a referral for a gender identity assessment until after his ASD assessment for which there was an additional two to three year waiting list. Maura stated that the length and uncertainty of the process had had a profoundly detrimental effect on the student’s mental health: “He’s very down, depressed. He’s talking like there’s no hope.” Furthermore, Maura felt that the delays distracted him from his schoolwork: “I firmly believe that if, even if he knew that it was coming down the line, that he would be more settled.” This experience highlights how some TGD youth had their access to gender identity assessments delayed because they were perceived as having non-gender related behavioural difficulties and/or learning impairments.

Some TGD youth were able to circumvent healthcare access barriers by paying for private healthcare. Patrick (parent of a trans boy, 17) explained how private healthcare greatly shortened the time his child had to wait for a gender identity assessment. However, accessing private healthcare was not an option for all TGD youth: “To go privately is huge money. That mom doesn’t have” (Maura, teacher, co-educational community school). Accessing private healthcare was therefore an economic privilege:

How it [socio-economic status] makes a difference is the parents with the means can get access to healthcare, can get access to mental healthcare, if needed. […] Whereas families that might not have that disposable income […] don’t have that choice.

Gabriel (stakeholder, youth organisation)
In addition, to economic means, a number of interviewees highlighted the importance of accessing information regarding private practitioners from other parents. As a result, parental peer support groups were important spaces for parents to gain knowledge of private practitioners who offered gender identity assessments.
RECOMMENDATIONS

I think if you have young trans students in your school, make a statement. Try and support them, get on the same page that they’re on, as opposed to trying to make them on your page. […] So if they want to transition in school that should be supported. And as much as you can, like, whether it’s through exams, through bathrooms, through changing rooms and uniforms. All that stuff is really important.

*Esme (17, Youthreach)*
Recommendations from TGD youth

TGD youth felt that there was a wide range of initiatives that post-primary schools could undertake to become more inclusive of gender diversity and more welcoming for TGD youth:

a. **Increase the inclusiveness of the curriculum**

TGD youth unanimously highlighted the need for greater levels of education around issues of gender diversity (see Fig. 18, page 53). They advocated for topics pertaining to gender identity development and the experiences of TGD people to be included within the school curriculum in a robust manner. This included calls for gender identity and expression to be integrated into SPHE and RSE curriculum across junior and senior cycle. Additionally, TGD youth felt there was wide scope for issues of gender diversity to be discussed in other subject areas, including: biology, English literature, society and politics, and religious education.\(^4\)

b. **Affirm TGD student’s self-determined name and pronoun**

TGD students felt that school staff should use TGD student’s preferred name and pronoun as well as ensure their name is changed administratively in a timely manner, including on the class register, forms of identification, and official records. The majority of TGD students felt that staff and students should be informed about the student’s name change and preferred pronoun to reduce the likelihood of misnaming, misgendering, and rumours.\(^5\)

c. **Non-restrictive uniform policy**

TGD youth universally advocated for post-primary schools to limit the overtly gendered dimensions of their school uniform. In particular, TGD youth felt that schools should provide students with a gender-neutral uniform option or abolish their school uniform all together (see Fig. 19, page 55).\(^6\)

d. **Gender-neutral facilities**

TGD youth collectively called for schools to provide students with gender-neutral, single-stall bathrooms at multiple locations across the school as well as gender-neutral, single-stall changing rooms close to sports facilities. Some TGD youth recommended that schools facilitate TGD youth’s use of communal bathroom and changing facilities that align with their gender identity.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) International research suggests LGBTI+-inclusive curriculum improves TGD youth’s learning and well-being (Snapp, et al., 2015) and that open discussions about gender identity in schools provide TGD youth with a liberating sense of validation and acceptance (Shelton and Lester, 2018).

\(^5\) International research suggests that TGD youth greatly appreciate school staff who assist them in asserting their chosen name and affirm their pronouns (Johnson et al., 2014) and that schools should address name changes on TGD youth’s identification documents and documentation (Sausa, 2006).

