Teaching trans students: How dominant truth discourses facilitate misrecognition and preclude equitable schooling

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Abstract

There is extensive evidence that trans youth face significant barriers to equitable school access. Effective intervention strategies, however, are less clear – an issue which is compounded by contemporary trans-hostility. Currently, in the absence of UK-wide policy, provision for trans students is inconsistent and often dependent on individual educators. Yet, whilst many teachers have inclusive intentions, even with relevant training their approaches are frequently limited by persistently cisnormative beliefs and practices; genuine trans equity in schools is rare. Accordingly, this thesis investigates how teachers come to adopt particular approaches, identifying barriers and supports for trans-emancipatory practices.

Methodologically, I combine Foucault with critical realism to present an ontologically realist and epistemologically relativist framework, facilitating causal analysis of contributory factors. Following a two-stage research design, I firstly conducted thematic analysis of 15 interviews with teachers, producing three factors which each represent a dominant truth discourse: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism. Secondly, I assessed these factors with a larger sample (n=93) completing an online questionnaire; this data was used to analyse causal salience through systematic case comparison in Qualitative Comparative Analysis. Of the two resultant causal models, for the presence and absence of a trans-emancipatory teacher approach, the latter is particularly well-evidenced regarding sufficiency and necessity – suggesting that the absence of this trans-emancipatory outcome could be reached through investment either in sex/gender essentialism, and/or in *both* neoliberalism and childhood innocence and developmentalism.

Finally, I develop a theoretical account of potential generative mechanisms, particularly considering divergence between expressed teacher support and marginalising trans student experiences. Here, I integrate insights from Honneth's recognition theory with my primarily Foucauldian theoretical approach; I posit that normative forms of teacher care, informed by the identified truth discourses, *misrecognise* trans students – instead often interpreting them primarily in terms of threat.

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List of abbreviations

ABA	Applied Behavioural Analysis
ASCL	Association of School and College Leaders
BERA	British Educational Research Association
DfE	Department for Education
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
ESA	Enhanced Standard Analysis
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FE	Further Education
GRC	Gender Recognition Certificate
GSD	Gender and Sexuality Diverse
HBT	Homophobic, Biphobic, Transphobic
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PE	Physical Education
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
ROGD	Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria
RSE	Relationships and Sex Education
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SMV	Set Membership Value
TA	Thematic Analysis
TERF	Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

Declaration

Ideas informing aspects of this thesis have previously been published as Armitage (2020).

Statement of copyright

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Part One: Background and Methodology

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. UK and international context for trans youth

When I first proposed this PhD project in 2017, it was not that socio-political discourse was particularly *positive* about trans people, but I was – perhaps naively – optimistic about progress. I did not anticipate the level of intensification in anti-trans rhetoric that has occurred in the intervening years, the floodgates seemingly opened (in the UK) with the public consultation on Gender Recognition Act reform (Armitage, 2020) and never closed, as we continue to be both weapon and target in a culture war waged by politicians (Milton, 2022a), legacy media (Gwenffrewi, 2022), and international anti-gender movements (GATE, 2022). I also did not expect that just as I was drawing my research to a close, the UK government would be promising the imminent release of explicitly trans-hostile guidance (and yet another public consultation; Beckford, 2023) on my very thesis topic – specifically, how teachers and schools should respond to trans students. Yet, as ministers threaten to follow in the footsteps of several US states (Schoenbaum & Murphy, 2023) and mandate, for instance, that teachers immediately inform parents if a child questions their gender identity (Williamson, 2023a), this is no longer particularly surprising but simply one of the latest manifestations of an intensely hostile and exhausting (Todd, 2023) climate for trans youth – and indeed adults.

Simultaneously, it is arguably unprecedentedly hard to erase trans possibilities. Social transition is increasingly supported in childhood (Durwood et al., 2017; Horton & Carlile, 2022), with internet proliferation also facilitating greater access to trans communities and knowledges (Erlick, 2018; Rothbaum et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2020). Trans youth demonstrably show "hopeful, resilient, and persistent capacities […] to survive and *flourish* within exhausting life conditions" (Todd, 2023, p. 785, emphasis in original). However, it is a matter of justice that their lives simply should not have to be so difficult (Horton, 2023a). Accordingly, and in a context wherein recommendations by the soi-disant Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to remove existing legal protections of trans people (Stonewall, 2023a) have garnered cross-party political support (Kelleher, 2023), there is an urgent need for solidarity from cis people in fighting with us against trans-oppressive rhetoric and policy (Pearce, 2023). This thesis contributes to a body of research addressing the role that teachers may be able to play in this regard.

In this work, I use the term 'trans' to describe people whose gender is in some way different from their original birth assignment; this is inclusive of non-binary and otherwise gender diverse individuals. Conversely, I use 'cis' (or cisgender) to refer to those who are not trans.

1.2. Situating the research question

Over the last few decades, research has consistently demonstrated that trans students face substantial barriers and difficulties within school environments that are ill-prepared for them – from constant invocations of binary gender and the associated segregation, to curricular exclusion, misgendering, and violence. Whilst some schools are taking steps to offer a level of accommodative inclusion, even so they retain the same institutional cisnormativity that is common to the vast majority (McBride, 2021). Accordingly, provision tends to be reactive to individual identified trans students (Martino, Kassen et al., 2022), treating their needs as additional and as outside of the mainstream work of the school. These cisnormative school environments produce conditions of vulnerability for trans youth, who nevertheless utilise their situated agency within these constraints to prioritise different contextual needs – perhaps choosing to compromise physical safety to preserve self-worth, for instance, or vice versa (Hillier et al., 2020).

Yet, there is significant variation across trans students' experiences, and teachers play a key role in this – with the opportunity to disrupt educational cisnormativity (Mangin, 2022). Not only are their individual supportive relationships highly important to trans youth (Ullman, 2022), but educators and especially school leaders are in a position to influence various sites of potential marginalisation or inclusion – school policies, taught content (Schmitt, 2023), and access to facilities (Horton, 2023a) – as well as the overall school culture. However, whilst teachers frequently express both supportive intentions and the desire for training and guidance on working with trans students, even after relevant training cisnormative beliefs and approaches often persist (R.A. Marx et al., 2017).

Against this context, the overall research question of this thesis is: *How do teachers come to have particular approaches towards trans students?*

1.3. Objectives and scope

The objective in investigating this question is to identify pathways that can lead both towards and away from a trans-positive, or *trans-emancipatory* (Horton & Carlile, 2022) approach, such that this might inform more effective training and interventions supporting teachers in providing equitable school environments for trans children and young people.

The geographical scope of this research is focused on the UK. Whilst there are of course local and national specificities across different contexts, the findings of this work are also likely to have some relevance to education in other countries; indeed, it is a contribution to an existing international field of literature, as demonstrated by the research background given in Chapter Two.

Additionally, whilst I do not wish to entirely obscure mention of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its indisputable impact on education, I will also note here that this has not been a significant focus of my research (which begun prior to its onset), and an analysis of the effect of the pandemic, lockdowns, and remote learning on approaches to and experiences of trans students is beyond the scope of this thesis.

1.4. Thesis structure

There are two parts to this thesis; the first encompasses chapters one to four and sets out the research background and methodology, and the second is formed of chapters five to ten and details my findings and the discussion thereof. Firstly, the present chapter (One) has introduced the socio-political environment into which this thesis arrives, contextualising the challenges that trans youth experience and that teachers may face in their work to support these students. This chapter has also introduced the research question, with the current section outlining how this will be addressed throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two situates the research question against the background of existing literature. I set out the evidence that school climates are regularly trans-hostile, facilitated by naturalised cisnormativity and its manifestations in teaching practices, architecture, institutional rules, and curricula. I highlight that such cisnormative environments create the conditions of vulnerability for trans students, producing chronic and cumulative minority stress and often necessitating significant compromises as they attempt to navigate education safely. Further, I identify teachers as having a significant role in either reproducing or disrupting these marginalising conditions, and consider previous findings that many educators' inclusive intentions are limited in practice by the persistent investment in cisnormativity. Thus, I locate my own research as seeking to address how teachers come to have these particular approaches to trans students, and to identify potential barriers to their adoption of trans-emancipatory positions.

Subsequently, in Chapter Three I explain the theoretical and philosophical framework of the thesis. I outline my interpretation of Foucauldian theory as ontologically realist, reasoning that the discursive 'truth' that Foucault describes as a function of power/knowledge implies an *epistemological* (not ontological) relativism. I thereby position this as eminently compatible with a critical realist paradigm. I then introduce the three examples of discursive truth that are relevant to my later analysis: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism.

In Chapter Four, I outline my methodological approach, firstly explaining the implications of a Foucauldian and critical realist framework for the approach taken to investigating causation, including a retroductive inferential logic. I then detail the methods used in data collection and

analysis, describing the two-stage design consisting of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, and subsequently an online questionnaire and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).

Following a short introduction to the second part of the thesis, Chapter Five is the first of three that each explore a single theme from the interview data, in this case neoliberalism. These are aligned with the truth discourses established in Chapter Three. Here, I identify that whilst participants regularly articulated resistance to the broad impacts of neoliberalism on education, particularly in terms of marketisation and accountability demands, they were more likely to naturalise the neoliberal framing of equality – as decontextualised individual rights – advocating 'reasonable' accommodations to trans students' additional or 'special' needs, rather than perceiving cisnormative school cultures as problematic or unjust.

Chapter Six then addresses the theme of sex/gender essentialism. Whilst this was present to varying extents in participants' narratives, in general they expressed resistance to gender roles and stereotypes, but had a much stronger investment in binary sex assignment as a natural truth that defines who a person immutably *is*. This is a barrier to treating trans students truly equitably because it denies the legitimacy of their gender. Through this essentialist lens, it appears reasonable to consider treating trans students as their assigned sex, at least for certain areas tied to safety concerns, because even if a teacher wants to respect their wishes, they still inherently *are* that sex. Additionally, several participants appeared to reference dominant 'inclusive' conceptualisations of transness, such as 'wrong body' narratives and the division of sex and gender, which in fact still undermine trans equity by reifying biological essentialism; primarily, although such frameworks may ostensibly respect a trans person's *gender* identity, they simultaneously retain the 'truth' of the assigned sex.

Ensuingly, Chapter Seven addresses the third and last theme, namely childhood innocence and developmentalism. This chapter identifies participants' varying perspectives on dominant constructions of children as biologically pre-rational pre-adults – a position widely used to justify restrictions and control, aiming to ensure that 'normal' development occurs uncorrupted by precocious exposure to 'adult' knowledge and experiences. Further, it is not primarily a concern for the individual child's future self that underlies this protectionism, but a wider adult desire to ensure normative social reproduction and to protect the future that is *represented* by the figure of the child. Investment in this discourse by teachers acts as a barrier to equitable provision for trans students because cis proto-heterosexuality is an integral part of normative development, producing a *desire for a non-trans outcome*. Queerness is positioned as threatening to childhood and to reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004); thus, children must be protected from it and transition avoided, or allowed solely as a last resort where adults are certain that the child cannot otherwise be returned to a normative cisgender path. Correspondingly, participants' experiences evidence the point that decisions on whether a child is allowed to socially transition at school are a negotiation between

parents and school staff – as one instance of the direct government by adults that is justified by developmentalist discourses, and within which the balance of authority between family and state is consistently weighted towards the side whose interests align with the normative, hence supporting the pursuit of social reproduction.

Following this discussion of the three themes, Chapter Eight presents the results from the Qualitative Comparative Analysis of their causal salience. I first outline how each theme, as well as a trans-positive outcome, was operationalised using appropriate questions from the questionnaire. I then give the results from the two analyses, namely that for the presence of the outcome (a trans-emancipatory teacher approach), and that for its absence. For the former, the causal model produced suggests that such an outcome could be reached through one (or both) of two paths; both include an absence of investment in sex/gender essentialism, in addition to non-investment in either neoliberalism or childhood innocence and developmentalism. For the latter, the model also included two potential routes: investment in sex/gender essentialism; or investment in *both* neoliberalism and childhood innocence.

Chapter Nine considers all of my findings together, theorising how investment in each discourse (theme) may work through shared or combined mechanisms to prevent the adoption of trans-emancipatory approaches. I argue that as naturalised 'truths', these discourses inform the caring practices that teachers believe to be supportive of trans students. Yet, these forms of care in fact *misrecognise* trans youth, devaluing their particular subjectivity and thus denying them school belonging. However, because this normative care is considered appropriately inclusive, trans student needs that inevitably fall outside of its remit are perceived as unreasonable and even dangerous – facilitating the construction of trans youth primarily in terms of threat, rather than as legitimate subjects of teacher care.

Finally, Chapter Ten concludes the thesis by reflecting on the findings, potential implications, and limitations of the research that it has presented – also considering where further research may be usefully directed.

Chapter Two: Research Background

2.1. Cisnormativity facilitates trans-hostile school climates

Trans children are certainly not a new phenomenon (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Yet, with greater visibility and access to trans communities, childhood social transition has become increasingly attainable in recent years – and hence schools are responding to greater numbers of known trans students (Horton, 2023a). Correspondingly, in the last two decades there has been an exponential rise in published research about the educational experiences of these young people (McBride, 2021). Whilst there is clear evidence for the benefits of an affirmative approach (Horton, 2020; skelton, 2022), there is also significant socio-political opposition and resistance to the challenge that this poses to dominant structures and power relations (Martino, 2022c).

Overall, there is significant variation in the educational experiences of trans youth, both in the UK and internationally. Whilst some schools remain explicitly trans-hostile, others are providing a level of accommodative inclusion to these students (Horton, 2020). However, and common to both of these approaches, the vast majority of schools retain a fundamental, *institutional* cisnormativity (Horton, 2023a; McBride, 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2021) – which marginalises trans students and forecloses the possibility of educational equity (Martino, Kassen et al., 2022).

Cisnormativity refers to the normative assumption that all people are, or *should be*, cisgender – that their sex/gender is immutable, specifically male *or* female based on innate biological characteristics, and, perhaps with the rare exception of a few intersex people, correctly assigned to them at birth. This is the terminology that I primarily use in this thesis, whilst acknowledging that some literature also uses the related terms 'cissexism' (Serano, 2007) and/or 'cisgenderism' (Lennon & Mistler, 2014), either instead or in combination. Whilst it has been suggested that each word should have its own distinct meaning (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022), it is also not uncommon to use 'cisnormativity' alone – as analogous to the well-established 'heteronormativity' – to encompass the concept of the cultural and systemic ideology that privileges and rewards assigned sex and cis identity, and denigrates, delegitimises, and erases transness (see also Horton & Carlile, 2022, p. 186).

Cisnormative educational environments demonstrably produce particularly harsh climates for trans students, in which they frequently feel unsafe and have low levels of connection and belonging (A.O. Hill et al., 2021; Horton, 2023a; Kosciw et al., 2022). The marginalising experiences that these young people face in schools have been classified by McBride (2021) into three forms, namely cisnormative macroaggressions, microaggressions, and violence. Following this, cisnormative macroaggressions are the systemic forms of discrimination that erase trans possibility, thus constructing trans people and identities as aberrant and as having no place in the institutions and administration of society

and everyday life (see also s.j. Miller, 2015). Cisnormative microaggressions, on the other hand, are the forms of bias and delegitimisation present in everyday interpersonal interactions – that expect everyone to be cis, and are surprised, confused, and even disgusted by transness and gender non-conformity. Lastly, cisnormative violence refers to deliberately and explicitly harmful acts, motivated by the prejudice of transphobia (see also Spade, 2015). This intentional punishment of perceived gender deviance is perpetrated by school staff as well as other students. It can be physical, sexual, and verbal, and includes threats, bullying, and harassment. These are all highly prevalent in the school experiences of trans youth, including in the UK (Bradlow et al., 2017; Horton, 2023a).

