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School experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in global and local policy protections on the basis of gender identity and expression in education and a recent spate of coverage of transgender students on Australian television and news media. This paper explores the school experiences of Australian transgender and gender diverse students, with particular consideration of recognition of their gender identity in documentation, experiences of puberty and sexuality education, treatment by staff and students, and other forms of provision. It reports on the findings of a 2013 study which combined a survey of 189 transgender and gender diverse Australian students aged 14–25 years, with 16 online interviews with members of this group. The study was informed by a community advisory group which included a range of transgender, gender diverse and intersex people. Findings include both quantitative and qualitative data, detailing a trend towards more disruptive, fluid and inconsistent identifications by members of this student group, and a diversification of their needs at school. Student advocacy on topics including sexuality and puberty education was shown to be common and also useful in improving individual well-being and social outcomes. We offer some reflections towards more useful school practices and future research.

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Introduction

At the ‘global’ level, transgender and gender diverse people have recently featured more prominently in policies related to education. Contributing factors include recent transgender activism against the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*’s construction of transgender and gender diverse people: cast as suffering from ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ in the *Paraphilias and Sexual Dysfunction* section (Drescher and Byne 2012). The manual now features a less stigmatising view of this group as potentially (but not always) suffering from ‘Gender Dysphoria’, a diagnosis which no longer applies when a sense of gender affirmation is achieved (given its own section).

The rights of transgender and gender diverse students to equal access in education and sexuality education more specifically have also been recognised internationally in the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO 2009) the *Rio Statement* (UNESCO 2011) and the *Born Free and Equal* policy (United Nations 2012). Against this background, this paper considers the extent to which such equal access to education generally, and sexuality education in particular, is supported for Australian transgender and gender diverse students. It provides insight into the developing fields of transgender and gender diverse student rights in Australia, reviews research on the topic, explains the theoretical framing and methods of a 2014 study constructed to reveal whether these rights are observed in schooling, and discusses key findings and conclusions.

Background: transgender and gender diverse rights in Australia

Australia's first official 'legal transsexual' transitioned legally through an amended birth certificate with the Births, Deaths and Marriages Department of NSW in 1987, and all Australian jurisdictions have since recognised the affirmed sex of an individual after surgery unless the person is married (Jones et al. 2015). However, requirements for transgender individuals to have received certain surgeries (including being sterilised) differ by state, and 2013 government guidelines recommended that this disparity be addressed by 2016 (Australian Government 2013). These guidelines support individuals to consistently identify and be recognised within the community as a gender other than the sex or gender they were assigned at birth, as intersex or as an indeterminate sex and/or gender in their personal records (Australian Government 2013). Sex reassignment surgery and/or hormone therapy are no longer prerequisites for the recognition of a gender change in Australian Government records or passports (which may be issued in male/M, female/F or indeterminate/unspecified/intersex/X¹). Subsequent changes have sought to revise Medicare policies to ensure less discrimination around healthcare benefits (Plibersek and McLucas 2013).

In Australia, transgender and gender diverse young people have not been highly visible in the media or protective policies historically, and a few vocal Australian radical feminists and conservative religious groups have even framed young people undergoing gender affirmation processes as 'child abuse' (Karvelas 2013; Miletic and Browne 2013). However, transgender and gender diverse students have been achieving an increasing level of visibility through online social networking groups, through the work of specially focussed government and non-government organisations (such as the Safe Schools Coalition, Ygender and others), and in media coverage (including *Four Corners* and various ABC2 television documentaries in 2014). Family Courts have been supporting adolescents to commence using puberty blockers and gender affirmation surgery in their teens (McCredie 2008; Kissane 2009; Fewster 2013), and it appears likely that courts will become unnecessary to approve transition treatments in the future (Miletic and Browne 2013).

Australia's Sex Discrimination Amendment (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Status) Act 2013 provides protection against discrimination in schools on the basis of gender identity and expression (with some exemptions for religious schools), and all states and territories have prohibited discrimination in education related to transgender issues (Jones 2015).² There are specific education policy guidelines addressing equal access for transgender and gender diverse students in Victoria (VIC Government 2007) and Tasmania (TAS Department of Education 2012). However, these policies are not as detailed or as widely known about as corresponding state provisions on homophobia or sexual diversity

(Jones and Hillier 2012, 2013). They emphasise the need to combat discrimination and to allow students opportunities to become involved in creating their own schooling management plans.