\(^6\) International research suggests that reconsideration of gender differentiated uniform and haircut policies is an essential element of schools comprehensively supporting TGD youth (McBride and Schubotz, 2017).

\(^7\) International research suggest that schools should provide TGD youth with safe and appropriate access to bathrooms and changing rooms (Gower et al., 2018) as well as work to ensure the availability of single-stall, gender-neutral bathrooms and changing rooms (Porta et al., 2017).
Fig. 18: Workshop participants advocated for more education in schools about gender diversity.
e. Staff education
   TGD youth recommended that school staff receive comprehensive education about gender diversity, particularly in relation to the importance of pronouns, non-binary identities, and how to engage with TGD students. TGD youth felt that schools should proactively organise full-staff gender diversity education (i.e. before a TGD student comes out and transitions). TGD youth also suggested that staff education be delivered by a TGD person and where possible a TGD young person.

f. Challenge transphobic bullying
   TGD youth recommended that schools undertake a range of actions to challenge transphobic prejudice. This included recommendations that schools: (i) clearly state that transphobic bullying is unacceptable in their anti-bullying policy (in line with the Department of Education and Skills [DES, 2013] *Anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools*); (ii) respond to transphobic incidents in a robust manner and meaningfully include TGD students in this process; and, (iii) participate in anti-bullying campaigns, such as Stand Up Awareness Week.

g. Establish LGBTI+ school clubs
   TGD youth recommended that school staff support students to establish and run LGBTI+ clubs. TGD youth felt it was important that staff support LGBTI+ groups to develop a meaningful programme of activities, e.g. co-ordinating Pride and/or Stand Up Awareness Week activities.

h. Proactive engagement
   TGD youth recommended that school staff periodically engage with TGD students, and their parents, to ensure any issues or challenges that emerge are dealt with in a timely manner and without the student having to come forward to complain. Parents felt that schools should have a designated member of staff with who they and their child could liaise with on a regular basis.

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8 International research shows that for school environments to be safe, TGD youth need school staff who are educated and knowledgeable about gender diversity (Snapp, et al., 2015; Ullman, 2017). Pre-service and in-service educator education delivered by experts is considered a pre-requisite for improving school environments for TGD youth (Porta et al., 2017).

9 International research suggests that that schools should develop policies and practices aimed at preventing transphobic bullying and harassment as well as seek to eliminate prejudice among students and staff in order to make TGD youth feel safer and more welcome at school (Gower et al., 2018).

10 International research has shown that having access to LGBTI+ supportive space in school can increase TGD youth’s self-esteem and confidence as well as lead them to feel more supported, less isolated, less depressed and have an improved sense of belonging (Bopp, et al., 2004). To be safe and sustainable LGBTI+ peer support groups require support from school staff (Porta, et al., 2017).

11 International research suggests that proactive engagement and ongoing dialogue between families, educators, and other service providers can ensure that issues and challenges that TGD youth experience can be attended to in a timely fashion (McBride and Schubotz, 2017). International research has also shown that it is important that TGD youth are able to identify at least one supportive member of school staff and that schools should designate a specific member of staff to act as a liaison between TGD youth and school leadership (Porta, et al., 2017).
Figure 19: Workshop participants advocated for school uniforms to be gender-neutral or for uniforms to be abolished.
Response from TENI’s Education and Family Support Officer

As the Family Support and Education Officer I spend much of my time liaising with schools nationwide through email, phone calls and on-site visits. As well as this I meet young people and their families, youth workers, health care workers and any other service providers who support young people that are linked in with TENI. We provide parental and family support as well as peer support for our young people. As an organisation, we provide an ongoing, sustainable and holistic wrap-around service which continues throughout a young person’s transition. This is what helps to create positive outcomes for TGD young people.

In schools, I provide staff with training so that they understand terminology and the difficulties that TGD students face. This gives staff more confidence in supporting their students. I also give advice and support to principals and guidance counsellors on how best to implement practical trans positive guidelines within their schools. This work is vital to TGD students lives as it begins the process of true engagement and understanding from schools, but, as always, more is needed.