These three categories, whilst in practice overlapping and not discretely separable, are useful in highlighting the multiple forms cisnormativity takes and levels at which it operates. Their mutually reinforcing nature (McBride, 2021) is also evident throughout the various forms of trans-exclusionary practices that the subsequent sections will discuss – from institutionally embedded binary gender segregation and impediments to affirmation, to curricular and policy-based marginalisation. The remainder of this chapter will also address both the damaging impact of such practices and the corresponding agency and resistance demonstrated by trans students, before identifying the important role that teachers can play in this context. This latter point gives rise to my own research question, which investigates potential pathways and barriers to teachers adopting trans-emancipatory approaches.

2.2. Foundationally cis/binary, *fundamentally unsuitable*

It is firstly a significant macroaggression that, at an institutional level, binary gender distinctions and segregation are embedded in school structures, practices, and architecture (Woolley, 2017; Schmidt, 2020). Not only are there 'single-sex' schools, and separate male and female facilities within co-educational institutions, but everyday routines and teaching practices commonly reinforce the same divisions. Boys and girls – the only two available categories – are separated in lines, seating plans, educational resources, and the sports they are allowed to play (B. Francis & Paechter, 2015). Students are regularly greeted, praised, and otherwise referred to in gendered terms, and are expected to behave and achieve differently based on their assigned sex (skelton, 2022). Accordingly, Callahan and Nicholas (2019) contend that "gender binarism continues to be (re)constructed and reinforced through subtle, but *omnirelevant*, invocations of gender" (p. 705, emphasis added).

Correspondingly, Bower-Brown et al. (2023) argue that "the British school system is fundamentally unsuitable for non-binary and gender-questioning identities" (p. 74), citing the pervasive discrimination and erasure that these binary norms facilitate and legitimise. Yet, whilst it may be true that certain marginalising experiences are particular to non-binary students – for instance, the

invalidation of the very *existence* of their genders – it is also not the case that the binarism of schools is comparably unproblematic for trans boys and trans girls. It is an emphatically *cis* binary, and is oppositional and *fixed* – hence, the very act of transitioning is a violation (skelton, 2022), preventing trans students from existing within gendered school structures in a way that is not somehow qualified or acutely precarious.

Indeed, Martino (2022b) contends that it is a *cissexist pitfall* to impose a categorical distinction between so-called 'binary', and non-binary trans people – and to suggest that the former are more easily included in existing frameworks, whilst the latter are uniquely challenging for educators to comprehend and support. The framing of these as mutually exclusive groups that are defined against each other, and trans girls and boys as neatly aligning with gender norms (and in a manner beyond what is expected of cis children), fails to do justice to trans people's own experiences of gender. Further, it "eschews the very transphobic oppression and invalidation of the trans men and women whose self-aligned gender identities are constantly called into question, with demands to provide evidence of, and to account for, their existence" (p. 24). Additionally, I would suggest that simply re-categorising a trans boy or girl within existing structures corresponds to an *assimilationist* approach to trans inclusion – which Horton and Carlile (2022) describe as "[c]is supremacy with exceptionalism" (p. 175). Transness remains devalued, and may be kept secret not out of personal choice but to protect the child or the school from transphobic backlash (Payne & Smith, 2014). Under this approach, particular needs are ignored, and cisnormativity reified.

Ultimately schools are, predominantly, simply unprepared for trans students (skelton, 2022) – of any gender. Trans youth trouble foundational gendered assumptions of education, and to manage an existential threat to cis norms it is they who are most often problematised (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018) – policed towards conformity, or at best individually and non-disruptively accommodated. Thus, despite the good intentions of many educators, schools are ultimately failing to provide a safe and equitable education for trans children and young people (Horton, 2023a) – with low, persistently cisnormative expectations of what constitutes inclusion (2020).

2.3. Gatekeeping self-determination and affirmation

Cisnormativity privileges assigned sex as the truth about who a person is, and thus creates barriers to others perceiving a trans student's gender as entirely legitimate. The deference to assigned sex and the institutionalised importance of gender congruence also naturalise the inequitable conditions in which *only trans students* are required to obtain explicit permission from their schools to express and be affirmed in their gender identity.

Correspondingly, misgendering and misnaming are a significant problem frequently experienced by trans youth, from both school staff and other students, and both intentionally and accidentally (or habitually) (T. Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). In some cases, schools are resistant to changing a trans student's name or gender marker on school records (Bradlow et al., 2017) – and regularly the only available options for the latter are male and female (Sausa, 2005). They may impose unnecessary barriers, such as requiring a student's name to be changed legally before allowing its use in school (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Further, even when formal records are changed, misgendering regularly continues (McBride et al., 2020).

Additionally, uniform rules (or dress codes) in the majority of schools are gender-specific, and thus in order to attend without punishment or exclusion, frequently trans students must conform through gendered clothing that causes dysphoria and conflicts with their identity (T. Jones et al., 2016; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). Indeed, many are explicitly barred from wearing clothes consistent with their gender (Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020). With rules commonly extending beyond clothing and into bodily aspects that cannot simply be taken off at the end of the school day – such as hair length – trans youth are implicitly taught that expression of their deeply held sense of self is unacceptable, and subordinate to the expectations of others. This may be a particular issue in places, like the UK, where schools have a formal uniform (Ma'ayan, 2003; Paechter et al., 2021). The clear distinction between two gendered versions of specific clothing visibly categorises students into discrete sets of 'boys' and 'girls', encouraging internal and external surveillance of incongruity. Trans students who do not or cannot conform to rules and normative expectations are exposed to transphobic and homophobic harassment, as well as formal punishment for breaking school rules (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Paechter et al. also describe how the binary *interpretation* of a dress code by students, beyond its explicit gendered rules, can be problematic, particularly for non-binary students who feel pressured to meet others' stereotypical expectations of non-binary presentation.

2.4. Gender-segregated spaces

Binary segregated spaces in schools frame and reinforce normative gendered possibilities, producing trans students as unintelligible, and encouraging surveillance and heightened levels of transphobic abuse. In single-sex institutions this macroaggression occurs at a whole-school level, naturalising and reifying essential binary sex differences, intersex erasure, and also heterosexuality (Jackson, 2010). This is felt keenly by students whose gendered embodiment does not easily align with the male or female category that the school is centred around. O'Flynn (2016), discussing the experiences of two trans ('female-to-male') teenagers at a London girls' secondary school, suggests that they could not be recognisable as students there without presenting a female gender – describing them as "the antithesis of who was to be included in the school" (p. 439). Whilst they were theoretically allowed

(and in fact legally mandated) to attend the school, in practice their presence in school spaces was heavily restricted, both through direct policing and bullying from other students, and through teachers completely refusing to acknowledge or interact with them. In this way they were both hypervisible and invisible. The spatial context of the 'single-sex' environment created the conditions that facilitated these marginalising – or microaggressive and violent – interpersonal interactions.

This gender segregation, in co-educational schools as well as single-sex institutions, also leads to self-exclusion of trans students – from particularly gendered classes, from toilets and changing rooms, and sometimes from school entirely (Horton, 2023c; T. Jones et al., 2016). With heightened attention brought to the apparent conflict between their gendered embodiment and cisnormative expectations, many trans students feel unsafe and uncomfortable in spaces like bathrooms and changing facilities – and therefore avoid them (Kosciw et al., 2022). Their fear is not unfounded, as these are particularly common sites of cisnormative microaggressions and violence (Peter et al., 2016; J. Francis et al., 2022) – especially when trans students are prevented from using the facilities aligned with their gender identity (Ehrensaft & Rosenthal, 2019). An illustrative example is given by Joey, a student in the East of England, describing how "other students would shout at me, give me weird looks, laugh at me, tell their friends and teachers because they thought I was a boy using the girls' toilets" (Bradlow et al., 2017, p. 15). This policing and *category maintenance work* (Davies, 1989) may be especially prevalent in these contexts, since the 'truth' of the gender binary is *required* for such a space to make sense, and thus is strongly and even violently asserted and defended. Joey was "so afraid of going to the toilets, that for about four years of secondary school I never used the school toilets". This complete avoidance of bathrooms at school is not uncommon; it leads some trans youth to restrict what they eat and drink, and can cause significant physical health problems as well as affecting concentration and learning (McBride et al., 2020). Ultimately, lack of appropriate access to toilets means that trans students are prevented from full access to the education to which they have a right (Movement Advancement Project & GLSEN[1], 2017).

Further, many trans students are not allowed by their school to use the bathroom facilities they would prefer, including specifically in the UK (Horton, 2023a; Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020). This is delegitimising and exemplifies the inequitable treatment of trans youth compared to their cis peers. Further, bathroom access for trans students is often negotiated and – if not refused – only provided as a specific accommodation that the individual student must request; this is also reflective of the broader issue of reactive and individualised provision for trans students that refuses to problematise cisnormativity (Martino, Kassen et al., 2022; Horton, 2020). Trans youth therefore do not have the same freedom to use school facilities that is automatically granted to cisgender students, and instead must seek permission from school authorities to carry out essential bodily

[1] A US organisation that works to establish LGBTQ inclusion in schools. GLSEN was originally an acronym for Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

functions (Ingrey, 2018) – with teachers acting as "bathroom gatekeeper" (skelton, 2022, p. 263). In this way, cisnormativity reasserts itself in the face of potential disruption; the trans student is positioned as the abnormality, and may be considered for individual accommodation, effectively reinforcing the normativity of the existing structure rather than troubling it. Frequently, trans youth are required to use 'special' arrangements, such as toilets designed for disabled access or those used by teachers (T. Jones et al., 2016). These may be difficult and time-consuming to access (McBride et al., 2020), and can also act to hypervisibilise trans students – potentially making them a target for abuse when they use these facilities (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022).

Moreover, even when trans students are able to use gendered facilities in line with their identity, these continue to be spaces of heightened surveillance and policing of gender conformity, and safety is often contingent on the ability to 'pass' as legibly male or female (Woolley, 2017). Entering a gendered bathroom implicitly involves the self-declaration of one's gender (Juang, 2006) – and "cultural genitals" (Paechter, 2021, p. 613). The constant awareness of being observed and judged against cis norms is exemplified by Ingrey's (2018) example of one trans male student, who expressed concern that the sound of his urination sitting down could 'out' him through being noticeably different to that of a cis man (standing up). Corresponding problems have also been found when gender-neutral toilets are provided, with for instance non-binary students being reluctant to use them because this would risk outing them to their peers (Paechter et al., 2021). Additionally, Omercajic (2022) found that one school's all-gender bathrooms were quickly colonised by primarily white cis male students using them to socialise and vape – impeding the intended purpose of providing a safe space for trans and gender-diverse students. Thus, simply providing or 'allowing' use of appropriate facilities is insufficient and does not equate to actual access, without a concomitant institutional commitment to dismantling cisnormativity and heteropatriarchy embedded within school culture.

2.5. Curricular exclusion and epistemic injustice

Skelton (2022), researching how young trans children imagine an ideal education, tells us that their responses are "full of desire for greater access to knowledge about themselves and others like them" (p. 266). This is something that they are currently denied, reflecting a widespread problem; the majority of school curricula globally strongly reinforce binary cisgender norms and lack representation of trans lives and possibilities (McBride, 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022), again including specifically in the UK (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Horton, 2023a; Milsom, 2021).

Steele and Nicholson (2020) describe this cisnormative inequity in terms of Fricker's (2007) concept of *epistemic injustice*, highlighting its two distinct forms – namely *testimonial* and *hermeneutical*. Firstly, testimonial injustice occurs in the denial of credibility to the self-knowledge of trans children

– as their asserted identities are disbelieved, subordinated to the apparent authority of their assigned sex. Manifestations of this have been evident throughout the chapter thus far; in being misgendered, denied access to facilities, and otherwise having their genders delegitimised, trans students are "disqualified by others as a knower of their own experience" (Kassen, 2022). Secondly, hermeneutical injustice, as adapted by Steele and Nicholson, is applicable not only when there are simply no linguistic and discursive tools to conceptualise a person's experience, but also where access to existing resources is withheld – as is the case with the absence of trans knowledges in school (explicit and implicit) curricula. Thus, it is not just that trans children do not see themselves represented in educational content and environments, but significantly that they are denied the information and the means to identify and comprehend their own experiences – or to be *intelligible* to themselves (Kennedy, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021).

One consequence of this is that trans youth must instead find the information and language themselves to develop and understand their identities. As school staff frequently lack relevant knowledge (Carlile & Paechter, 2018), trans students often have to work out their identity before they can request support in school (Schmitt, 2023), with little space for questioning and gender exploration (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). They are also regularly expected to educate both teachers and peers (Paechter et al., 2021), which may be an unwanted, exhausting, and ongoing burden (Horton, 2023a).

Further, it is an educational injustice that trans and queer students miss out on the benefits of personally relevant and engaging curricular content – something that their cis and heterosexual peers can expect by default. Where LGB and (more rarely) trans-relevant content is included, this is often done in Othering and pathologising ways, which can actually reinforce cisheteronormativity instead of challenging it. For instance, it may only be covered as stand-alone lessons and separately from the main curriculum (Snapp, Burdge et al., 2015), or only in the context of discrimination and intolerance (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). It is also much more likely to be mentioned in sex and health education than other classes like maths, science, and arts subjects (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015) – in contrast to cisheterosexual perspectives which are assumed to be the natural foundation of all subjects.

Additionally, queer and trans content is rarely covered in a critical manner that engages with social justice and acknowledges systemic oppression (Schmitt, 2023; Snapp, Burdge et al., 2015). Simply mentioning (LGB and) trans people can have some disruptive potential, but to a much lesser extent than curricula which discuss and challenge cishetero norms and queer marginalisation (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015). The insufficiency of the former approach is exemplified by one student's experience, as related by Peter et al., (2016), that "[w]hen watching a video on the holocaust where they mentioned the killing of LGBT people, boys cheered at the idea" (p. 204). This incident, and

perhaps especially the fact that the cheering boys were not challenged on this, would only reinforce the normativity and apparent acceptability of violent anti-queer sentiment.

Moreover, trans students must regularly navigate marginalising and exclusionary practices within certain school subjects that are especially strongly gendered. Physical Education (PE) is one such example that often *depends* on two oppositional gender categories, enforcing binary segregated activities and limiting the possibilities for 'inclusion' of trans young people (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Neary & McBride, 2021). Additionally, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is regularly dominated by cisheteronormative descriptions of anatomy and sexuality, failing to address the educational needs of all students (Epps et al., 2023; Naser et al., 2022; Riggs et al., 2022).

Rather than altering these classes to be more inclusive, in both PE (Neary & McBride, 2021) and RSE (Horton, 2023a), several schools have been found to 'allow' trans students to simply drop out of this part of their education – "while continuing to teach their peers from a cisnormative curriculum that marginalizes and stigmatizes trans people" (p. 79). This is therefore another example of schools taking an individualistic approach that prioritises maintaining naturalised cis supremacy over equitably meeting the needs of trans students.

The fundamental cisheteronormativity of both subjects also creates an environment which facilitates queerphobic abuse. It is well documented that trans and queer youth often experience heightened discrimination and violence in PE and other sporting settings (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Devís-Devís et al., 2018). PE involves a particular focus on embodiment, regularly taking competitive forms that differentially value students' bodies and their performance and conformity to gendered ideals (Lynch et al., 2022). Similar issues can also apply to RSE; Horton (2023a) for instance describes findings that in UK primary schools, cisnormative lessons on puberty and human bodies were associated with increased harassment of trans children, legitimising invasive questioning from their peers.