Research on transgender and gender diverse students

Most international research on transgender and gender diverse students has focused on medical and psychological interventions, risk determinants, negative pathways and victimisation (Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras 2012; Menvielle 2012; Donatone and Rachlin 2013). This focus, and the recruitment methods associated with it (such as directly through clinics and health service providers), reinforces negative stereotypes of transgender people as living risky lives. However, the evidence that institutions can mistreat these young people is strong.

A UK survey of 889 transgender participants aged over 18 years found that 63% were discriminated against in mental health services and 65% in general health services (McNeil et al. 2012). Further, 90% of participants had been told that transgender people were not normal and 84% had thought of suicide, with 35% attempting it – reflecting findings from other research on increased risk of discrimination and suicide risks (Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz 2006; Grossman and D'Augelli 2007; Stieglitz 2010). A USA survey found that transgender students were frequently managed with strategies designed for gay students, which had little or nothing to do with their identities or needs (McGuire et al. 2010). Other studies have similarly noted the lack of relevant sexual education (Clements-Nolle et al. 2001; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; Rosario 2009). Beyond institutional mistreatment, international research also shows family rejection and (verbal and physical) abuse to be common for these students (Grossman, D'Augelli, and Salter 2006; Varjas et al. 2008). While acknowledging suffering is important, the international literature often overlooks positive pathways and protective factors for the group.

To date, Australian studies of transgender and gender diverse people have mainly focused on adults (Couch et al. 2007; Pitts et al. 2009; Jones, Gray, and Harris 2014; Jones et al. 2015). However, a recent Australian study of 3134 same-sex attracted students included 91 transgender and gender diverse students aged 14–21 (Jones and Hillier 2013). Compared to cisgendered same-sex attracted young people, transgender and gender diverse students were significantly more likely to have known their diverse identity earlier; disclosed this identity to people in their networks; and to have suffered discriminatory physical abuse. They were also significantly more likely to self-harm and attempt suicide. In contrast, such students were twice as likely to seek help or engage in activism as cisgender same-sex attracted students. The Australian *Growing Up Queer* study (Robinson et al. 2014) found that the Internet provided same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people with sophisticated understandings about gender, sex and sexuality and that this was particularly the case for young people with transgender identities. Similar to findings from the larger study, 25% of the young people in this study, who had experienced transphobia at school, said that these experiences led them to activism (Robinson et al. 2014). These findings suggest the importance of activism for transgender and gender diverse students, but did not explore the type of activism engaged in or its impacts on the students concerned.

Framing and defining transgender and gender diverse students

European writing before the nineteenth century made little reference to transgender variance in relation to identity, but only with respect to the violation of social roles

(Foucault 1980; Garber 1992). By the start of the twentieth century, gender variance was associated in a Freudian frame with the psychological disorder of 'inversion', combining homosexuality and role confusion (Freud 1905; Chauncey 1989). Individuals' and groups' attempts at 'crossing' over between (then) distinct male and female gender roles were understood as contributing to a broader degeneration of the species (Halberstam 2012). During the First and Second World Wars, anxieties about moves towards indistinct gender roles were furthered as women took on 'male' factory jobs and domestic tasks. Due to the pervasive anxiety that women were trying to 'replace' men, liberal and radical feminist rights analyses since that time sometimes drew a clear line between pushing for a breakdown of gender role distinctions and the push for women to be seen 'as' men, and therefore sometimes quite actively excluded transgender people from pushes for political progress (Tuttle 1986).