As this report highlights TGD students are still faced with many obstacles within school, with use of facilities and uniforms still being key points of anxiety and stress. TGD students also find themselves on the receiving end of regular harassment and a lack of understanding from their peers and from staff. The issues raised in this report would coincide with experiences that have been highlighted to me and issues that have been brought to my attention from families and young people in our community.

These issues are largely preventable if all schools nationwide engaged with TENI’s services, supports and workshops. This would provide every school around the country with a standardised level of training and all staff members would be more informed about transgender and gender diverse issues. If there was scope to include lessons on gender identity and gender expression within the curriculum then there would be less harassment and bullying of TGD students and more proactive support from peers.

Conversation and visibility are key. It is no longer acceptable to shy away from the subject of gender identity and expression within schools. How can we expect TGD students to feel safe, accepted and understood if they are not represented, seen and heard within the school curriculum and the school community? This report highlights those needs clearly.

Hannah Solley (she/her)
Family Support and Education Officer
Future directions and goals in education

The research findings indicate that TGD youth do not have equality of educational opportunity and, as such, that there is a need for remedial action at the level of national policy. The publication of this report presents an opportunity to build on the extensive work already underway at TENI (as summarised on pg3) and amongst TENI’s education partners. Below we outline future directions and goals that build from the findings of this study and the expertise of the project team. Achieving these goals will make schools more inclusive of gender diversity and reduce the educational inequalities TGD youth experience, which will, in turn, enhance TGD youth’s sense of acceptance, belonging and safety in school and increase the likelihood that they will complete their education and achieve their full potential. However, these goals will only be achievable if adequate funding and resources are made available.

1. Establishment of a National Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Education Working Group

TENI has established an Education Advisory Group that consists of the following education partners: TENI, Joint Managerial Body (JMB), Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), National Parents Council Primary (NPCP), National Parents Council Post-Primary (NPCPP), National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI), Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI), and the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO). There is a need for this group to expand into a National Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Education Working Group. To achieve this the existing membership of TENI’s Education Advisory Group would be extended to include representatives from other advocacy organisations (e.g. BeLonGTo, shOut, GOSHH, etc.), teacher unions, the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the Irish Primary Principals’ Network, the primary school management bodies and academics/researchers in the field. We propose that the National Transgender Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Education Working Group would be provided with the necessary government resourcing to undertake the following key activities:

2. Development of a National Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy and Procedures for Schools

The National Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013) indicate that schools’ anti-bullying policies must outline the ‘education’ and ‘prevention’ strategies they have in place to proactively combat homophobia and transphobia. Responding to this DES instruction, the National Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Education Working Group would oversee the development of a National Transgender and Gender Expression Policy and Procedures for Schools. This national policy guidance would support schools to achieve the following two aspects in tandem:

(a) Build on the holistic wrap-around service that TENI provides (pg3) in supporting TGD young people and their families as they transition or come out at school

TENI’s existing wrap-around service, in partnership with the relevant education stakeholders and organisations, would be adopted and resourced as an exemplar of best practice across
all schools nationally. This would ensure that a transition plan is developed for all TGD youth that covers key aspects such as name and pronoun, use of facilities, choice of uniform, pastoral care, home-school relations, and community/external organisation supports.

(b) **Work proactively to ensure that schools are inclusive spaces**
Building on the education and training already provided by TENI as part of their holistic wrap-around service, as well as research in the field, the *National Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy and Procedures for Schools* would instruct on the ways that schools should proactively ensure that all gender identities and expressions are respected and meaningfully included. This would comprise of guidance related to aspects such as: school policy and administration, teaching and learning practices, extra-curricular activities, professional development, gender-neutral bathroom and changing room facilities, student councils and groups, and communication/dialogue with parents/families.