In contrast however, inclusive curricula can have an important and positive impact. Kosciw et al. (2022) found that, although only 16.3% of the 22,298 US LGBTQ+ students that they surveyed reported having positive LGBTQ+ representations taught in class, those who did also fared better both academically and in terms of their wellbeing. Additionally, this curricular inclusion may also have influenced their peers' attitudes and behaviours; these students were significantly more likely to say that classmates were accepting of LGBTQ+ people. They also reported experiencing less sexuality-based or gender-based victimisation, and heard homophobic and transphobic comments less frequently.

2.6. Policyscapes

Different national and regional contexts have particular *policyscapes* regarding trans inclusion in schools (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018; Martino, 2022c). There is significant variation, from official mandates for support and protections, to for instance the proposed legal prohibition in Florida on school staff using trans students' chosen names and pronouns (Chudy, 2023). However, overall, effective policies appear to be relatively rare.

Firstly, schools often do not explicitly reference protections for LGBT+ students in their anti-bullying policies (Kosciw et al., 2022; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). Although there has been government-supported work done in the UK to tackle HBT (Homophobic, Biphobic, and Transphobic) bullying (Mitchell et al., 2016), funding for this was cut in 2021 (ILGA-Europe, 2022), and additionally such work may not have translated into all schools' approaches. Transphobia is particularly unlikely to be challenged; Stonewall's School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017) found that only 41% of students reported that their school opposed transphobic bullying. Further, research by UK charity Just Like Us found that a clear way to report anti-LGBT+ bullying was available for only 33% of LGBT+ students (Milsom, 2021).

Beyond anti-bullying frameworks, proactive and positive inclusion policies are particularly uncommon (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). In the US, the most recent GLSEN national school climate survey (Kosciw et al., 2022) found that only 8.5% of transgender and non-binary respondents reported that their school had official policies or guidance specifically supporting trans/non-binary students – down from 12.5% in the previous iteration in 2019 (GLSEN, 2021). These policies were often limited, primarily to (non-official) use of name and pronouns; only 64% protected preferred bathroom use, for instance, and only 40% sports participation. However, trans and non-binary students who did attend schools with such policies also reported less discrimination, were less likely to have missed school for safety reasons, and had a stronger sense of belonging to their school community – with a greater effect associated with a more comprehensive policy. This suggests that inclusive policies may be somewhat effective in improving school experiences for trans youth. Some benefit to such policies is also evidenced by Ullman's (2018) comparison of schools in New York City which had a strong official commitment to trans inclusion, to those which had a minimal anti-bullying stance; educators working at the former kind were much more confident in affirming and supporting trans students, as they were reassured by the institutional backing represented by the policy that doing so would not put them at professional risk.

In the UK, there is significant variation between the different nations. The Scottish Government (2021) has relatively strong trans-inclusive guidance, including supporting the use of names, pronouns, and bathrooms, as well as inclusion in gendered PE classes, based on the trans student's preference. This is in particularly stark contrast to the context in England, where government

ministers have explicitly advocated a trans-oppressive approach (e.g., Braverman, 2022). Whilst various local authorities, as well as the Crown Prosecution Service, had over the last decade produced their own trans-supportive guidance documents, in recent years these have been withdrawn due to campaigns by trans-hostile groups, leveraging legal threats and with mainstream media backing (Parsons, 2020). There is currently no specific national or statutory policy in England, but anticipated guidance by the Department for Education (DfE; Camden, 2023) is likely to align with the current government's position (Hansford, 2023a). This is also indicated by an advisory document published last year by a group of school leaders' unions and other school governance organisations (Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) et al., 2022) – which is heavily focused on a legal justification for excluding trans students in the name of 'protecting' their (cisgender) peers, emphasising that "a pupil's right not to be subject to discrimination because of gender reassignment does not necessarily amount to a right to be treated as being of the sex other than the pupil's birth sex" (p. 15).

Further, the absence of relevant policy in many schools leaves trans students uncertain about whether they will be supported or put at risk if they disclose their identity, and also means that staff are unprepared when they do. Schools often create such policies in direct response to specific known trans students; however, Paechter et al. (2021) found that students are in fact discouraged from coming out *due to* the initial lack of policy, creating a "vicious circle" (p. 704). This also facilitates an acceptability of cisnormativity and transphobia in school culture, as there is no perceived need to challenge it.

Additionally, where supportive policies do exist, in general they continue to rely upon cisnormative discourses – responding to the individual trans student as atypical, rather than attending to the need for institutional change (Horton, 2020; E.J. Meyer & Keenan, 2018). Guidance may also lack explicit reference to non-binary students and identities, restricting acceptable trans narratives and invisibilising the specific needs of different groups (Paechter et al., 2021).

Moreover, research has also highlighted that simply having supportive legislation or policy is not sufficient to ensure that it is enacted, and accordingly the impact is dependent upon implementation – which may vary by school and by staff member (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022; E.J. Meyer & Keenan, 2018). As Martino et al. (2019) point out:

> *policy processes, narratives and discourses, which are part of 'networked modes of governance' associated with any policyscape, are never static, but are continually mediated, mediatized and translated by key stakeholders such as advocacy/interest groups, school boards, principals, educators and students* (p. 322)

Notably, both aforementioned UK guidance documents (Scottish Government, 2021; ASCL et al., 2022) refer to the Equality Act 2010 as supporting their position on trans in/exclusion – but through

their different interpretative frames manage to reach contradictory conclusions. Bower-Brown et al. (2023) also highlight how schools' practices may be directed by (erroneous) assumptions about their legal obligations, perhaps influenced by dominant socio-political discourse; they relate one trans boy's experience of being told that he must have PE classes with the girls (and not the other boys) because "it's the law" (p. 80) – despite the actual lack of any such requirement.

Finally, inclusion policies may in practice act as a *substitute* for actual anti-oppressive work and change at an institutional level, and can be leveraged to obscure the persisting structural inequity (Ahmed, 2012; Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022). Schmitt (2023) gives an example of this through one Swedish student's experience:

> *As a nonbinary person of Color, Rakel problematized how in (school) education Sweden is presented as unambiguously good at social justice and that schools did not engage students in a deeper conversation on equity beyond the mandatory policies* (p. 100)

The framing of the school – and indeed the country as a whole – as "good at diversity" (p. 101) appears to position any criticism or suggestion that improvements remain necessary as unreasonable. For instance, Rakel describes how teachers cast zir as 'annoying' and 'difficult' because ze raised intersectional issues involving *both* gender and race.

2.7. Minority stress and intersectional inequity

Overall, cisnormative and trans-hostile school environments place constant strain and a cumulative burden on trans youth, and in many cases cause acute trauma with long-term impacts (Horton, 2023a). To conceptualise the effects of these chronic experiences of marginalisation, researchers have applied the gender minority stress framework (Testa et al., 2015) – both more broadly (e.g., Toomey, 2021) and specifically to school contexts (Horton, 2023c; Johns et al., 2021). Higher levels of such minority stress have been associated with greater negative impacts on the health of trans young people, both mental (Hunter et al., 2021; Green et al., 2022) and physical (Diamond et al., 2021; McQuillan et al., 2021). Discriminatory and victimising experiences have also been linked to high rates of trans students dropping out of school and missing significant amounts of their education (Horton, 2023a; Kosciw et al., 2022).

Further, Horton (2023c) found that pre-adolescent trans children were affected by gender minority stress in school through institutional discrimination, rejection from peers and staff, victimisation, and non-affirmation. Moreover, the cisnormative environment not only creates stressors, but also has a deleterious effect on factors that might otherwise protect against them. For instance, identity pride and self-worth in one's gender identity is a significant facet of resilience (Singh et al., 2011; Tan

et al., 2020). However, Horton shows that cisnormative school practices and culture actively undermined the children's sense of trans pride. In one example, a "young trans child had been explicitly banned from using the word trans to describe themselves at primary school, as though it was something shameful" (p. 205).

Literature has also highlighted the importance of attending to specific intersectional experiences, and the interaction of other dimensions of marginalisation with cisnormativity and transphobia. Indeed, cissexism is inextricably racialised; the imposition of a binary gender system was a key project of European colonialism (J. James, 2021). As Ahmed (2016) notes, "gender norms so often remain predicated on an unremarkable whiteness" (p. 23). Correspondingly, referring back to the aforementioned experience of Rakel, Schmitt (2023) argues that ze faces a particular dearth in support from teachers because, in embodying *two* axes of 'difference', ze cannot be entirely intelligible to them. One school counsellor strategically misgenders Rakel, Schmitt contends, as "a function of a cisnormative linear understanding of gender unmarked by race" (p. 102).

Hence, and following intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), it is not simply that multiply marginalised youth experience 'more' minority stressors in an additive fashion, but that they face *particular* stressors that are the emergent product of the specific intersection. This concept has also been applied to various other dimensions of difference; for instance, Schmitt (2023) also draws attention to fatphobia as another means through which trans students are targeted for failing to embody "cisnormative purity" (p. 105). Additionally, Kahn and Lindstrom (2015) discuss the interaction of disability and queerness, noting how both can be associated with a perceived incongruity with gender norms. For example, they relate how one student's autistic behaviours and preferences were targeted by peers through *queerphobic* aggression.

Lastly, it is also notable that skelton's (2022) participating trans children, in designing their ideal learning spaces, did not just focus on trans inclusion as a single issue – they wanted anti-racist schools, disability access, and provision of meals and transport, implicitly attending to the interrelation between these concerns. This is just one example of the way in which trans youth themselves are agentically and creatively responding to marginalising conditions, bringing valuable knowledge and experience to conversations of justice and educational change – a point on which I elaborate in the following section.

2.8. Trans youth agency and resistance

Ahmed (2016) captures the experience of persistent cisnormative stressors through her description of transphobia as "a hammering, a constant chipping away at trans existence". Yet, as she goes on to explain, this also produces the conditions of resistance:

> *To experience that hammering is to be given a hammer, a tool through which we, too, can chip away at the surfaces of what is, or who is, including the very categories through which personhood is made meaningful – categories of sex and gender, for instance, that have chipped away at us.* (p. 22)

Correspondingly, other literature has shown various ways in which trans youth navigate and cope with minority stressors – both cushioning blows through strategies of resilience, and wielding their own hammers in resistance. Thus, they demonstrate *situated agency* as they make choices that balance different contextual needs, including: "to protect themselves from physical and verbal harassment, maintain their sense of self-worth, and make things better for themselves and the trans students who followed them" (Hillier et al., 2020, p. 390). Yet, such choices inevitably involve compromises, as they are made within cisnormative constraints, often unsafe environments, and inequitable power relations. For instance, the aforementioned binary gender segregation of normative PE practices constrains trans students' agency, and thus they must often accept a threat to either safety or identity to protect against the other, or else may avoid PE classes entirely (Neary & McBride, 2021). These 'trade-offs' are also evident in strategies identified in other research – as just one example, the negotiation and (where possible) control over disclosure of trans identity (Bower-Brown et al., 2023) often involves balancing safety concerns with the access to support and affirmation that might be made available through coming out. Further, it has been argued that naming one's experience and existing as openly trans in itself resists school cisnormativity (D.A. Francis, 2023), yet simultaneously opens one up to potential harm, exemplifying the concept of *vulnerability-in-resistance* (Butler, 2016; McBride & Neary, 2021).

Additionally, an effective strategy appears to be what Bower-Brown et al. (2023) term *proactive protection* – accessing community connection and solidarity with other LGB+ and trans people and allies (see also Johns et al., 2021). This can include the creation of formal student groups at school, and produces both resilience through interpersonal support, and resistance through group activities and activism. McBride and Neary (2021) emphasise the *collective* nature of such expressions of trans youth agency, and the building of a social movement that moves beyond individual responses to isolated situations and stressors. This collective resistance, particularly where it integrates solidarity across various other axes of marginalisation, may be described in Ahmed's (2016) terms as "an *affinity* of hammers" (p. 23, emphasis added).

However, what is also evident throughout these works is that enacting such strategies and skills to navigate challenging and cisnormative environments is itself almost invariably stressful and burdensome for trans youth. As J. James (2021) relates, this work to refuse abjection "takes an incredible toll on their internal resources" (p. 125). Moreover, in some contexts the ability to use certain strategies is strongly constrained, such as where schools refuse the formation of LGBT+

student groups (McBride & Neary, 2021), or in primary schools where these are frequently infeasible for trans children who may be the only known queer student there (Horton, 2023c).

Ultimately, it is essential to problematise and deconstruct the institutional cisnormativity that produces the *conditions* of vulnerability for trans youth in education (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022; McBride & Neary, 2021). This is certainly not to deny their own agency or capacity to resist, or to uphold a pathologising narrative that problematises trans young people themselves. Rather, it is to acknowledge an ethical imperative to disrupt these conditions that constrain their agency and necessitate such significant compromises – following Horton's (2020) call for:

> *a shift in expectations and ambition for trans pupils, from aspiring for resilience and protection from violence and abuse, to aspiring for self-confident, secure pupils who are validated and represented both in daily school life and across the curriculum, children with equality of opportunity to their cis peers, pupils who can excel and thrive at school* (p. 13)

Correspondingly, and further demonstrating that the vulnerability of trans youth is produced contextually rather than being inherent, the positive impact of supportive and affirming environments has been clearly evidenced. For instance, trans youth who experience more gender affirmation, and who report higher perceived transition progress, have lower levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Russell et al., 2018; Thoma et al., 2023). Moreover, those who are supported to socially transition at age 14 or younger have consistently been found to demonstrate mental health and self-worth that is on par with their cisgender siblings and unrelated peers (Durwood et al., 2017; Ehrensaft et al., 2018; Gibson et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2016).

Moreover, in research with trans children and their supportive parents, Horton (2022a) found that a remarkable and positive change had occurred for the children after social transition. Before, waiting for affirmation and acceptance at home and at school, children experienced growing distress, sadness, and frustration. In clear contrast, they described "the happiness or 'euphoria' of being affirmed and living authentically", and parents noted that this significantly enhanced wellbeing had been both immediate and sustained. Notably, *in-school* affirmation had appreciably improved "willingness to go to school, enjoyment of school, and enthusiasm for social and extra-curricular activities" (p. 13), as well as educational attainment.

2.9. Intensified agency constraints in pre-adolescence and primary school

As is implicit throughout the preceding sections, trans children of all ages are constrained in their bodily and gender autonomy by their social position in relation to adults, to a large extent requiring the permission of parents and/or school staff to change aspects of their presentation, for instance,

or to access certain gendered spaces. However, this is particularly heightened for younger children, firstly reflecting the stricter adult control held over them in general – whereas adolescents, with increasing age, tend to be granted more independent or unsupervised access to spaces and information, and thus can exercise somewhat greater agency. It is also related to adult constructions of what childhood is and should be, and specifically the deeply ingrained belief that queerness is inherently corruptive of the child's assumed asexual innocence (Renold, 2006). Transness is therefore framed as *inappropriate* for children to know about and indeed to express, especially at primary school and below (Neary, 2023); they are "too young to be exposed to [it]" (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022, p. 84). Accordingly, even guidance for trans student support in primary schools frequently advocates only challenging gender stereotypes, without explicit reference to transness (Horton, 2020). In subsequent chapters (primarily Three, Seven, and Nine), I will expand in much greater detail on these dominant discourses of childhood, and how they affect attitudes and approaches to trans youth.

In line with such ideas, research about trans students in schools has often attended predominantly to secondary and equivalent settings, with a greater focus only more recently being drawn to primary and early years (Horton, 2023a; Neary, 2021). Work regarding younger children has also commonly been done through the perspectives of their parents, and indeed assumptions of age-inappropriateness can lead gatekeepers to refuse trans-relevant research in younger age group settings (Maughan et al., 2022). Yet, whilst educators may assume that trans and queer topics are simply not relevant to primary and early years (R.A. Marx et al., 2017; Warin & Price, 2020), research is now demonstrating not only young children's existing complex engagements with gender and sexuality, but also their capabilities to understand and respond positively to education about transness and gender diversity (Atkinson et al., 2023; Ryan et al., 2013).