Post-modern and post-structuralist feminisms from the 1980s and Queer theory in the 1990s considered women's rights in ways which were less problematic for transgender people (Califia 1981; Butler 1990, 2004). These frames challenged essentialist notions of identity (male, female, gay, straight or otherwise) and posited gender as culturally constructed, although this sometimes led to work lacking a focus on material experience. More recent transgender studies have aimed at affirming the right to self-definition and the right to more positive representation in narratives and research representations (Stone 1991). They had a comparatively stronger focus on embodiment overall. There is also a stronger focus on the material in more recent work by 'brain sex' biologists, who sometimes theorise transgender people as having brain areas which were impacted upon through hormonal exposure in the womb and contribute to their diverse identity (Pease and Pease 2003).

In researching transgender and gender diverse people, it was important to consider how newer framings of transgender people do not simply 'replace' older ones, but coexist in tension with them, along with residual psychological frames reshaping inversion into newer concepts of gender identity disorder and gender dysphoria. Various different framings of transgender student identities have been seen in research studies as reflecting or disrupting the dominant social order (Jones 2013). Given contrasting accounts as to whether transgender identities are linked to brain chemistries or cultural context, and given that transgender people may themselves see their identities in queer, psychiatric, medical, biological or other terms (by self-definition), we were careful to keep this project 'open' to a wide range of issues of relevance to transgender experience and diversity.

We sought in particular to draw upon insights provided by Foucault's work (1969, 1970, 1976, 1979, 1980) on power and sexuality, and queer and transgender studies (Califia 1981; Butler 1990, 2004; Jagose 1996; Nagoshi and Brzury 2010). We rejected the notion of there being any one grand meta-narrative relevant to Australian transgender and gender diverse student identity, seeking 'truth' instead in a post-structuralist manner that allowed for the recognition of identity positions' partialities, in the spirit of Morton and Zavarzadeh's notion of 'incompleteness and committedness' (1991, 12). In particular, our study sought to engage with queer theory's interest in (de)constructions of sex and gender (Butler 1990; Jagose 1996) and transgender studies' interest in narratives of self-definition and embodied experience (Nagoshi and Brzury 2010).

In consequence, we cast 'transgender' as a fractured and discursively contested/constructed term associated with multiple meanings open to multiple interpretations. We use this frame so as not to limit the data or exclude transgender students with variant experiences. With respect to transgender and gender diverse student identities, we favour those

presented to us by those who applied these terms to themselves rather than external definitions. We reject cis-sexist views of gender that either do not allow for trans identities at all or cast them as 'sinful', disordered psychological frames (Hepp et al. 2005; Walls and Costello 2010; Gahan, Jones, and Hillier 2014) and radical feminist notions of transgender people as 'victims of patriarchy' (Jeffreys 1997). We instead aim to follow the transgender studies precept that it is possible for transgender people to have empowered and positive experiences (Stone 1991; Nagoshi and Brzury 2010).

Against this background, we sought to gather evidence on how transgender and gender diverse students experienced school, including information relevant to their gender and sexual identities. We also aimed to collect data on transgender and gender diverse young people's involvement in school activism, building on earlier research, suggesting greater engagement in activism than same-sex attracted students (Jones and Hillier 2013). We worked with a community advisory group of transgender, gender diverse and intersex people (including young people) to advise on study design. This group played a pivotal role in ensuring the research was relevant, sensitive and respectful.

Study design

Recruitment

A broad-based recruitment strategy was used for the online survey and interviews conducted between April and September of 2013. Members of the community advisory group used their professional networks to promote the survey and its importance. A media release was distributed to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex organisations, mainstream community and youth services and media outlets. A number of articles were published online including in Australian queer magazines and newspapers. Business cards and postcard-sized recruitment flyers were produced which included a QR code that could be scanned with a smart phone in order to complete the survey on that platform. These cards were sent to organisations and support groups which worked directly with transgender people across Australia. The survey and recruitment material included a kite logo consisting of a colour spectrum of dots to symbolise uplifting feelings and positivity in young people's lives. The survey was also promoted on the national radio station Triple J, the community radio station 3CR and through Facebook and Tumblr multiple times.