3. **Inclusive curriculum, teacher education and professional development**
Alongside the development of national policy guidelines, the National Gender Identity and Gender Expression in Education Working Group would be responsible for enhancing the inclusivity of school environments by ensuring the following steps are taken and subjected to ongoing monitoring:

(a) **Include gender identity and gender expression across school curricula** by following international best practice/research. As outlined in TENI’s work in consulting with the Oireachtas and NCCA reviews of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), there is a unique opportunity now for the NCCA to make a lasting and meaningful intervention in teaching and learning about gender identity diversity and expression at school. This approach would be underpinned by a presumption that there are LGBTI+ youth and/or students whose family members are LGBTI+ in every classroom.

(b) **Include gender identity and gender expression in pre-service teacher education**
by explicitly including ‘learning about gender identity and gender expression’ within the Teaching Council requirements for initial teacher education programme accreditation at primary and post-primary levels.

(c) **Include gender identity and gender expression in in-service teacher education**
through DES resourcing of the PDST to create meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders to learn about and thus become more comfortable with gender identity diversity and expression.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1 – GLOSSARY

**Assigned female at birth (AFAB)**
A person of any age and irrespective of their gender identification whose sex assignment at birth was “female”.

**Assigned male at birth (AMAB)**
A person of any age and irrespective of their gender identification whose sex assignment at birth was “male”.

**Binding**
Flattening breasts by the use of constrictive materials.

**Bisexual**
Someone who is attracted to more than one gender e.g. both men and women.

**Coming out**
The process of understanding yourself and telling others about your gender identity or sexual orientation.

**Gay**
Someone who is attracted to people of the same gender. Gay usually refers to men, as many women prefer to call themselves lesbian.

**Gender diverse**
An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and expression does not conform to the norms and stereotypes others expect.

**Gender expression**
How a person expresses their gender through clothing, behaviour and other factors, generally measured on scales of masculinity and femininity.

**Gender identity**
A person’s deeply felt internal identity as female, male or another identity such as non-binary.

**Gender-neutral**
Roles, identities, language, policies and spaces that do not correspond to a binary gender category (i.e. male/female).

**Gender non-specific**
See gender-neutral.

**Homophobic**
Discrimination against and/or fear or dislike of lesbian and gay people (including those perceived to be gay or lesbian). This also includes the perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes through jokes and personal negative thoughts about lesbian and gay people.
Intersex
This is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations that do not fit typical binary notions of male and female bodies such as having both male and female genitalia. In some cases intersex traits are visible at birth, while in others they are not apparent until puberty or later in life. Some intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all (e.g. XXY chromosomes).

Lesbian
A woman who is primarily attracted to other women.

LGBTI+
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex people. The plus sign includes people with other minority sexual orientations and gender identities.

Misgendering
Calling a person by the wrong or an inappropriate pronoun.

Misnaming
Calling a person by the wrong or an inappropriate name. This may also be referred to as ‘deadnaming.’

Non-binary
Individuals who do not have an exclusively male or female gender identity.

Transgender, or trans
An umbrella term for those whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were given at birth persistently, consistently, and insistently over time.

Transition
A process in which trans people begin to live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the sex they were given at birth.

Transphobic
Discrimination against and/or fear or dislike of people whose gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth, or whose gender identity or expression doesn’t appear to align. This also includes the perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes through jokes and personal negative thoughts about trans people.