Despite many young trans children indeed showing sophisticated understandings and articulations of their genders, and desires to be treated accordingly, their agency in this regard is regularly constrained; parents and other adults consistently refer to the child's age as a reason not to trust their asserted identity, and to mandate extreme caution in taking any action (Neary, 2023). Further, school staff who refuse students' requests to transition often cite concern for protecting and preserving the innocence of the *other children* – as either their own position, or one they anticipate from parents (Nash & Browne, 2021). Ultimately, whilst some primary schools do facilitate a student's transition, with substantial and wide-reaching benefits for the child (Horton, 2022a), invariably this relies on agreement and, frequently, ongoing advocacy from their parents (2020). Additionally, in many cases simply allowing social transition does not ameliorate the enduring harms facilitated by a persistently cisnormative and unsafe school environment (2023a).

2.10. The importance of teachers

Teachers hold a key role with the potential to interrupt educational cisnormativity (Mangin, 2022). Accordingly, Horton (2023c) emphasises the importance of educators recognising the impact of gender minority stress on trans students, and working proactively to reduce it such that these children might have the opportunity to thrive in education. Moreover, national-level (US) survey data also supports teachers' significance; GLSEN (2021) found that trans and nonbinary students who had a higher number of supportive educators felt less unsafe at school, had better self-esteem, and had higher GPAs (attainment scores).

Notably, supportive personal relationships with teachers are highly important for trans youth, who have a higher sense of school connection and belonging when they feel that their teachers care about and are personally invested in them (Ullman, 2022). Further, educators and especially school leaders are able to influence the majority of the marginalising aspects of school environments that have been discussed throughout this chapter. This includes school policies, curricular content (Schmitt, 2023), and gatekeeping access to gendered or alternative facilities (Horton, 2023a; skelton, 2022). They can also be instrumental in facilitating queer student groups, and hence trans young people's own collective resilience and resistance; McBride and Neary (2021) highlight how the ability of students to form and successfully sustain such groups is often dependent on the degree of support offered by school staff. Additionally, teacher intervention in microaggressions and violence has been identified as particularly valued by trans students. For example, in Bower-Brown et al.'s (2023) research, one trans boy said that teachers were "helpful with dealing with other students who misgender me" (p. 82). GLSEN (2021) also found that consistent and effective intervention by teachers in gender-based negative comments and anti-LGBT harassment and assault was associated with trans students feeling less unsafe in school. In contrast, both a *lack* of this intervention, and microaggressions or violence perpetrated by teachers themselves, are especially detrimental to trans youth and also model the acceptability of this behaviour to other students (Horton, 2023a; McGuire et al., 2010). Correspondingly, teachers' approaches to queerness can strongly influence the overall school culture; as Ullman argues, in many ways they "serve as the moral arbiters with respect to the framing and visibility of GSD [gender and sexuality diverse] subjectivities within school environments" (p. 160).

A final point to make here is that the attitudes and approaches of individual teachers and school leaders may be especially important in national and local contexts that lack mandatory and explicitly trans-positive policies. This is true of the UK (Horton & Carlile, 2022), and perhaps particularly in England, where depending on the position taken in upcoming DfE guidance it may become a question of how and whether educators are able to resist overtly trans-hostile requirements – as is already the case in certain US states (Ali, 2023; Chudy, 2023). Although the policyscape in the other UK nations appears more conducive to trans-affirmative provision – Scotland and Northern Ireland

have supportive government-approved guidance, and the Welsh government has committed to producing similar later this year – it is also the case that these policies are all (currently) non-statutory (Education Authority Northern Ireland, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2023). Overall, for the current context Bower-Brown et al. (2023) make an apt point in relating their finding that for trans secondary school students in the UK, "teachers had a unique authoritative power to either help or hinder them" (p. 82).

2.11. Existing knowledge on teacher attitudes and barriers

Previous research has found varied teacher approaches towards trans youth, both between and within schools. Although trans students can often identify at least one supportive adult at school, this is frequently inconsistent between staff and may not apply to the leadership team or administration (Kosciw et al., 2022). Correspondingly, Paechter et al. (2021) describe the "patchy" response of non-binary participants' UK schools to transphobic bullying – "with the chances of intervention depending on individual staff" (p. 704). Schmitt (2023) also highlights that the experiences with supportive adults described by Swedish school students were irregular and not entirely reliable – which "often positioned trans and nonbinary students as an exception and anti-oppressive education as optional" (p. 100).

Several studies have demonstrated that some teachers are explicitly trans-hostile and may actively victimise trans students. Bower-Brown et al. (2023) give recent examples of this in the UK, with one student describing her school's "openly homophobic and transphobic senior staff team", and another participant explaining that when some teachers insult and intentionally misgender him, other staff entirely dismiss his complaints: "they say that everyone's entitled to their own opinions" (p. 83). In Ireland, McBride & Neary (2021) relate from student participants that one teacher "called trans people an illusion", and that another "goes out of her way not to use the right pronouns and not use the right name as well" (p. 1096). Further, in research with educators themselves, Martino, Omercajic et al. (2022) found that a significant minority of those surveyed in Ontario "outrightly rejected trans inclusion and expressed a degree of transphobia and cissexism that was troubling" (p. 85); example comments insisted on the 'scientific' or religiously mandated truth of binary gender, equated transness to identifying as a cat, and described trans inclusion as "morally and ethically wrong" (p. 86).

More positively, many teachers do have supportive intentions and want to be inclusive of trans youth. Surveys of practising and pre-service teachers have found that attitudes towards trans students are on average reasonably positive, and are more positive in women (compared with men) and those with prior social contact with trans people (Gegenfurtner, 2021). However, these positive attitudes and intentions do not necessarily translate into comfort or confidence in working with

trans students (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017). It has been suggested that teachers need training, resources, and institutional and professional support systems to enable them to do so proficiently, and without fear of retribution (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017).

Moreover, the effectiveness of teachers' approaches is frequently limited by persistently cisnormative beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Indeed, teachers (and pre-service teachers) often fail to recognise that cisnormativity embedded in school practices and cultures is problematic or harmful – or even that they *are* in fact cisnormative (Blair & Deckman, 2020, 2022). Hence, they often understand inclusion to mean reactively accommodating and safeguarding individual known trans students, but remain invested in maintaining normative gender order in school practices and structures (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022; Smith & Payne, 2016).

Additionally, practising and pre-service teachers' ostensibly supportive attitudes often co-exist with Othering and dehumanising perceptions of trans students. Blair and Deckman (2019) found that pre-service teachers "created cognitive and emotional distance with trans students" (p. 1) and exceptionalised them through tropes of heroism or victimhood, positioning them as essentially different; the authors problematise such understandings as indicating "a deep barrier to empathy" (2022, p. 277). Further, R.A. Marx et al. (2017) found that even after relevant training (designed to develop school personnel as allies for LGBTQ+ students), whilst participants' knowledge improved and they also expressed concern for trans students' wellbeing, many "retained frames of understanding that relied on trans people as Other and that situated their roles as allies through the frameworks of protection and care" (p. 1).

Lastly, in work with trans children and their parents, Horton (2023a) highlights a common feeling that teachers and school leaders did not understand or take seriously the negative impact of omnipresent cisnormativity and transphobia – and hence blamed trans children themselves for marginalising experiences like being excluded and isolated by peers, rather than recognising how this was facilitated by the school culture. Returning to Ahmed's (2016) metaphor, cis educators, by virtue of their gender modality, are not directly subjected to and thus do not *have* to come into contact with the constant hammering of transphobia; thus, in the absence of their choosing to do so, to become "attuned to others who are stopped by what allows [them] to pass through" (p. 23), the aspects that they do see may seem minimal and isolated, and the reaction of trans students unnecessary or exaggerated.

2.12. Chapter conclusion: Investigating pathways to support

Ultimately, although schools and teachers often attempt to provide some level of support to trans students, genuinely trans-*emancipatory* and equitable approaches appear to be very rare (Horton &

Carlile, 2022). Previous literature has commonly identified the persistence of cisnormative approaches and a corresponding lack of appreciation that this is problematic, rather than simply natural and correct. Whilst teachers consistently express a desire for more training and guidance on working with trans students, research has also shown that even after relevant training that includes work on challenging microaggressions and cisheteronormativity, these cisnormative framings often persist (R.A. Marx et al., 2017).

Accordingly, the research reported in this thesis seeks to identify the barriers that may be preventing teachers from reaching an anti-cisnormative position, as well as positive pathways to such an approach, theoretically such that these might be targeted in effective training to facilitate teacher competence and confidence in creating equitable educational environments for trans students. In the following two chapters, I outline the theoretical and methodological approach that I have taken to address this question.

Chapter Three: Theoretical and Philosophical Framework

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I evidenced how the pervasive cisnormativity of school environments works to foreclose equitable educational provision for trans students – also highlighting the importance of teachers in this context. The present and subsequent chapters now outline, respectively, the frameworks and the methods through which this thesis addresses the specific research question identified – namely, how teachers may come to have particular (supportive or otherwise) approaches to trans students.

Initially, in this chapter I will set out the theoretical and philosophical framework, integrating critical realism with a reading of Foucault that suggests a shared combination of ontological realism and epistemological relativism. I demonstrate that in this way, a Foucauldian approach can explain how particular dominant discourses – whilst they may be at odds with the underlying ontological reality – are produced and come to function as 'truth' through the workings of power/knowledge and normalisation. I specifically examine three such discourses – those which, as I will demonstrate in Chapters Five to Seven, were identified in my research findings and analysis as salient lenses through which teachers' approaches to trans students may be understood. These are: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism.

3.2. Foucault and critical realism: Truth discourses are not ontological reality

In outlining this framework, my first point is to explain *critical realism* as a research paradigm that is ontologically realist and epistemologically relativist (Bhaskar, 1975/2008, 1979/2014). Being realist, as opposed to subjectivist, means that it asserts the existence of an objective or material reality independent of human perception. However, in contrast to a naïve realist or positivist position, critical realism's epistemological relativism means that it acknowledges the role of human interpretation in the construction of knowledge about this reality. Bhaskar thus delineates an ontological separation between three domains: the *real* generative mechanisms, structures, and causal tendencies; the *actual* occurrences of events; and the *empirical* experience and observation of these events. Positivism, in contending that accurate knowledge of reality can directly be obtained through observation and measurement, effectively conflates the empirical with the real; this relates to the epistemic and ontic fallacies (1986/2009) of conflating knowledge (epistemology) with being (ontology).

Of note here, Bhaskar positions critical realism in contrast to positivism whilst also highlighting the contemporary deconstruction of certain "fundamental assumptions of the positivist worldview"

(monism and deductivism; 1986/2009, p. 1). In fact, he argues that modern philosophy of science is "an *incomplete critique of positivism*" (emphasis in original) – which treats its rational epistemological developments as adjustments to existing ontologies (whether positivist or idealist), without accounting for their incompatibility. Indeed, "positivism, discredited but not dissolved, is merely the dominant historical attractor position in a plate with deeper alethic roots" (p. 3); its influence and ontological assumptions remain. Thus, Bhaskar's proposition is to complete the critique of positivism – hence its use as comparator – and advance a new form of realist ontology, which is able to support the anti-monistic and anti-deductivist gains.

Furthermore, in line with critical realism, Foucault also appears to express a combination of ontological realism and epistemological relativism. When he states, for instance, that "[t]ruth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" – he is not in fact making a subjectivist ontological claim, but rather is referring to *epistemological* (relativist) 'truth' in the sense of societal games[2] of truth – "the types of discourse which it accepts and *makes function as true*" (1980a, p. 131, emphasis added). As he clarifies:

> *by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true'* (p. 132)

Whilst the realist aspect of his work is arguably underdeveloped (Hardy, 2019), Foucault does explicitly distance himself from an anti-realist perspective:

> *This does not mean that there's just a void, that everything is a figment of the imagination. On the basis of what can be said, for example, about this transformation of games of truth, some people conclude that I have said that nothing exists – I have been seen as saying that madness does not exist, whereas the problem is absolutely the converse: it was a question of knowing how madness, under the various definitions that have been given, was at a particular time integrated into an institutional field that constituted it as a mental illness occupying a specific place alongside other illnesses.* (1984/1997, p. 297)

This position can in fact be understood in relation to Bhaskar's critical realism, which describes *intransitive* and *transitive* dimensions of the philosophy of science, and their respective objects: the (relatively) "unchanging real objects that exist outside the scientific process"; and "the changing cognitive objects that are produced within science as a function of scientific practice" (1989/2011, pp. 26-27).

[2] Whilst Foucault originally used the term 'regime' of truth to refer to this epistemic level, he later (e.g., 2014) replaced this with 'game' – changing his use of 'regime' to mean the practical obligations attached to the truth (Lorenzini, 2022).

In the natural sciences, intransitive objects are natural laws that would exist even if humans did not, like gravity or nuclear fusion. The analogue of such generative mechanisms for social sciences is located in social *structures and relations* (Bhaskar, 1979/2014). Regardless of any scientific influence in their creation, social (power) relations are still *existentially* intransitive – they nevertheless exist as what they are (H. Richards, 2018). Further, they are also *causally* intransitive; as Porpora (1993) contends regarding the example of capitalist wage relations, they "are emergently *material* in that they have an ontologically objective and socially consequential existence, whether or not any actors are aware of them" (p. 222, emphasis in original).

Two additional concepts in critical realism are important to explain this causal intransitivity of social structures: ontological stratification; and emergence. Firstly, stratification means that divisions between layers of reality are truly ontological, rather than arbitrary distinctions of scale. Further, a higher stratum (such as social structures) is existentially dependent on, but *not reducible to*, a lower one (such as individual actors). This is the idea of emergence (Bhaskar, 1979/2014). Thus, the social is more than the sum of its parts; it cannot be comprehensively understood through causal processes at the level of individuals. This is because the interactions of entities at one level generate novel properties at another (J.H. Miller & Page, 2007) – a point which applies to the natural as well as the social, as Gorski (2013) explains using the example of water:

> *It has causal powers (e.g., to extinguish fires) that are quite different from those of its constituent parts (i.e., hydrogen and oxygen). Water tends to extinguish fires. Hydrogen and oxygen tend to accelerate them.* (p. 664)

Hence, social structures have their own causally intransitive properties that exist separately from the influence of individual actors.

This in many ways appears to correspond with Foucault's concept of power as transcending the divide between structure and agency. For Foucault, power refers to power *relations*, which are exercised in every social and interpersonal interaction (1984/1997). Hence, power is not solely repressive, and it is not simply a top-down system directed by a single agent (or sovereign). Individuals have agency and intention at the local level, but although some have a greater ability to wield influence than others, no one person or group is responsible for the whole network of power and its strategies (1989a); it is the relations between potentially disparate actions that connect, interact, and organise to produce a system (1977). The *emergent* system constrains the actions that are available for individuals, and these actions then work to continually reproduce power and social norms (as 'truths'; 1978).

Accordingly, Foucault's games and discourses of truth can be understood in this sense to refer to intransitive social objects. Parenthetically, his *theories* are themselves *transitive* objects. Indeed, his position on power and knowledge entails that "discourses are produced and maintained separate

from the intentions of human agents and the individual meanings that agents hold about discourses" (Hardy, 2019, p. 8). In Foucault's (1984/1997) aforementioned example, his genealogy examined how madness had come to operate in this way as an intransitive discourse – a coming-into-being that involved the scientific discipline of psychiatry constructing knowledge of the initially transitive object of mental illness.