Survey

Two-hundred and twelve people completed an online survey hosted by the programme Demographix.³ Once the raw data had been cleaned and cases that did not fit the criteria for inclusion, such as age, were removed from the data-set, 189 valid participants remained. Young people spent from 20 minutes to over an hour answering the questions. The survey asked both closed (multiple choice) and open-ended (text-based) questions about demographic characteristics, gender and sexual identity(ies), social and medical transitioning, experiences at school, mental health and the role of activism in young people's lives. Survey participants came from every state and territory in Australia, in numbers proportionate to the population more generally.

Interviews

Our study also used an online instant messenger platform that allowed for real-time interviews with 16 transgender and gender diverse students aged 14–25. This interview technique allowed young people to participate without their bodies being seen by the interviewer, thus reducing any potential discomfort informants might feel about their gender identity as read in this context. Interviewees were recruited through the survey itself, which provided willing participants with the researchers' email and phone contact details. Online interviews explored protective factors, engagement in activism as well as how participants accessed knowledge about sex, gender and gender identity(ies). Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours in total. Interviewees came from Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

Analysis

Survey data were analysed using SPSS, version 21, to deliver both descriptive and comparative statistics. Interview data were analysed in a grounded manner using the qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS): NVivo, version 10. Narratives within the interview data were coded according to the principal themes that emerged.

Ethical considerations

Previous research has shown that transgender and gender diverse young people often become aware that their gender identity(ies) do not match their sex assigned at birth early in their lives (Hillier et al. 2010). Therefore, it was imperative that people under the age of 18 years were able to participate in this research. In order to protect young people from potential dangers of abuse within their families (Grossman et al. 2005), we ensured participants did not require parental or guardian consent to participate in the research, with anonymity guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. The study was approved by research ethics review committees at the University of New England and La Trobe University.

Findings

Demographic characteristics

Of the 189 transgender and gender diverse students who responded to the survey, the average age was 19 years. Most (84%) were born in Australia, 5% in England, 3% in New Zealand and the remaining 8% in other countries (Bolivia, Iraq, Japan and others). Less than 5% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Although a wide range of states was represented, the majority of respondents lived in Victoria (58%) and New South Wales (19%), a finding echoing other Australian data (Jones et al. 2015) and perhaps related to the higher number of transgender support services in these states. The majority of respondents were assigned female at birth (72.5%), a smaller group were assigned male (26.5%) and two were not assigned a sex. In total, 40% of participants indicated that they were in a relationship at the time of the survey. Based on the list of options provided, half (50%) of the transgender and gender diverse students identified their sexual orientation as either pansexual or queer, 17% identified as gay/lesbian/ homosexual, 10% bisexual, 5% heterosexual, 5% questioning, 5% other and 3% asexual.

Gender identity

One half ($n = 192$) of the survey participants reported gender identities beyond the male–female binary (16% genderqueer, 10% gender fluid, 7% agender, 5% trans*, 4% androgynous, 4% questioning, 2% bi-gender and 2% other, e.g. ‘pangender’). These identities were generally referred to in both the qualitative survey data and the interviews as related to an absence of gender or a feeling of being between or beyond gender positions. For example, interviewee Alex (agender, 15 years) said, ‘I don’t feel a presence of gender’. Interviewee Charlie (genderqueer, 20 years) explained, ‘I never saw myself as a girl (by birth sex) but couldn’t see myself as a boy ... transgender doesn’t fit’. Other participants in the survey had identities fitting a male–female binary considered ‘oppositional’ to their allocated sex at birth (13% boy/man, 13% girl/woman, 6% trans man, 6% trans woman, 6% FtM, 5% MtF or 1% brotherboy).

However, interviewee Charlotte (24 years, trans woman) explained in a manner typical of many members of this second group of survey participants that being transgender even in a more classic sense was not straightforward: ‘Personally, I identify as female but there are times where I identify as male’. Survey participants were also asked to select pronouns they liked applied to themselves; 46% chose ‘she’, 42% ‘he’, 35% ‘they’ and over 5% offered ‘other’ terms (like ‘yo’ and ‘ze’). One-fifth of the survey participants indicated that they ‘did not care’ which pronoun is used, possibly reflecting the trend towards non-binary and inconsistent identities. Nearly one-third of the students in the survey had always questioned their gender identity; the remainder nominated a specific age (from 3 to 24, on average 14). Questioning one’s gender identity can be a complex process that does not necessarily end; participants repeatedly identified their explorations as ongoing.