Youthreach
Youthreach is a national programme in Ireland that provides opportunities for basic education, personal development, vocational training and work experience to those who have left school without formal qualifications.
### APPENDIX 2 – WORKSHOP OUTLINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 mins</td>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 25 mins  | **What jars you?**<sup>12</sup>  
**Aim**
To explore what we find difficult about gender and what can be done to challenge these difficulties  
**Materials**
large glass jars, slips of blank paper, coloured marker pens that can write on glass | 1. Participants will be asked to write down all the things that ‘jar’ them about how society is unequal or unfair when it comes to gender and sexuality.  
2. The slips of paper will be folded up and put inside a glass jar.  
3. They will then be asked to take each comment in turn and think about what needs to change to turn what is unfair to fair, for an equal and more inclusive world.  
4. Finally, they will be asked to decorate the jar with messages for change. |
| 11.35 – 11.40 | Comfort break | Stretch legs, go toilet |
| 11.40 – 12.40 | **Genderbread pupil**<sup>13</sup>  
**Aim**
To reflect on social expectations about gender identity and how these expectations are regulated and enforced  
**Materials**
flipchart, A3 paper or cardboard, markers, pens, crayons, colour pencils | **Part 1 (45 minutes) – creating a genderbread pupil**  
1. Each person / group will be provided with an outline of a gingerbread pupil and asked to draw the ‘ideal pupil’. Participants will be asked to represent a social ideal and how their schools expect pupils to dress, act and think – rather than participants’ personal opinions.  
2. Participants will be asked to draw physical features and clothing, use symbolic imagery to represent the behaviours and beliefs of their ideal student, including hobbies, activities, interests, etc. Participants will be prompted to consider:  
   a. How would teachers describe the ideal pupil?  
   b. What physical characteristics does the ideal pupil have?  
   c. What are the common behaviours of the ideal pupil?  
   d. What emotional qualities are associated with this ideal pupil?  
   e. How does religion, culture, and tradition shape the ideal pupil?  
   f. Do different schools have different expectations? |

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<sup>12</sup> Activity taken from Renold (2016: 13).

3. Participants will be asked to create a character for their ideal pupil, including a name, where they live, and their number one hobby.

**Part 2 (15 minutes) – group discussion (notes written on flip chart)**

1. Participants will be asked to reflect on their own and each other’s genderbread pupil. They will be asked:
   a. What behaviours are considered appropriate for boys and girls in school?
   b. What emotional qualities are associated with men and women?
   c. How does this shape the role boys and girls adopt in schools?
   d. What impact does this have for people who do not match these norms?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12.40 – 13.10</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Food and drinks will be provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 13.10 – 13.35 | Stop start<sup>14</sup> **Aim**
   Red and green paper plates, marker pens, string, pegs |
| 13.35 – 13.40 | Comfort break | |

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<sup>14</sup> Activity taken from Renold (2016: 14).
13.40 – 14.40 A Message To You

**Aim**
To develop visual advocacy messages that promote transgender and gender diverse youth’s inclusion in post-primary school settings

**Materials**
Flipchart, A3 papers, markers, colour pencils, crayons, charcoal

This activity will build on the issues raised in previous activities and will begin with a brief overview of the key issues discussed so far.

**Part 1 (10 mins) – thinking about developing a message**
1. Participants to name ad campaigns, logos or slogans they think are powerful (responses written on a flipchart)
   i. Why do these stick out?
   ii. What makes for a good/bad message?
   iii. Do campaigns target specific people?

**Part 2 – developing a message through art (40 mins)**
2. Each participant / group given 3 pieces of paper on asked to write:
   a. The ‘problem’ – list an identified gendered problem they would like to respond to
   b. The audience - list the individuals/groups who could be targeted by a campaign to transform the problem
   c. The message - list potential advocacy messages, which should be simple and memorable statements related to the problem
3. Participants then develop a visual concept with which to target one or two audiences identified with their chosen message

**Part 3 - discussion (10 mins)**
4. Ask participants to consider the visual concepts develop:
   i. Which images catch your eye?
   ii. What do they say to you?
   iii. Who are the potential audiences?
   iv. How could they be strengthened?
   v. Are there different images that might resonate with the chosen audience?

14.40 – 15.00 Close

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APPENDIX 2 – FEEDBACK RESPONSES

1. Are there any findings in the summary document that are not clear? Please explain.

No, everything is clear.
No.
No, everything is clear.
No all very well addressed and laid out.
I do not think so.
No.

2. What finding resonates/stands out the most for you? Please elaborate.

Most of the findings were as I had expected. One finding that stands out to me is that a lot TGD students are not given access to a uniform that is aligned with their gender identity. This is something that I have experienced, and in my opinion all schools should have the option for a masculine and feminine uniform, as it is something that can be easily implemented and would benefit the whole school, not just transgender students.