Crucially, Foucault's argument is that power and knowledge are *inextricable*; certain knowledges come to function as true not because they correspond to extra-discursive reality, but because they succeed in an omnipresent battle of power relations. Notably, "[t]here is no fundamental ontological affiliation between the reality of a discourse, its existence, its very existence as discourse that claims to tell the truth, and the reality of which it speaks" (2017, p. 221). Knowledge is always produced *within* this societal network of power relations – for instance, psychiatry as a knowledge "is linked with a whole array of institutions, economic requirements and political issues of social regulation" (1980a, p. 109). It is constructed within a scientific game of truth that dictates the rules of what counts as true.

Correspondingly, power is also upheld, exercised, and justified through the production of such knowledge. Significantly, knowledge about individuals and the population works to define 'normal' (and abnormal) – facilitating *normalisation* as a technique of power (Foucault, 1989b), and a mandatory classification of individuals (1989c). This 'normal' is constructed as an apparently true or natural human nature (1977, 1978). In this way, human subjects – or, their particular *kinds* of subjectivity – are also produced through discourse. To continue with the previous example, certain subjects are constituted as 'mad'; further, the workings of power produce in individuals the desire to construct themselves in normative and non-disruptive ways, and to thereby avoid the consequences (including institutionalisation) of being identified as abnormal – as mad.

For both Foucault and critical realism, just as the ontological stratum of social structure is emergent from individual actors, so too is the latter emergent from the former; subjects are dependent on and constrained by discourse, but they cannot be reduced to it (Bhaskar, 1979/2014). This irreducibility is suggested by Foucault in his emphasis on the agentic freedom that must exist for there to be power *relations* rather than complete one-sided control (1984/1997), and also in his later work on ethical self-constitution (1982). As explained by Hardy (2011), "subjects become examples of *constitutive emergence* – meaning they are neither mere discursive constructs (i.e. 'defined') nor ontologically distinct (i.e. physically/essentially unique)" (p. 68, emphasis in original).

To explain cisnormativity in these terms: through and within networks of power a form of scientific knowledge has been produced that defines male and female as binary categories of human subjectivity, initially based on empirical observations of anatomy and recursively reified in subsequent knowledge development. Under a positivist regime of truth, the empirical is conflated

with the real (ontological), and binary (cis) sex is made to function as truth, as common sense. Whilst individuals have the agency to construct themselves otherwise, they cannot escape their social context, in which the discourse of sex and gender norms work to position deviance (and thus, transness) as not only abnormal or undesirable, but as acting *outside truth* – as impossible and inherently false or illegitimate.

Finally, it is also important to highlight that epistemological relativism – which is what enables such a distinction to be made between discursive 'truth' and an underlying ontological reality – does not mean that all knowledge claims (or transitive objects) are equally valid. In critical realism, this point is termed *judgemental rationality* (Bhaskar, 1986/2009; Willis, 2023). Foucault correspondingly contends that the involvement of power relations in a person's expression of truth:

> *does not mean that what the person says is not true, which is what most people believe. When you tell people that there may be a relationship between truth and power, they say: 'So it isn't truth after all!'* (1984/1997, p. 298)

Accordingly, it *is* possible to assess the validity of a knowledge claim and the extent to which it may be likely to correspond to the real, but in doing so it is necessary to consider that all knowledge is contingently produced in a way that is influenced by power.

In the next chapter (Four), I will outline a methodological approach to investigating causality at the level of the real, that follows both critical realism and, arguably, Foucault's genealogies: using a *retroductive* inferential logic to work backwards from something that has been observed – in this case, teachers' different approaches to trans students – to investigate and theorise how it has, *contingently*, come to be that way.

However, the present chapter will first introduce in turn the three aforementioned truth claims that will become relevant to this investigation of causality: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism. In attaining hegemonic status, such truth discourses have not been required to demonstrate any actual correspondence with the ontological real – rather, it is through recursive power/knowledge relations and socio-culturally contingent games of truth that they have become intransitive forms of social structure and naturalised as 'true' knowledge or common sense.

3.3. Neoliberalism

3.3.1. Neoliberal governmentality: Definition and historical context

I am addressing neoliberalism firstly as the political and economic ideology, originating with the New Right and the American Chicago School (B. Williams, 2021), that has dominated British government and public policy since Thatcher's premiership (1979-1990)[3]. It also has a wide global influence across many states and international agencies (Navarro, 2007). Further, I am following Foucault's (2004/2008) conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a mode of *governmentality* – an idea that others have developed since his death in 1984 (e.g., Rose, 1999; P. Miller & Rose, 2008).

On this latter point, in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004/2008) Foucault presents *neo*liberalism as a contemporary example within his analysis of liberalism as governmental reason, the rationale behind a particular form of government. 'Government' here refers not to the institution, but to the activity, to "the methods by which human conduct is directed through a state administration" (p. 322). As Foucault explains, a fundamental principle of liberalism is the facilitation of individual freedom – expressed through a free market economy – by limiting the undue influence of the state. In the classical liberalism of the eighteenth century, this was considered a natural freedom that states should respect if they were to prosper; market forces and mechanisms of competition were believed to have a natural order that would be most efficient when left free from political intervention. However, *neo*liberalism, having emerged within a specific twentieth century context, is distinctive in that it uses this concept of individual freedom as an instrument *through which* states exert government (Lorenzini, 2018).

Both neoliberalism and its contemporary, the ordoliberalism of post-war Germany, arose in opposition to the unacceptable restriction on individual (economic) freedom that proponents believed was caused by the "excessive government" of states that had in the preceding decades moved towards social democracy and a more collectivist approach (Foucault, 2004/2008, p. 322). As Foucault outlines, the ordoliberals considered such state interventionism, and the corresponding absence of liberalism, to have enabled fascism and the Nazi rise to power. In response, and in contrast to the classically liberal approach that positioned a naturally free economy as the appropriate limitation of an already existing legitimate state, in the post-war context the re-establishment of individual freedom through the *facilitation* of a market economy was the very founding principle and purpose of the new German state. Following the ordoliberal belief that market forces do not occur naturally, government was considered justified in constructing the free market that was thought necessary for economic growth, and the state legitimised by social

[3] Albeit there is some debate over the characterisation of New Labour governments (1997-2010) as solely neoliberal, or whether they also integrated some social democratic features (e.g., Beech, 2017).

consensus around this common goal. Under this approach, the conditions to enable all individuals to participate in genuinely free market competition had to be maintained through "active, multiple, vigilant, and omnipresent" (pp. 159-160) social interventionism (such as healthcare and housing policy).

Neoliberal ideology was likewise presented as a reaction to 'excessive government', but specifically in American and British contexts; in the latter, Thatcherism arose in rejection of the post-war welfare state. Whilst neoliberalism does purport to similarly prioritise individual freedom through facilitating a market economy and ostensibly creating a smaller state (B. Williams, 2021), unlike ordoliberalism it extends the economic competition rationality to *all* social domains (Foucault, 2004/2008). It is therefore actively opposed to redistributive policies; inequality is an inherent and desirable part of this system wherein everything is a 'free market' in which people must be motivated to compete.

Correspondingly, the arguments which have become naturalised in favour of neoliberalism are twofold: first, that welfare state intervention was an unacceptable restriction on individual freedom; and second, that the withdrawal of such social intervention is *necessary* for economic survival, citing for instance the 'inflationary crisis' and state debt as evidence of the failure of these policies (Davies et al., 2006). However, this framing of inevitability obscures how neoliberalism has been intentionally propagated for the purpose of effectively governing populations (Cruickshank, 2016). Following a Foucauldian theory of power that mediates between structure and agency, it is not that contemporary neoliberal systems were entirely pre-designed, yet various groups have evidentially (e.g., Crozier et al., 1975) taken actions that are "more or less considered and calculated" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790) in service of bourgeoisie interests and governance, and in response to progressive and radical ideas that threatened their dominant position (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Accordingly, and despite its claims to the contrary, the neoliberal state retains techniques of direct government. The 'small state' principle is used to justify the removal of redistributive interventions, but simultaneously neoliberal policy enacts its own forms of interventions that benefit bourgeoisie interests, claiming that this supports free markets, the economy, and eventually the rest of society through 'trickle-down economics' (B. Williams, 2021). Moreover, it combines these with the *indirect* techniques that are the hallmark of neoliberal governmentality – facilitating government through individual freedom, through responsibilised subjects who govern *themselves*.

This indirect government is achieved by reconceiving the individual as neoliberal *homo economicus* – as a rational-economic actor whose freedom is an obligation of personal responsibility (Rose, 1999) to make rational choices based on cost/benefit analysis. This decision-making logic is expected across all domains, including those previously considered social rather than primarily economic (Foucault, 2004/2008). The state-citizen relationship is thereby shifted, as the former "seeks to

reduce the social, political and economic investments and risks typically assumed by government, and transfer these risks through responsibilisation onto individuals" (Pulsford, 2019, p. 347). That is to say, the state's purpose is no longer to provide for its people, but rather to establish conditions – to "invent market-shaped systems of action" (Lemke, 2001, p. 197) – which facilitate individuals exercising free choice and providing for their own needs. Hence, state and collective responsibility are rejected; adverse life experiences and outcomes are attributed to individual failure in decision-making and action, to poor choices by those who fail to take advantage of the free market, rather than to systemic factors or inequality. This is the logical result of a system in which individuals are responsible only for themselves (and their families), in which people's fates are "uncoupled from one another" and linked only to their own personal abilities and effort (P. Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 96).

In this context, neoliberal governmentality is enacted not by controlling subjects directly, but instead by manipulating the environment within which their 'free' choices are made. The state encourages people towards desirable behaviours by altering the relative costs and benefits of different actions, based on the reasoning that rational decisions should be predictable – at least at the population level (Foucault, 2004/2008). Neoliberal freedom is therefore an "artificially arranged liberty" (Lemke, 2001, p. 200) within a state-regulated environment. However, with the market presenting seemingly unlimited options, decisions made by individuals are perceived to be the organic result of their own desires (Lorenzini, 2018), and the consequences solely their own responsibility.

Yet, these individual desires are shaped by power/knowledge, or in terms more latterly favoured by Foucault, by "the obligations that derive from the truth claims established within a given game of truth" (Lorenzini, 2022, p. 549). As P. Miller and Rose (2008) explain, "the injunctions of the experts merge with our own projects for self-mastery and the enhancement of our lives" (p. 25). The neoliberal regime achieves this "binding [of] the individual to the manifestation of truth" (Foucault, 2014, p. 99) at least in part through moralisation; the "virtue ethics of the market" (M. Cooper, 2017, p. 63) ties a person's moral worth to the economic rationality of their actions (Lemke, 2001). Accordingly, moral virtue is associated with entrepreneurial subjectivity, self-sufficiency, and individual financial and competitive success (Rose, 1999). Notably, it is *not* affiliated with collective responsibility; Thornton (2015) argues that "[t]his shift has effectively blunted the egalitarian concern for social justice and gender equality" (p. 75).

3.3.2. Neoliberal education: Students and teachers governed through self- and coercion-technologies

In reconstructing education as one such domain governed by economic rationality, neoliberalism works to discursively transform how people think about schooling, its purpose, and what constitutes 'good' teaching and learning (Apple, 2017). Whilst previous welfare state notions of education held

it as a common good, valuable to society through enabling all members to contribute, neoliberal policy instead constructs it as a commercial service to be bought and sold like any other (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Education is therefore a product that individuals are responsibilised for choosing and obtaining (Connell, 2013a), and schools are responsibilised for 'selling' and thereby competing for students and funding (Ball, 2018; G. Thompson et al., 2021). The role of the state is to facilitate a (quasi-)market within which these roles can be exercised – notably, it is not to itself ensure a good quality education for all, and certainly not an equal one. Indeed, as with all neoliberal 'freedom', this is a shifting of responsibility that inherently privileges those who are already most advantaged, thereby increasing inequalities at both the individual (Simpson & Smith, 2011) and institutional level (Greany & Higham, 2018; National Education Union, 2022). This system also justifies the very inequalities that it creates, framing them as the fair result of individual deficit (B. Francis & Mills, 2012).

In fact, such inequalities are entirely consistent with the purpose of the education system for the neoliberal state – namely an economic and governmental investment. It is about producing students as productive members of the future workforce, and thereby securing the state's competitive position in a globalised marketplace (Clarke et al., 2021). Moreover, it is also about shaping young people into governable and self-governing subjects, who are invested in their individual freedom (Davies & Bansel, 2007) – binding them to the neoliberal truth, and naturalising the obligations associated with such truth, as defined within a regime that moralises individualised economic and competitive success (see Foucault, 2014). Accordingly, as Bradbury (2019) demonstrates, from the very start of schooling in England, the 'ideal' child subjectivity is constructed as a "little neoliberal" (p. 321) – through policy and assessment frameworks that value self-regulation, self-improvement, and making 'good' learning-related choices. Further, students are encouraged to value individualism over more collectivist ideals, within "educational institutions [that] have become reterritorialized with business-driven imperatives that legitimize the symbolic capital of entrepreneurial and individualized selves" (Lakes & Carter, 2011, p. 110).

Correspondingly, the purpose of education for students is predominantly framed as preparation for future work, and as the means to obtain the necessary credentials to compete for access to university and careers (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Dadvand, 2022). Hence, it is about developing their *human capital* (Hastings, 2019) – their (marketable) knowledge, abilities, and achievements – and optimising themselves as a resource and product which can be used to obtain (economic) value (Lorenzini, 2018). These forms of human capital become integrated with students' own desires, associated with the (future) financial security and success that is considered a moral responsibility and necessary to individual worth – to provide for themselves and not depend on others, as neoliberalism "demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal" (Butler, 2015, p. 14) and "reconstitutes any dependence on the state as a morally lesser form of being" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 251).

However, education under neoliberalism does not rely solely on students accepting responsibilisation in this way. Indeed, Clarke (2023) argues that the success of neoliberalism requires its collaboration with neoconservatism, albeit unacknowledged. Social conservatism, with its espousal of 'traditional' values, shares a common ambition with neoliberalism, which is ideologically opposed to the redistributive principles of social justice. Accordingly, the inequalities perpetuated are not solely tied to economics; as Apple (2017) contends, they are part of a wider "attack on egalitarian norms and values" (p. 271) in which "[c]ultural struggles and struggles over race, gender, and sexuality coincide with class alliances and class power" (p. 272). Yet, as Foucault (1980c) explains, from a governance perspective the bourgeoisie are not so much interested in the specific contents of cultural norms and values as they are in the associated *techniques* and apparatuses of control. In fact, as will become clear, both of the other truth discourses of interest to this thesis (sex/gender essentialism and childhood innocence) are utilised in this way. Accordingly, the neoliberal-neoconservative collaboration facilitates efficacious government of students through, as Clarke identifies, authoritarian school cultures that simultaneously claim to promote individual freedom, and also dictate micro-details of acceptable clothing, appearance, and behaviour – in alignment with gendered and otherwise dominant norms, and enforced by constant surveillance and strict discipline policies. Such cultures are also naturalised as a necessity for obtaining good results and for a school's reputation, and also to prepare students for future economic productivity. Correspondingly, Clarke's metaphor of the authoritarian neoconservatism as the 'stick' to neoliberalism's 'carrot' could be interpreted to mirror Foucault's own explanation of the effectiveness of governmentality – that it arises from "the subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies" (1993, p. 204).

Moreover, teachers and their institutions are similarly governed through such combined technologies. Firstly, the 'autonomy' that neoliberal education policy offers to schools functions as responsibilisation (G. Thompson et al., 2021); given control over their own budgets, leaders must make best use of this limited funding to successfully compete within the school market – in contrast to the more collaborative approach that being grouped under local authorities may previously have enabled. Thus, resource allocation tends to follow market demands, because to do otherwise would bring substantial risk for a school that is made solely responsible for the consequences.