Transition

Social transitioning involves affirming how one wishes to be perceived and treated, one’s ideal social role (e.g. declaring one’s gender identity and preferred pronouns, changing or affirming one’s presentation and role, etc.). Most (77%) of the participants had been or were involved in this process, 7% wanted to do so in the future and 15% did not want to. For some survey participants, social transitioning mainly involved not conforming to gender norms: ‘I don’t wear make-up, I don’t shave, I don’t wear heels, I don’t wear bras very often ... and I feel I have a male persona, at least some times’ (Spencer, gender-questioning young person, 18 years).

Legal transitioning involves having one’s desired gender identity affirmed on official documents (e.g. birth certificate, licence or passport, etc.). Of the 169 survey participants who had these documents, 17% had changed their birth certificate and driver’s licence, only 13% had changed their proof of age card and only 10% had changed their passport. Participants’ stories suggested that their age and perceived inexperience impacted on opportunities to proceed with legal transitions such as changing a passport, despite over half (54%) of the survey participants wanting to do so.

Medically transitioning involves accessing medical, hormonal and/or surgical aids (e.g. using puberty blockers or hormone injections/pills/creams, getting ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ surgeries, etc.) to transform one’s body and affirm one’s gender. Just over one-quarter (26%) of the survey participants had or were currently medically transitioning; 33% wished to do

so in the future. For some survey participants, medical transitioning was linked to feelings of mental well-being. Sarah (MTF, 21 years) desired to have ‘a FULL transition i.e. name, clothes, sex reassignment surgery’ to gain social acceptance and feel ‘better’. However, 40% of the survey participants did not want to have a medical transition. This matched to some degree with the relatively large numbers of non-binary gender identities in the survey sample compared to in other studies (Couch et al. 2007; Jones et al. 2015). Survey participant Shannon (trans*, 25 years), for example, explained that transitioning medically was unnecessary for their⁴ particular gender affirmation: ‘I doubt I will ever go “all the way” to “male” from “female” ... I still wear the same clothes, do the same things, my life just makes more sense now. I just want to be acknowledged for who I am’.

General school experience

Whilst we do not claim our sample is representative, it is important to note that survey participants were currently or had previously attended all Australian school types: Government (47%), Christian (18%), general private (10%), vocational education and other secondary provision institutions (19%) and ‘other’ forms of schooling (e.g. distance education) (6%). This is noteworthy because it shows that it would be incorrect to assume that religious school types, for example, ‘do not have’ transgender or gender diverse students, although in Australia, religious schools may obtain national legal exemptions from discrimination on the basis of gender identity in their service provisions to students (Australian Parliament 2013). Overall, 25% of the survey participants reported that they avoided their schools because they cannot conform to the gender stereotypes dominant within these contexts, including 50% of those in Christian schools.

Basic record-keeping

Just under one-tenth of transgender and gender diverse students surveyed had formally changed their gender on their school records. A further 41% reported wanting to do so. Thus, about half of the group felt that changing their gender on their school record was a key part of their educational experience. One-third of students surveyed did not want to have their gender changed in this way: a trend linked to their non-binary gender identities for some and for others to not feeling safe to declare their gender identity at school. One interview participant, Charlotte (24 years), reported maintaining a silence about her gender identity to avoid affecting a family member’s career: ‘I was at a Christian school and my mum worked there as a teacher. So, I always had this fear that if I told one of my friends my secret, it would cause my mother to lose her job’.

Sexuality and puberty education classes

To find out how appropriate sexuality and puberty education was perceived as being, we asked participants in the survey to rate provision at their current/most recent school as ‘mostly appropriate’, ‘mostly inappropriate’ or ‘don’t know/not applicable’. With respect to sexuality education, two-thirds of the survey participants rated their schools’ provision as *mostly inappropriate* and less than 10% as *mostly appropriate*. Students at Christian schools were most likely to indicate that their sexuality education was *mostly inappropriate* (85%); none found it *mostly appropriate*. In relation to puberty education, over half (55%) of the

survey participants reported provisions were *mostly inappropriate*. One Female to Male survey participant Nathan (21 years) explained, 'sex education class did not mention trans or intersex' and characterised his puberty education teachers as 'mostly intolerant staff'. Boston, a gender-questioning survey participant (18 years), noted that provision for gender diversity in sexuality and puberty education in their all-girls school was very limited: 'we are told to be "lady-like", our sex ed. was appalling'.