I completely agree that school need more guidance on inclusivity. It’s obvious that teacher and management responses are all so different depending on that particular individuals approach.

The finding that stands out most for me is the difference in experience between MTF and FTM trans young people.

The finding about school uniform as it was a battle we faced and eventually won due in no small part to the school having a Whole School Evaluation!

Nothing really. I was expecting to see these findings.

That there is more prejudice against AMAB students.

3. What finding in the summary document do you think is the most important for schools and staff to know about? Please say why.

I feel that the staff in my school don’t understand how much it affects me as a transgender student when I am misgendered or deadnamed. Fortunately, I have no problems with deadnaming, however it does sometimes feel as if teachers see me as a “girl with a boy’s name” rather than simply as male. Even after speaking privately with my teachers, few have made an effort to use inclusive language and avoid misgendering, as if they think that it is unimportant.
I feel that the practical issues with toilets and changing facilities should be the bare minimum in provision.

Schools are reactive rather than proactive in their approach, this could create a barrier for trans youth to feel safe in presenting in their preferred gender.

That constantly referring to students as ‘girls’ or ‘ladies’ in a single sex school can be very upsetting particularly if the trans person want to stay in the school. According to my son his friends also find it very patronising even though they identify as female.

The importance of having a supportive school that ensures use of proper pronouns, name and bathrooms. Because school is a place where we spend a lot of time at our age, and feeling safe in this space is very important.

To accept and encourage diversity in their schools because it important for gender diverse students to know that they are accepted in their school community.

4. Do you think this is a good representation of the challenges transgender and gender diverse students face in Irish secondary schools? Please say why.

Yes I think this is a good representation of the challenges that TGD students face. A wide range of issues are addressed, and I don’t feel that any aspect of being a transgender student has been omitted.

Yes it’s as I would expect - a mixture of findings.

Yes, there are a range of questions covered in the research and the varied experiences of trans youth which seem to be affected by the ethos of the schooled they attend are represented clearly.

I do.

Yes I do. Because it covers different scenarios in which different trans people might be in.

Yes.

5. Do you think there are any challenges that transgender and gender diverse students face that are missing in the summary of preliminary findings? Please explain.

No, I feel that there was a wide range of issues explored and I can’t think of anything that could be added.

No.

No.

No.
Some students in schools use slurs to mock gender diverse and transgender students this is another issue that is small but can be quite hurtful.

6. Do you disagree with or would you like to challenge any of the findings as they are currently described in the preliminary findings document? Please say why.

No, I agree with all of the findings.
No a lot of them ring true for my child’s experience.
No.
No.
No I do not.
No I agree with the findings.

7. Please use this space to highlight anything else you might like to say about the research and/or the summary of findings.

I agree that schools tend to establish good practices reactively when dealing with transgender students. For example, in my “all girls” school, I was forced to wear the P.E. tracksuit bottoms with my uniform for a year because there was no option of trousers. However, the board of management were eager to offer a pair of proper uniform trousers when our school was undergoing a Whole School Evaluation. I have also tried to set up an LGBT+ group in my school, which at first was successful, however I found that extra rules were being imposed on the group, for example two teachers had to be present at meetings or they had to be rescheduled, and these rules did not apply to other groups like our Well-being Group. In this way, I think my school, as well as others, have created a false image of themselves. They seem as though they are very accepting and want to help, however when it comes to the practical things they hide behind “school policy” and the board of management, claiming that it would be “too difficult” to introduce trousers or that some teachers are “not ready” to see an LGBT+ group introduced into a school with a Catholic ethos.

I would hope that these findings can be presented before too long and dearly hope they will lead to new policy or best practice recommendations as soon as possible.

It was a pleasure to be involved in this very worthwhile research and, despite the bad timing, I hope that your findings will inform and lead to changes in school procedures. Well done Ruari!

I believe that the findings are useful but the implications said in the summary need to be implemented in all schools in Ireland so that transgender and gender diverse students feel safe in their school environment.