Significantly, within a regime of *performativity*, this market competition is facilitated by external accountability measures of education 'quality' that are primarily defined not by pedagogical values, but by standardised assessments and student attainment of credentials (Ball, 2003). Under the "factory-based model of performance management that is high-stakes testing" (2018, p. 220), schools are therefore incentivised – if not effectively *required* – to prioritise specific measurable criteria as defined by neoliberal policy (Gaches, 2018). These assessed criteria align with the knowledges granted legitimacy and value within a neoliberal regime of truth, and especially focus on

certain subjects like science and maths that are "equated with the potential of enabling future economic productivity" (Ingleby, 2021, p. 33).

Yet, performativity too is not only coercive, but arguably also attempts to inculcate self-technologies through shifting teacher subjectivity (Ball, 2003) – endeavouring to supplant the profession-led alignment with humanistic values and public service in favour of a new teacher subject for whom "cold calculation and extrinsic values predominate" (Marshall & Ball, 1999, p. 81). Accordingly, it works to replace trust in teachers' own professional judgement with approved standards against which they must justify every aspect of their practice with documentation and data (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022; Mockler & Stacey, 2021). The complex expert system underlying quality teaching and learning is by necessity simplified to facilitate this external accountability (Stacey et al., 2022; Lindqvist et al., 2009), challenging the ability of the teaching profession to internally define and implement good pedagogy (Salton et al., 2022). Schools and teachers are given 'objective' scores that claim to represent such concepts as teaching quality, and through performative technologies these measures actually come to *redefine* the concepts (Englund et al., 2019). The teacher's role is thereby technicalised, deemed successful only in terms of the test results their students produce (de Saxe et al., 2020). Clarke (2023) describes this as "contemporary education policy's instrumentalization of teachers, as tools for producing ever-improving levels of achievement and ever-rising test scores" (pp. 8-9). Moreover, this redefinition of teacher subjectivity and role is also facilitated by changes in training to align with the external accountability measures that they will be required to meet, to the exclusion of trans and queer equity work; as Gilbert and Gray (2020) contend, "[t]he increasing standardisation of teacher education also means that possibilities for learning and teaching that engage gender, sexuality and identity are squeezed out in favour of more technical aspects of teaching" (pp. 1-2).

3.3.3. Subjugated trans knowledges

In line with this, the cis – and otherwise – normative nature of school curricula (McBride, 2021; Milsom, 2021) is also naturalised as a neutral consequence of market demands, apparently reflecting the most legitimate and economically useful knowledges. However, this obscures that these particular knowledges have not achieved this dominance through some natural alignment with the ontological real, but through struggle and the active subjugation of other knowledges (Foucault, 1980c); it disguises the structural injustice perpetuated by the corresponding curricula that facilitate access only to dominant cultures and social experiences (Kotzee, 2017), and deny marginalised groups a culturally relevant education – an issue described in section 2.5 using the terminology of epistemic injustice.

In fact, trans knowledges can be understood as *subjugated knowledges* in both forms of these that Foucault (1980c) outlines. Firstly, there are "the historical contents that have been buried and

disguised" (p. 81) – the trans lives and research erased from history and indeed from academic curricula – thereby facilitating the contemporary discreditation of transness and transition (especially in children) as 'new' and 'experimental' (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Riggs et al., 2021), and further naturalising the cis norms which provide apparatuses of control for neoliberal governmentality. This form of subjugation is exemplified, for instance, by the expunction of Magnus Hirschfeld's pioneering research and activism regarding homosexuals, 'transvestites', and medical transition; Hirschfeld's *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Research), opened in 1919, was destroyed by the Nazis in 1933 (Dose, 2014). This knowledge began to be rediscovered (in Foucault's terms, *insurrected*) around the 1980s, yet remains obscure; images showing the contents of the institute's large and unique library set alight are some of the most well-known pictorial representations of Nazi book burnings, but their context is rarely identified (Schillace, 2021).

The second form of subjugated knowledges are those "that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault, 1980c, p. 82). Accordingly, considered simply experiential rather than qualifying as truth under a normative scientific regime, in the school context trans knowledges are regularly positioned solely in terms of 'diversity' work; they are not considered academic in the same way as the cis perspectives that are integrated across the whole wider curriculum and also the standardised test content that neoliberal policy uses to delimit what is worthwhile learning.

Moreover, in current political discourse even this limited acceptance of trans knowledges is increasingly challenged, by socially conservative and anti-trans actors who seek to defend the dominance of cissexist knowledges by delegitimising transness as non-scientific 'ideology'. A particular focus has been placed on RSE; a review into the teaching of this subject in England has recently begun on the instruction of the prime minister, in response to claims by a group of MPs that, for instance, "even primary school children are being indoctrinated with radical and unevidenced ideologies about sex and gender" (Woolcock, 2023). At an evidence-gathering session for this review, invited representatives of explicitly anti-trans organisations asserted that "[g]ender identity is a contested belief system" that is "not based on evidence, it's not based on facts", and that the possibility of being trans is "misinformation" that "[s]chools should be challenging […] not reinforcing" (Perry, 2023). In line with Foucault's (1980c) argument, trans knowledges are subjugated – and in fact framed as harmful impositions on the realm of 'facts' that schooling should apparently be – through being positioned as lacking the scientific credentials to have been included in the curriculum based on legitimate merit, as cisnormative knowledges are assumed to have been.

This asserted meritocracy is used more broadly to legitimise existing curricula and school culture, and conversely to frame the alternative approach of structural-level change as an unjustified intervention that would unfairly disadvantage dominant groups. This is demonstrated, for instance,

in resistance to curricular decolonisation, as expressed by Nick Gibb (Minister of State for Schools) opposing the integration of Black British history into the national curriculum:

> *We will not create a more harmonious, tolerant and equal society through promoting a curriculum based on relevance to or representativeness of any one group. […] A curriculum based on relevance to pupils is to deny them an introduction to the 'best that has been thought and said'* (in Weale, 2021)

Gibb asserts here that the existing, white-dominated curriculum is such simply by merit, because it is genuinely the "best that has been thought and said" – denying the inequitable power/knowledge relations and the subjugation of Black knowledges that have produced it. In contrast, Black knowledges are reduced merely to 'representation', and denied proper academic status. Decolonisation – as indeed with anti-cisnormative actions – would therefore be considered an active (redistributive) intervention that inappropriately distorts the market, and so it is dismissed as 'woke'[4] ideology, not equity.

3.4. Sex/gender[5] essentialism

3.4.1. Introductory definition

Corresponding with this active subjugation of trans knowledges is the second truth discourse of relevance to this thesis – namely, essentialism as the dominant contemporary understanding of sex/gender. This is the idea that the categories of men and women are each defined by a distinct innate and immutable essence; they are oppositional, mutually exclusive, and the only two legitimate gender categories. The defining 'essence' is primarily considered to be biological, with "gender as a binary phenotypic expression of an underlying genotype" (Klysing, 2020, p. 253).

The discourse of essentialism is produced through the workings of power/knowledge as the apparent 'truth' of individual (male or female) subjectivity (Foucault, 1978). Yet, not only is it flawed even under the rules of a scientific game of truth (Meynell, 2012), but the normatively accepted obligations attached to it as 'truth' (Foucault, 2014; Lorenzini, 2022) also validate the unequal treatment and denigration of the 'abnormal' – those who fail to meet these gendered obligations. Correspondingly, the claim to inherent opposite gender essences is used to justify different roles and

[4] A contemporary misappropriation of the term 'woke' – from its origin with Black American leaders encouraging Black people to be awake to racial oppression (Bayne, 2022), to pejorative use dismissing social justice advocacy as "the tenderminded desire to engineer society to mollify individuals who believe themselves to be the victims of discrimination" (Ward, 2021, p. 244).
[5] I use 'sex/gender' here because, as I go on to explain, disputing the normative 'truth' of essentialism involves disputing the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. However, for most of the thesis I use the words individually, primarily for textual fluency.

expectations as simply the natural consequence of biology; non-normative individuals are therefore positioned as disordered or failures of proper human development. The association between essentialism and inequity has also been demonstrated empirically; for instance, belief in a biologically essentialist explanation for gender differences has been shown to increase support for gender stereotypes and unequal gender hierarchy (Saguy et al., 2021), and to predict opposition to same-sex parent families (Ching & Wu, 2023). Further, reading manipulated texts evidencing gender essentialism has been found to decrease the extent to which a person attributes inequality to discrimination or unfair treatment, leading them instead to support explanations of inherent differences between groups inevitably producing differential outcomes (Klysing, 2020). Finally, gender essentialism has also been directly associated with increased prejudice towards trans people (Ching & Xu, 2018) and opposition to trans civil rights (Tee & Hegarty, 2006).

In this section, I will also go on to contend that such essentialism is in fact reinforced by common interpretations of a social constructionist explanation of gender, despite this frequently being considered the 'opposite' argument; by separating sex and gender into distinct concepts, but framing *only gender* as a social construct, such interpretations reify binary sex categorisation as an apparently natural biological phenomenon (of which gender is the cultural interpretation). Such a position therefore purports to be trans-inclusive, whilst maintaining the essentialist truth discourse and thus the governance that this facilitates. However, I will also conclude by expounding a radically anti-essentialist understanding of sex/gender as construction, and furthermore by reconciling this with the need to do justice to the materiality of trans phenomenological experience – providing a means to resist the essentialist truth discourse and thereby move towards trans-emancipatory approaches.

3.4.2. Transnormativity, and the sex/gender distinction

Indeed, culturally dominant narratives of transness ultimately work to reinforce cisnormativity. Versions of such narratives are often presented as trans-*inclusive* explanations, but in retaining the 'truth' of essentialist binary sex categorisation, they in fact undermine genuine trans legitimacy. Such prevailing accounts can broadly be understood through the concept of *transnormativity* – outlined by A.H. Johnson (2016) as a framework that "structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is based on medical standards" (p. 465). It has also been described as an alternative narrative to the master narrative of cisnormativity (Bradford & Syed, 2019) – through which a subset of trans people can claim legitimacy through presenting a specific version of transness.

Accordingly, for their identity claims to be considered valid (in such contexts that allow for this as a possibility), frequently trans people must present a transnormative subjectivity. Medical institutions, in an example of (Foucauldian) biopower, enforce such narratives as a prerequisite to access the medical means of transition that they gatekeep (Johnston, 2013). Although there has been some

degree of (trans-influenced) change in these medical models over time, to a large extent trans people have been required to affirm the expected diagnosis criteria or else be denied treatment (Riggs et al., 2019). Informed by shared community knowledge, it is therefore regularly a strategic choice to enact such transmedicalist scripts when navigating medical settings (Konnelly, 2022; S. Stone, 2006). However, this also acts to facilitate the reproduction and reification of transnormative power/knowledge.

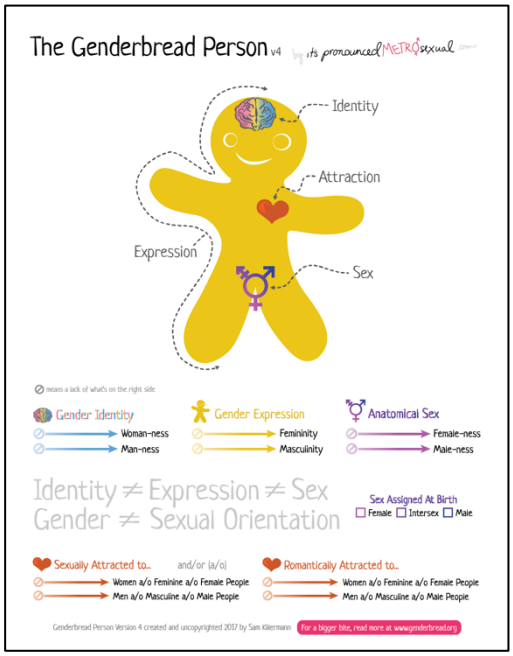
The concept of being 'born in the wrong body' is a foundational aspect of these medical definitions and diagnosis criteria – from Harry Benjamin's (1966) transsexualism to the modern DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; see McQueen, 2014) and ICD (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health Problems; see Engdahl, 2014). The premise is that a person is 'born' (assigned) as one binary sex, and then wishes to change as much as possible about their body in order to 'become' the other binary sex. This narrative "privilege[s] gender reassignment surgery as the culmination of a process of self-discovery confirming the gender binary" – the ultimate ambition being to 'complete' (medical) transition, enabling "erasure of the transgender past" (Putzi, 2017, p. 423) and (re)assimilation into cis norms. Transness is constructed as an individual 'problem' with an individual solution (transition), thus placing the responsibility for action or change on the trans person, and not cisnormative society.

This affirmation of cisnormativity is problematic from a trans-emancipatory perspective, but it also makes the 'wrong body' concept effective in influencing a general audience – as a narrative that to a large extent aligns with the rules of the (cisnormative) game of truth and therefore appears logically possible. Accordingly, it has become a prevalent trope in Anglo-American media (Lovelock, 2017).

There appear to be two main interpretations of the 'wrong body' narrative (Bettcher, 2014). Whilst one may generally be considered more inclusive or progressive, in fact both produce the same problem of naturalising sex categorisation. The first version may in some ways be more overtly essentialist as it does not dispute the truth of the assigned sex, constructing (physical) transition as literally the process of *becoming* the 'opposite' sex. In this framing, a trans man for instance would be considered female until such a point that he attained a sufficiently 'male' body through hormone treatment and surgery. Of course, in strict gender essentialist terms, he would always remain immutably female regardless of medical treatments; chromosomal sex is often cited as justification for this viewpoint.

Figure 1

'Genderbread Person'



On the other hand, the second version of the 'wrong body' narrative is more often presented as affirmatory to trans identity. This version is premised on separating 'sex' and 'gender' out into two distinct concepts. This can be seen in frequently used educational resources such as the 'Genderbread Person' (Figure 1; Killermann, 2017). As the diagram shows, in this model gender (identity) is in the mind, and sex is of the body, or 'anatomical', effectively positing a mind/body Cartesian dualism.

Notably, this dualism is strongly contested, both biologically – given that the brain both is already 'sexed' (for example through neural sex hormone receptors), and is altered physically through social experience (Serano, 2017) – and theoretically, as Chu (2017) explains, "the very thing that feels itself to be trapped in the wrong body *is nothing other than the wrong body itself*" (p. 149, emphasis in original).

Moreover, the problematic nature of this sex/gender distinction can be made further apparent by identifying that it effectively relies on the very same premise as anti-trans, 'gender critical' positions, which are based in a form of gender artifactualism. Gender artifactualism is a term introduced by Julia Serano (2013) to describe the belief that gender is entirely and only a social construct. The 'gender critical' position (mis)uses this to contend that (assigned) sex is the material, fixed physical reality, whereas gender identity is immaterial subjective 'feelings' and entirely a social artifact. The

aim is purportedly a feminist defence of 'sex-based rights', but ultimately reaches the same position as a biologically essentialist gender determinism.

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC; n.d.), for instance, "maintains that there is a difference between sex and gender – with sex being a biological fact of having certain chromosomes and bodily organs, upon which gender is inscribed." An essentialist definition of sex that refers to "women's biological realities (e.g., weaker physical strength compared to men and ability to become pregnant and bear children)" is used to justify the exclusion of trans women, a position that is indeed supported rather than contested by the framing that "some people have a gender identity that does not conform to their sex". This rationalises the statement, "WRC does not consider the right for women's organisations to choose who they consider women in the context of their service provision capabilities to be transphobic". It is considered reasonable that certain groups have the authority to "choose who they consider women" because this is framed as simply accepting the 'truth' of biological sex, and apparently inarguable facts cannot be transphobic.