Counselling

Younger survey participants (14–17-year olds) were more likely to have been provided with trans-inclusive counselling at school (67%; compared to 37% of 18–21-year olds and 22% of 22–25-year olds). This may suggest a story of changing attitudes for school counsellors in recent years. Participants who attended government schools were more likely to indicate that counselling provision was appropriate for them compared to those from Christian schools. Timothy, a trans boy/man survey participant (22 years), commented that religious and psychological counselling at his Christian school were not separated out; 'the only counselling that I knew of in school was from our school Chaplain (who was) the last person I would feel comfortable talking to about my gender identity'.

Segregation of facility use

Over 40% of the survey participants felt that gender segregation (such as lining up in rows of boys and girls, or segregation for learning, etc.) was too often applied at their school. Karen, a trans girl/woman survey participant (18 years), said she was not 'out' at school, but because it was a very gendered environment in which she faced discrimination: 'I was routinely ridiculed for doing things that were considered "inappropriate" for my presumed gender'. Over one-third of the students surveyed felt that the changing rooms (41%) and toilets (44%) at their school were *mostly inappropriate*. Bryce, a FTM survey participant (18 years), noted, 'I was made to use a disabled toilet instead of the male toilets'. Being transgender or gender diverse is not a disability, and being unable to use a toilet fitting one's gender identity can be distressing.

Interviewee Theo (transgender, 14 years) said that whilst he felt that school was generally 'pretty great', it was hardest in physical education 'cause' EVERYTHING is split into 'boys' and 'girls', and me and my best friend (who is also transgender) have considered just not going to that class'. He was concerned that there were no gender-neutral toilets, 'so I have to avoid going to the loo at school (which SUCKS)'. Like many other survey participants, Kelly (genderqueer, 24 years) discussed how gender-segregated facilities encouraged remaining silent about one's gender diversity; 'my all-boys private school encouraged a hypermasculine environment'. Conversely, Henry, a FTM survey participant (18 years), described how mixed classes offered a more supportive environment: 'From years 7–9 classes were single sex and I found this very uncomfortable. In senior school (10–12) I have been more comfortable with mixed classes. I have socially transitioned, with the school's permission; they were accommodating'.

Uniform

There was no particular trend to the data on the perceived appropriateness of school uniforms. For some young people, the uniform code at their school was strongly gendered. For

example, Ashley (genderqueer survey participant, 23 years) described how girls were discouraged from wearing trousers at their school and boys were given detention for 'wearing "girls" uniforms' and Martin (transgender boy, 16 years) described how depressed he was being 'forced to wear a dress/skirt' at school. Zane, a FTM survey participant (25 years), described attending an all-girls private school where there were no masculine uniform options; 'A person who requested trousers at assembly was laughed at and bullied for years'. For other survey participants and interviewees, their school had offered greater flexibility. Interviewee Cinder (transgender, 18 years) said, 'Having uniform policies that recognise the needs of transgender and gender diverse young people would make a difference to student wellbeing'.

Staff

Survey participants who reported receiving no teacher support were over four times more likely to leave school (23% compared to 5% of those with teacher support). They were also over twice as likely to hide at lunch (50% compared to 23% of those who had teacher support). They were at increased risk of various types of harassment and abuse, including specifically being bullied on mobile phones (27% compared to 8% of those who had teacher support), by written abuse (27% compared to 11% of those who had teacher support) and through discriminatory language from friends (62% compared to 31% of those who had teacher support).