Furthermore, by reifying the material primacy of the assigned sex, and separating out the 'immaterial' gender identity – even if this latter identity is ostensibly also to be respected – a discursive context is created in which anti-trans individuals can logically claim simultaneously to oppose *transness*, and also to have no desire to harm trans *people* (whom they position as 'trans-*identified*' but actually their assigned sex). Under this framework, it is apparently not contradictory to promote the eradication of transness and simultaneously claim compassion for trans people. Effectively, transness is framed as merely a concept or behaviour that is external to and separable from the person, and that is inherently negative and damaging. As the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention (2022) states:

> *[w]hile members of the gender critical movement may argue that they do not seek to kill the physical bodies of transgender people, they do openly seek to eradicate transgender identity from the world, following a genocidal logic similar to the US, Canadian, and Australian boarding schools that sought to 'kill the Indian, [and] save the man.'*

This is in some ways an ontological problem; it is contended that trans people do not truly exist in the form that they claim, but instead are confused or deceitful members of their assigned sex. Accordingly, Janice Raymond infamously declared in *The Transsexual Empire* (1979/1994) that "the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence" (p. 178). In one more recent example of such rhetoric, vocal 'gender critical' activist Helen Joyce advocated political action to this end:

> *while we're trying to get through to the decision-makers, we have to try to limit the harm and that means reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition. That's for two reasons – one of them is that every one of those people is a person who's been*

> *damaged. But the second one is every one of those people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world.* (quoted in Kelleher, 2022a)

Joyce claims compassion for "the people who've been damaged by it – the children who've been put through this", who she states, "deserve every accommodation we can possibly make". However, her attempt to position herself as benevolent towards those who have transitioned remains clearly in conflict firstly with her assertion that all trans people are "a huge problem" regardless of "whether they're happily transitioned", and secondly with her call to reduce the number of people who transition – something that would be impossible to do without enforcing the "social or literal death" that Butler (2004, p. 8) points out is the consequence of making trans lives unliveable.

Significantly, this rhetoric also demonstrably influences politicians, including government ministers, who have the authority to enact policies that seriously harm trans lives. For instance, in 2018, the increase in AFAB (assigned female at birth) trans children referred to NHS gender identity services was met with "real and genuine concerns" by the then equalities minister Penny Mordaunt, who ordered that research be carried out into the reasons for the "volume of girls [sic] referred to trans services" (Milton, 2022a; see also Hurst, 2018). The implication is that a rise in 'female' young people identifying as trans is a worrying phenomenon that necessitates intervention. Furthermore, this same idea is evident in the language used by Suella Braverman (then attorney general) in a 2022 speech advocating that schools refuse students' social transition. Her arguments are premised on the assumption that assigned sex directly reflects a fixed "biological reality" that retains primacy and cannot change, regardless of a person's identity, medical treatments, or acquisition of a Gender Recognition Certificate. She describes trans students, therefore, in terms such as: "a biologically male child, who identifies as a trans girl"; and "a child of the opposite biological sex who identifies as transgender".

With regard to the 'wrong body' narrative, whilst this is commonly presented as trans-inclusive, the issue is that through supporting the distinction between sex and gender, it ultimately *also* reifies biological essentialism. Its argument is effectively the reverse of the 'gender critical' position; it claims that it is *gender* (in the mind) that is primary and immutable (e.g., Putzi, 2017), and the sex of the body that is 'wrong' and should be changed to align it with the 'authentic' gendered self. However, rather than de-essentialising the binary categorisation of traditionally 'sexed' bodily characteristics, this explanation of transness retains the 'biological truth' of the assigned sex – "an essentialism of genital materiality that disputes the realness of transgender experience" (Engdahl, 2014, p. 267). This refuses first-person authority (Bettcher, 2009) to the trans person over their own embodied experience. Whilst a trans person's identified gender may be recognised, and the appropriate name and pronouns used in reference to them, the transnormative 'wrong body' concept allows this to not challenge – and indeed even to reinforce – the simultaneous perception that they are still 'really' their assigned sex. Yet, in cisnormative society, to achieve semi-intelligibility

and institutional acceptance (Riggs et al., 2019), trans identity claims are *required* to be presented through this kind of framework – reifying the 'truth' of the essentialist subjectivity, and precluding the possibility of genuine trans legitimacy and equity.

Ultimately then, such narratives retain the naturalisation of the binary classification system, under which the majority of people are still unproblematically categorised as male or female based on particular sex characteristics. It is a significant problem that the premise of these dominant 'supportive' explanations for transness is therefore the same sex essentialism that anti-trans activists ideologically and rhetorically rely upon; this shared 'truth' legitimises anti-trans arguments to people who intend to be inclusive. It means that mainstream socio-political discourse around transness is framed around an apparent conflict of (gender) identity with an indisputable 'biological' sex; it is a question of the weight given to each side, of whether (and to what extent) trans people should be accommodated through granting precedence to the former over the latter. This framing constitutes the rules of a game of truth under which positions advocating actual trans equity and legitimacy are made unintelligible.

3.4.3. Sex has always been gender

Accordingly, countering the myth of essentialism is integral to upholding the genuine legitimacy of trans experience. In fact, binary sex categories are demonstrably *not* some fundamental and acultural ontological reality, but instead are produced as hegemonic knowledge through a socio-culturally contingent regime of truth (Foucault, 1978). This contests the assumption within the sex/gender distinction that it is *only gender* that is socially constructed, which would require sex to be "'pre-discursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (Butler, 1999, p. 11, emphasis in original). Such an argument implies a metaphysical (not critical) realism of sex – the application of the ontology that "entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them" (Phillips, 1987, p. 205) to claim that categorisation of humans into two binary sexes occurs independently of our own human perception and societies – which is historically and scientifically untenable.

To expound, the contemporary two-sex model has not always been seen as natural truth; historically and cross-culturally, there have been and are many different understandings of sex/gender (C. Richards et al., 2016; Thorne et al., 2019). As recently as the late eighteenth century, the dominant Western discourse was very different. It was only with the new epistemological lens of the Enlightenment that men and women came to be seen as fundamentally distinct in *kind*, based on essential bodily differences. Laqueur (1992) explains that:

> *the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male, gave way by*

> *the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence* (pp. 5-6)

Previously, being male or female meant having a particular societal role, rather than being an ontological claim about a person's biological categorisation. Under the new model, however, these social roles were contended to exist *because* of the apparently natural biological truth of two incommensurable sexes. Further, Foucault (1978, 1980b) argues that the construction of these binary sex categories functioned as a tactic of disciplinary power in naturalising heterosexuality, of which oppositional sex could be positioned as the cause.

Moreover, even within the rules of a scientific game of truth, it would be considered biologically inaccurate to claim the existence of two exclusive and oppositional sexes. There are a variety of physical traits that can be observed at the empirical level, some of which are considered 'sex characteristics', and many of which are bimodal. However, these traits do not automatically translate into discrete 'male' and 'female' groups in the absence of human interpretation. The fallibility of binary sex categorisation is especially evident when considering intersex people, who may be 1 in 100 (Ainsworth, 2015); under this system, an individual can have 'contradictory' sex characteristics (such as 'female' genitalia with XY chromosomes). The decision of which of these characteristics is taken as primary determinant in categorising the person as male or female is clearly shaped by socio-cultural factors (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Part of the reason for these apparent conflicts is that different scientific disciplines (above, anatomy and genetics) define their objects in different and often clashing ways: "[t]here is no uniformly used category of woman or female within a century, a culture, a place, or even the institute that presents itself as the apogee of coherence: science" (Mol, 2015, p. 73).

Furthermore, as C. Williams (2020) points out, the majority of American and European cisgender people modify their bodies to some extent (e.g., hair, exercise, cosmetic surgery) in order "to better embody their sexed persona" (p. 720), effectively reifying a distinct sex binary by obscuring the extent to which most people have aspects of both 'male' and 'female' biological characteristics. Overall, in the absence of any other genuinely defining 'essence' of each category, if we are to persist in some form of sex classification, surely the most logical and ethical deciding characteristic is (gender) identity (Ainsworth, 2015); this would allow each person the agency of self-determination, rather than mandating any particular physical trait (as justified through cisnormative power/knowledge) to constitute the 'truth' of one's subjectivity – which also facilitates our government by this truth (Foucault, 2014).

The logic and usefulness of a sex (material) and gender (social) distinction is therefore disputed, as Butler writes:

> *If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.* (1999, pp. 10-11)

If sex does not naturally follow from biological characteristics, but requires human construction, then it does not make sense to define gender as, separately, the social interpretation of sex (characteristics) – because that is already what sex is.

3.4.4. A phenomenological 'wrong body'

In deconstructing essentialist truth claims, it must also be acknowledged that some trans people do identify with the idea of the 'wrong body'. Prosser (1998) contends that "transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like" (p. 69). However, there are two significant points I wish to make in arguing that this expression of individual phenomenological experience does not conflict with the criticism of the 'wrong body' trope as cultural understanding of transness.

Firstly, for many trans people, theorising the problem of essentialism is simply not a primary concern, in the face of more immediate challenges presented by everyday transphobia and cisnormativity. As Chu (2017) explains, "[w]hat does it matter whether bodies exist outside discourse or not when yours is under low, slow siege, not just by the threat of physical assault but also by bureaucracy, depression, anxiety and precarity?" (p. 144). In this context, trans people understand and explain their experience using the discursive resources available to them, which are predominantly cisnormative. It should not be problematic that individuals thereby have "nonce ontologies" (p. 150) of their own transness. This term describes a trans person's unstrategic description of their ordinary life, the experience of one's own embodiment that is not done to make any wider critical or theoretical point.

Secondly, I wish to engage with the *feeling* of wrong embodiment that Prosser cites – as something that may be associated with physical gender dysphoria (for those trans people who experience this). As a cisnormative trope, 'wrong body' reproduces essentialism and relies on the notion of changing between the extant fixed positions of male and female. However, as phenomenological wrong embodiment, there is no inherent reason this concept must be essentialist or require fixed categories of sex. This is because it can instead be understood as the misalignment between one's *psychological*, or *subconscious sex* (Serano, 2007), and to a variable extent, (other) *physical sex characteristics*. In this model, a person subconsciously expects, or is inclined towards having certain physical attributes – in rudimentary terms, they have a mental 'body map' – and dysphoria occurs when their actual body conflicts with this. However, unlike the essentialist 'wrong body' narrative, in this version the 'body map', or what the person is inclined towards, may include any combination of

physical characteristics, and no attribute inherently determines the person as male or female. As such, non-binary people may equally legitimately experience wrong embodiment, without being defined with reference to their assigned (or the 'opposite') sex.

The question of categorisation and the desire for recognition is a separate and cultural issue. Ethically and logically, the only characteristic that should determine a person's gender categorisation is their self-defined identity – which is an interpretation of a personal embodied experience within a particular cultural context. At the end of this section, I will go on to argue that this gender categorisation does have material importance, and thus despite refuting any essentialist basis to particular categories, that gender abolition would not achieve trans emancipation.

3.4.5. Bounded categories and manufactured conflict

As has been demonstrated throughout this section, all forms of sex/gender essentialism – even when they are intended to be inclusive – undermine trans legitimacy and contribute to anti-trans oppression. Therefore, whilst it is not incumbent on individual trans people to employ such theory in defining their own self-concept, simultaneously at a broader discursive level it is vital to engage with the ontological question of sex and gender and refuse to concede it to essentialism. In the following sections, I will discuss the dangerous influence of essentialism in socio-political discourse that harms trans lives, before proceeding to outline a radically anti-essentialist argument in pursuit of trans emancipation.

Firstly, as C. Williams (2020) explains, "[i]t is the need to defend an ontological woman rooted in sex-essentialism that morally animates TERF[6] rhetoric and behaviors" (p. 731). It is through appealing to this fixed 'biological' definition that anti-trans groups construct the idea that the category of 'woman' is under genuine threat, with bounds that must be upheld and protected against infringement by trans people and inclusive language, in order to safeguard (cis) women's rights. Here essentialism interacts with the previous truth discourse under discussion; as I will explore further in section 5.5.1, the *neoliberal* regime of truth that frames equality as individual rights rather than structural level justice – in which "rights and claims to entitlement can only be made on the basis of a singular and injured identity" (Butler, 1997, p. 100) – creates epistemological conditions wherein it appears logical that different, necessarily discrete groups' rights 'conflict'. With the addition of sex/gender essentialism, it becomes readily believed that (cis) women's and trans rights are inherently separate and oppositional; the latter is thought to impose on the former primarily through trans women violating the bounds of womanhood and attempting to claim associated rights, of which they are apparently undeserving because their male birth assignment is seen to preclude the characteristically female experience of gendered oppression. Moreover, in this

[6] Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

manufactured conflict essentialism also encourages women's 'sex-based rights' to be given primacy over trans rights, because transness is positioned as less material, as 'just' subjective identity.

The influence of this form of anti-trans rhetoric can be seen in, for instance, socio-political discourse opposing gender-neutral and inclusive language on the basis that this 'erases' women. One recent example of this is the argument, endorsed by the then health secretary Sajid Javid, that the NHS webpages on ovarian cancer should not have changed to say that anyone with ovaries (not just women) can get the condition – because "sex matters" (Harrison-West, 2022). This position does imply a simple lack of concern for trans people, but beyond this there is also an assumption that the use of normative gendered language is not genuinely a problem, because AFAB trans people apparently know that regardless of their (gender) identity, their sex is still female, and thus that the information applies to them. Pregnancy care is particularly impacted by this, with strong resistance to any attempts to use more inclusive (and therefore accurate) language. For instance, Strimpel (2021) in conservative broadsheet *The Telegraph* reacts to the phrase "postnatal people" being used in medical guidance by denouncing the "sinister new linguistic regime [in which] mothers are no longer women". She denies that exclusive reference to women creates any issue for trans men, whom she calls "biological women who identify as men who give birth", on the basis that they should "receive quality care like all patients". The clear point is that (cis) women's sex and the associated language used to refer to them is seen as having *material* impact, but for trans people, it is not; contrast Strimpel's descriptions of inclusive language as "materially dangerous" and "mad, sad, and hurtful to women" with her contention that normative gendered language is "not, despite what the maddened woke brigade insists, making hospitals 'unsafe' for trans people". However, in actuality the lack of trans-inclusive and trans-competent healthcare in pregnancy and childbirth is a significant obstacle for trans people in accessing care, and impedes medical safety (Falck et al., 2021; Greenfield & Darwin, 2021). Ultimately, from an essentialist perspective, the pregnant man (or non-binary person) is considered an 'impossible' subject position – and something that does not exist cannot be materially impacted.

3.4.6. Reconciling radical anti-essentialism with trans embodied phenomenology

Yet, contrary to what is implied by the TERF moniker, the actual history of radical feminism is one of *opposing* essentialist definitions of women. Indeed, this anti-essentialism was expounded in response to the exclusion from certain feminist spaces in the 1960s of lesbians, who were said to have left womanhood (C. Williams, 2020). Lesbian feminists such as Monique Wittig (1992) and Andrea Dworkin (1983, 1996) argued that a feminism based on an essentialised category of 'woman' reproduces the same underlying ideology as the patriarchal gender hierarchy from which they were fighting to be liberated; it endorsed the idea of fundamental and immutable differences between male and female sex categories, through which (for instance) gender roles are justified.

Wittig contended that man and woman "are political categories and not natural givens" (1992, p. 14), with womanhood being defined not by a fundamental essence but by a shared material position that is oppressed in a social hierarchy. Anti-trans feminists consider these material conditions to be experienced only on the basis of assigned (female) sex, which is a patently false claim; misogynistic treatment is not preceded by a chromosome scan or birth certificate check, and trans women (and many AMAB [assigned male at birth] non-binary people) also face sexism targeted both at their social position and physical body parts (Serano, 2017). They may not experience *all* forms, but the same is true of cis women – for instance, not all cis women have the reproductive organs that are targeted in sexist legislation to regulate women's reproductive systems.