Students whose teachers' use of pronouns, name or identity, was perceived as 'mostly inappropriate', experienced increased abuse from peers and suffered poorer educational outcomes compared to those whose teachers used appropriate language. They were more likely to report being unable to concentrate in class (54% compared to 22%), that their marks had dropped (54% compared to 26%) or that they dropped out of school entirely (22% compared to 6%). Interviewee Bailey (trans boy/man, 16 years) discussed the difficulties he experienced in having his principal use 'mostly inappropriate' language (pronouns, name or identity) in referring to him:

The school principal said he will never call me a male or use male pronouns until I have my gender reassignment therapy done, which will never happen until I [have] left school. (...) It makes me depressed so much that a lot of the time I can't focus at school. Sometimes I really hate myself for this, and I want to die, or to hit myself so hard so that I could faint.

Supportive classmates

About two-thirds (65%) of the survey participants experienced verbal abuse on the basis of their gender difference and 21% experienced physical abuse on the basis of their gender difference. The most common location where this abuse took place was reported to the street (40%), closely followed by the school (38%). Over 90% of the survey participants who had experienced physical abuse had thought about suicide.

A key protective factor for gender diverse and transgender students was support from classmates. Participants with supportive classmates were less likely to experience various forms of harassment and discrimination at school. Overall, 68% of the survey participants without supportive classmates reported experiencing 'social exclusion', compared to 30% of those with supportive classmates. Survey participants without supportive classmates were also more likely to report having rumours spread about them (50% compared to 36% with

supportive classmates); having graffiti written about them (27 vs. 3%); being bullied on the social media (47 vs. 21%); being humiliated (53 vs. 28%); or having people deliberately use the wrong pronoun or name (50 vs. 26%).

Participants without supportive classmates were also more likely to move schools (27% compared to 7% with supportive classmates); miss classes (47 vs. 22%); and hide at recess/lunch (50 vs. 21%). Robin, a genderqueer survey participant (21 years), had no supportive classmates and said, 'I'd get called dyke, fag, freak, shemale, shim ... They'd just be yelling it to be cruel and try and shame me'. Accounts given in both the survey and interview data revealed that speaking out against such incidents was more difficult for a transgender or gender diverse student to do without the aid of peers.

Positive outcomes of activism

Previous research has found that transgender and gender diverse young people in Australia are twice as likely to be involved in activism around gender and sexual diversity/difference as their cisgender same-sex attracted peers, possibly due to higher levels of experience of discrimination (Jones and Hillier 2013).

The majority (91%) of participants in the survey reported having taken part in at least one activism activity. Over half felt better about their gender identity after participating in activism (60%). Over half of the survey participants reported having had fun (57%) and feeling part of a larger community (55%). Involvement in activism also made students feel more resilient (33%), eased their depression (30%) and reduced their thoughts of self-harm (30%) and suicide (31%). Furthermore, 24% of the survey participants reported that participating in activism stopped them engaging in an act of self-harm or suicide attempt. This meant that regardless of whether the activism had results in the long term for the transgender 'cause' being advocated for, the act of activism potentially was reported by every participants to have had an immediate life-saving impact and likely helped their well-being. Riley, a genderqueer survey participant (17 years), whose comment was typical of survey and interview responses on this topic, explained that involvement in activism made them feel like they were changing the world and that this had a positive effect on them: 'I feel as though engaging in a positive action, something that adds to the world, lifts my spirits greatly'. Lynnette, a trans girl/woman, (23 years), said, 'I feel proactive, and that my voice is valued and worthwhile'.

Types of activism

Transgender and gender diverse students engaged in diverse activism activities; the most popular types involved minimal labour, considering their potential well-being impacts. Survey participants most commonly indicated they 'liked' an activist Facebook page or other social media site (83%), signed a petition (80%), improved understanding through conversation (70%) or attended a march or rally (52%). However, some survey participants reported engaging in more substantial/labour-intensive activities: they created an activist blog (30%), wrote to a local member of parliament (22%), uploaded a video to the Internet (20%), gave a speech at a march/rally (10%) or helped organise a march/rally (9%).

Students gave various reasons in both the survey and interviews for engaging in activism; most were tied to the need for improvements in society for gender diverse and transgender people. In this way, activism was often seen as a responsibility. Greg, a trans boy/man survey

participant (21 years), said, 'activism is the rent I pay for living on Earth'. John, a trans boy/man survey participant, (20 years) discussed the sense of contradiction he experienced in knowing the importance of activism and just wanting to be a regular guy (or in trans discourse, wanting to 'go stealth'):

I'm in a strange state where I want nothing to do with the activism side – I'm happy to be a stealth, regular guy. But on the other hand, I have a deeply felt rage and sadness about the state of things, and a feeling of social responsibility to look after people who are marginalised in the same ways as I have been, and to improve things for them if I can. They seem to be mutually exclusive options – activism or stealth. One I hate because it means I can't just live as a normal guy – I always have to be 'trans', and I hate that. The other I hate because it means turning my back on people who really do need all the help they can get, when I'm in a position to really help change things.

The emergence of a juxtaposition between 'going stealth' and 'engaging in activism' in the data was tied to the widely expressed view that engaging in activism required one to disclose a transgender identity. Certainly, some activism shows transgender and gender diverse people engaged in involved coming 'out' as transgender – such as by making a personal appearance in YouTube video clips featuring their own bodies and stories or discussing their own personal experiences in a speech at school. However, the claiming of a transgender identity does not need to be central to activism. Websites and online activism can also be created anonymously and general information can be distributed in a poster or a speech without the author discussing their own personal background. Schools could potentially provide a context in which training on advocacy might offer students opportunities to learn about impersonal activism techniques. Staff could also provide opportunities for students to engage in whole class/school events such as awareness raising days, where all students wear a certain symbol of support for gender diversity or learn about this theme together in ways supportive of gender diversity without requiring individuals to claim a particular identity.

Conclusion

The data discussed in this paper suggested that Australian schools of all types may have transgender and gender diverse students, and therefore should make provision on the assumption that there may be closeted transgender and gender diverse students in their care. There were both diversity and complexity in the gender identities (both non-binary and binary) of transgender and gender diverse students in this study and their needs as students were similarly variable. Because of this, it is likely that schools, teachers and teacher educators will need to offer a suitable nuanced response. The data suggest that it could be useful to transgender and gender diverse students if teachers and school leadership were trained in appropriate, supportive behaviour and language towards gender diverse and transgender students. The data show that appropriate language use by school staff can support these students' safety and educational outcomes.

However, the data also suggest that such training needs to be multi-levelled to privilege first and foremost students' need for diverse choices in inclusion options. This may involve, depending on individuals' needs, negotiating or making available many choices in facility use options and uniform options for example. There was a lack of structural support and inclusion in sexuality and puberty education in most transgender and gender diverse students' experiences, and other deficiencies which may perhaps be better addressed by holistically

rethinking how schools operate in relation to gender diversity both structurally and in the curriculum. Schooling often operates on a model of traditional gender segregation and norm enforcement, and there are many opportunities in educational contexts for integration and flexibility (including activism) that are worth exploring.

Our research has also revealed that while most constructions of transgender and gender diverse students in research to date focus on victimisation (Jones 2013), it is also possible to reframe such students as often empowered individuals who advocate on their own (and others') behalf, in ways that promote their own well-being but also fulfil a complex sense of social duty. More research could usefully be conducted using this premise, building practical ways to promote transgender and gender diverse inclusion in sexuality and puberty education. In addition, survey data show that questioning one's gender identity can be a complex process that does not necessarily have a clear-cut ending; participants repeatedly identified their explorations as ongoing. Together, these data illustrate the need for schools, community and health service providers to supply ongoing support for transgender and gender diverse young people over time. Because of this, longitudinal interventions and studies of schooling supports at various ages could potentially be useful.

Notes

1. See www.passports.gov.au/web/sexgenderapplicants.aspx.
2. Grounds at the state level in Australia include either gender identity, transsexuality, transgender status, chosen gender or gender history (see Jones 2015 for further information on state and territory protections).
3. An online interface which hosts qualitative and quantitative surveys compatible with a range of software used in analysis (SPSS and excel) for a fee.
4. The gendered or non-gendered personal pronouns identified as preferred by individual participants (such as he, she, their, etc.) are used throughout this paper.

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