Wittig's argument is not only anti-essentialist, but she also contends that "there is no sex" (1992, p. 2), as it is a construct created by oppression. It is possible to interpret this as an artifactualist view, situating sex as *only* social construction – albeit in an entirely different way to the aforementioned 'gender critical' position which considers gender as artifact but reifies an apparently distinct sex as essential. This could be thought to pose a problem, because sex/gender artifactualism may be construed as a denial of the authenticity of trans (and cis) identity, as Serano (2013) argues:

> *After all, if gender and sexuality are entirely social artifacts, and we have no intrinsic desires or individual differences, this implies that every person can (and should) change their gender and sexual behaviors at the drop of a hat in order to accommodate their own (or perhaps other people's) politics. This assumption denies human diversity and […] often leads to the further marginalization of minority and marked groups.* (p. 134)

However, for sex/gender *categories* to be entirely a social construction does *not* necessitate that bodies (and their individual differences) are also such, and do not have an underlying materiality. Yet, it is only possible to *conceptualise* such materiality through the (inevitably flawed or incomplete) forms of knowledge that are constructed about it; as Butler explains, "no prior materiality is accessible without the means of discourse, [and] no discourse can ever capture that prior materiality" (within interview; Meijer & Prins, 1998).

In combined critical realist and Foucauldian terms (see section 3.2), to say that sex/gender is a construct is to say that it is a *transitive* object of knowledge produced as a theoretical explanation for the empirical observation of certain human characteristics. The essentialist version, produced within a scientific truth regime, is normatively (but erroneously) conflated with the ontological real. In coming to function as discursive 'truth', it becomes itself an intransitive object with its own (emergent) effects – in a way that is *separate* from the original intransitive object (real generative mechanisms underlying observed characteristics) that it purportedly described.

The overall issue that I am attempting to resolve here is the concern that framing sex/gender as social construct risks trans delegitimisation and inequity. This is particularly related to the associated

interpretation that this would imply gender abolition as liberatory project; Wittig for instance advocated women "fighting […] for the disappearance of our class" (1992, p. 14). Indeed, it has been suggested that by framing sex/gender as solely a tool of power and oppression, anti-normative queer theory and gender abolitionist strands of feminism disregard trans material realities and the importance of trans people's genders to making our lives liveable. An exclusively deconstructive focus "fails to account for and do justice to an understanding, phenomenologically speaking, of trans bodily ontological understandings" (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018, p. 690). As Serano (2007) explains:

> *as a trans person, having spent most of my life battling gender dissonance, I don't have the privilege that others have of being able to presume that the femaleness or maleness of my body or mind is entirely meaningless, superficial, or unimportant. I have found that my physical sex, and how it relates to my subconscious sex, is incommensurably important to me.* (p. 104)

However, constructivism as I am using it here – in the Foucauldian terms that I have described and that I will now expand upon further using the work of Judith Butler – in fact *also* disputes the desirability (or in fact the possibility) of gender abolition. As such, Butler's (1993/2011) point in their theory of gender performativity is that gender is not an artifice or simple choice (in the way that Serano's artifactualism implies), and nor is it entirely cultural determinism. But whilst Serano (2013) counters artifactualism through recourse to inherent inclinations within individuals (which arguably still implies some degree of innate 'essence'), Butler instead clarifies the nature of the construction. Namely, to say that gender is constructed is not to say that it is artificial or dispensable. The human subject is inextricably *part* of power, even as one seeks to oppose it; it is through power, including its operation through the discourse of sex/gender, that the subject is formed (1997). Butler identifies gender as a construction of the body that is *constitutive*, "that we could not operate without" (1993/2011, p. x) – as "one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (p. xii). Accordingly, we cannot simply remove it as if from some external vantage point (1997). Indeed, Foucault similarly states that the individual, and thus their resistance, is never outside of power. In *What is Critique?* (1996), he argues that the resistance that is indissociable from governmentality does not take the form, "we do not want to be governed *at all*", but rather, questions "[h]ow not to be governed *like that*" (p. 384). Following Butler, sex/gender may be considered sufficiently essential to power and the constitution of the subject that, in the same way, perhaps the question of resistance is not 'we do not want to be gendered at all', but instead, 'we do not want to be gendered *like that*'.

Whilst both Foucault and Butler contest the idea of a fully autonomous subject, because gender performativity is part of power *relations* rather than simply imposed, it does not foreclose agency or resistance – and in fact *requires* it. The continual repetition of norms that reproduces and reifies

sex/gender is not done through identical copies of the same actions, but instead each act is *citational* – a reference to gendered norms that "effectively brings into being the very prior authority to which it then defers" (Butler, 1993/2011, p. 71). In *Excitable Speech* (1997/2021), Butler argues that resistance through these citations is possible because these actions can be perlocutionary – they are essential to producing an effect but are not concurrent with it. This temporality creates "the possibility of citing a term anew to break with its customary associations and challenge the relations of power they serve to naturalise" (Disch, 1999, p. 555).

Following this, such a framework can be both radically anti-essentialist and simultaneously legitimising of trans people's embodied genders. As Butler (2004) contends, "the transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories" (p. 8). Indeed, without essentialism, cis people do not have superior gender entitlement by birthright (Serano, 2007), and thus their genders can only be valid to the same extent that trans people's are. In fact, *all* people construct their subjectivity in relation to the context of norms (Butler, 2005; Foucault, 1990); as Serano points out, cis people already claim their gender category on the basis of identity and how they live their lives, but inaccurately assume that their birth assignment grants them an automatic authenticity that trans people can only seek to imitate. Additionally, sex/gender as construct does not exclude the phenomenological experience of wrong embodiment, or misalignment of subconscious with physical sex characteristics, that I discussed in section 3.4.4 – but the construct framework also implies that all trans people's genders are *equally legitimate* regardless of whether they experience this misalignment.

Because we cannot step outside of power, to nevertheless claim to do so (through gender abolition) would simply naturalise its effects – and thus further marginalise trans people whilst denying access to discursive resources of potential resistance. It would foreclose the possibility of trans people being able to articulate and be recognised as our genders, which is essential to intelligibility and having a liveable life (Butler, 2004). Instead, our gendered truth claims may themselves be understood to represent a form of resistance to the kind of normalising individualisation imposed by governmentality – through establishing "new forms of subjectivity" (as advocated by Foucault, 1982, p. 785) outside of the positions offered by an essentialist game of truth.

Regarding the former of these last two points, Butler (2004) contests the idea that "the question of how one does one's gender is a merely cultural question, or an indulgence on the part of those who insist on exercising bourgeois freedom in excessive dimensions" (p. 30). Trans and cis people can both have deeply held convictions as to their identity, but the normative gender order has material consequences in delimiting which lives are liveable and who counts as intelligibly human. Thus, "[t]he thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible" (p. 31) – namely, the cisgender men and women who can already recognise themselves

(and be recognised by others) in the legal and social norms, structures, and relations of power that define the human.

On the other hand, concerning the latter point, I will first refer to Foucault's explanation of the kind of subjectivation that transness may resist; it is a specific technique of power, making individuals into governable subjects, that "categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and have others recognize in him" (1982, p. 781). Yet, as discussed in section 3.3.2, Foucault also argues that governance in contemporary society is particularly effective because of the "subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies" (1993, p. 204). That is to say, people are not forced to enact the will of political power, but through this contact of discipline and freedom they self-govern; individuals constitute themselves as particular kinds of subjects through technologies of the self:

> *which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality* (1988, p. 18)

For trans people, becoming the *transnormative* subject (see section 3.4.2) may be considered an enactment of these technologies of the self. In a context of pre-assigned 'male' and 'female' subjectivities, for individuals who are unhappy with their designated category, transnormativity is the only other real option through which they might retain some degree of normative intelligibility. Indeed, adopting this position may offer the possibility of social and legal recognition as well as access to medical transition. However, to do so also necessitates submission to medical categorisation, as abnormal other which must be corrected, and the production of a particular self-narrative of gender dysphoria that is legible to external gatekeepers – thus ensuring one remains subjectivated.

However, the idea of trans identity claims as *resistance* comes to the fore in line with Foucault's additional emphasis, particularly in his later work, on the *agency* available to the individual in their self-constitution – allowing for the construction of new types of subjectivity. Foucault positions this as an ethical problem of resisting the "government of individualization" (1982, p. 781) which artificially constrains the kinds of subject we can be. Correspondingly, trans people do of course resist the demand to constitute ourselves solely in such a restricted way, thus aligning with a variety of other modern power struggles which:

> *revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is*
>
> (Foucault, 1982, p. 781)

Johnston (2013) argues that coming out as trans, in asserting one's particularity and refusing the constraint of medicalisation and transnormativity, can be understood as *parrhesia* – in the form that Foucault traces back to ancient Greek philosophy. This parrhesia is a type of speech in which the person freely and courageously tells the truth in an act of critique, and at the risk of harm to themselves (Foucault, 2010). Johnston's primary point is to present the language of parrhesia as supplementary to Butler's performativity for trans people conceptualising identity and coming out – arguing that it gives more weight in communicating the materiality and inner certainty of gender identities, whereas performativity is too often misinterpreted. My own intention however is to bring together the two concepts of parrhesia and performativity to demonstrate how claiming one's particular trans identity – outside of the available subject position(s) with which one is made obligated to align by an essentialist regime of truth (Foucault, 2014) – is to aver epistemic authority over oneself in an ethical act of resistance, and in an example of what Foucault identifies in the parrhesiastic act, the "binding oneself to the truth [as] actually the exercise, the highest exercise, of freedom" (2010, p. 67).

To explain this, it must first be highlighted that the normative gender order defines itself and its legible subjects *through* the exclusion of its constitutive outside – the abject, unintelligible kinds of subject (Butler, 1993/2011). The abject body is disavowed but necessarily remains within the sex/gender system (Kramer, 2017); it is therefore accessible through (or at the limits of) this system's means of reproduction (performativity), even whilst its political claims are normatively unintelligible. Butler (in Meijer & Prins, 1998) contends:

> *I could say 'there are abject bodies,' and that could be a performative in which I* endow *ontology. I endow ontology to precisely that which has been systematically deprived of the privilege of ontology.* (p. 280, emphasis in original)

In this statement, they are intentionally "performing a performative contradiction" (p. 280), demonstrating that what is normatively assumed or *allowed* to constitute the ontological domain – what is considered 'truth' under the rules of the game – is not pre-existing but is discursively produced; it is in fact *epistemological* in nature, but enjoys dominance such that it is (spuriously) conflated with the ontological real.

Following this, claiming one's transness is effectively Butler's "there are abject bodies" in personal form; in an unsanctioned form of performative citation, the trans person asserts their genuine existence and thus endows ontological validity to their abjectified body. The parrhesiastic act is the free and risky choice of this unsanctioned way of citing gendered norms over following the rules of an essentialist game of truth – correspondingly, disrupting the expectation to self-govern through regulated technologies of the self and instead creating for oneself a new form of subjectivity. Accordingly, the endowment of ontological validity is the binding of oneself to the truth (they exist)

that critiques the normative 'truth' (they do not exist). To do so risks mistreatment and the denial of even the limited recognition that may have otherwise been accessible through transnormativity. Yet, as Foucault (2010) points out, such risk is inherent to this exercise of freedom.

3.4.7. Gender democratisation, not abolition, as anti-essentialist praxis

All of this is to say that 'gender abolition', whilst seemingly anti-essentialist, does not work as method or ambition in seeking justice and educational equity for trans people. As Martino (2022a) points out, "an antinormative emphasis or focus on treating all gender norms as constraining is limited and does not serve the needs of all trans students in schools" (p. 354). Beyond the effective impossibility of abolishing gender entirely, the desirability of this is similarly questionable. Connell (2009) contends that "as an ultimate goal [degendering] is extremely pessimistic", highlighting the positive aspects of gender – "the many pleasures, cultural riches, identities and other practices that arise in gender orders and that people value". She proposes the alternative of *gender democratisation*, which "seeks to equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing". Connell also highlights the significantly varying degree of inequality across different international gender orders, including examples where social action has led to more equal gender relations, as evidence that "gender does not, in itself, imply inequality" (p. 146).

Accordingly, the solution to essentialism is not to disavow gender entirely, even if this were a genuine possibility. For many people, trans and cis alike, gender identity is deeply meaningful and even essential to a liveable quality of life. Thus, as Butler argues:

> *No matter whether one feels one's gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives.* (interviewed by C. Williams, 2014)

Finally, and as I have demonstrated, certain approaches to feminism refuse trans legitimacy because they base their political action on the idea of representing a fixed and bounded subject – the essentialist woman. However, there is no pre-discursive or universal definition of woman that can be decontextualised from power relations; "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (Butler, 1999, p. 4). A feminist politics therefore cannot be emancipatory – and in fact may unwittingly reify inequitable gender relations – when it takes the premise of "extend[ing] representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject" (p. 9). Instead, it is abandoning essentialism – or, "[a]bstaining from knowing what a woman is" (Mol, 2015, p. 66) – that reveals the possibility of agency, of altering and democratising gender relations. This assertion that gender categories are not stable and do not require an underlying shared 'essence' does not invalidate individuals' gender identities, and in fact is vital to trans legitimacy and equity.

3.5. Childhood innocence and developmentalism

3.5.1. Contingently produced 'truth' of developmentalism

Just as with sex/gender essentialism, the phenomenon of childhood is generally accepted as a common-sense 'truth' with an innate biological basis. Yet, this too is a social discourse that has been contingently produced and naturalised through the recursive workings of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980a) – and it is the third and final truth discourse that I am addressing in this work. Here I am referring both to the concept of childhood itself – as a meaningfully distinct life stage to adulthood – and the particular definitions and meanings attributed to it in contemporary society. The presently dominant paradigm is that of developmentalism, which was produced and reified within the scientific truth regime of the Global North and exported across much of the world through colonialism and unequal international power relations; it now "occupies a position of nearly unquestioned hegemony in psychology, the social sciences, the human services professions, and education" (Zaman & Anderson-Nathe, 2021, p. 106).

The Enlightenment era antecedents of developmentalism – Rousseau being a notable contributor – conceived childhood as qualitatively distinct from adulthood, framing the child as (consequently) having particular distinct needs (Burman, 2008). Romanticist notions of idealised childhood innocence remain strongly influential today, often forming the basis of child protectionist discourses that are weaponised against queerness and 'gender identity', and in fact against the rights of children themselves (Martínez et al., 2021).

Moreover, development theory posits that children are simply incomplete versions of their future adult selves (Jenks, 2005); accordingly, childhood is a natural and universal process through which one must progress to eventually achieve the complex thought and rationality which are exclusive to the adult. In this paradigm, social elements of childhood are inseparable from biological immaturity – children's play and social relationships are viewed primarily as necessary transitional stages which facilitate progress towards the goal of adulthood (Prout & James, 2015). This position marginalises children in society, producing such arguments as

> *that children were not citizens and, further, they did not even have rights because they lacked rationality, they lacked competence, they needed protection not autonomy and they must be socialised into 'good citizens'* (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 250).

However, as Zaman and Anderson-Nathe (2021) argue, it is the 'truth' of developmentalism that "provides a preexisting interpretative frame for findings that the brain changes over time" (p. 107). That is to say, empirical anatomical and physiological findings are interpreted with reference to – or as evidence for – existing assumptions about childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The adult brain is already assumed to be the finished, mature, and exclusively rational version, and therefore any structural or functional differences in the young person's brain are construed as evidence for its

relative deficiency, its state of *becoming* along a linear trajectory towards its adult and 'complete' self. Zaman and Anderson-Nathe give the example that neuroimaging data is interpreted as demonstrating the impulsivity and immaturity that are already believed to characterise the adolescent, where that same data could otherwise indicate creativity, curiosity, or adaptability.

This interpretative frame – or indeed, game of truth – forecloses the possibility of empirical findings 'disproving' developmentalism, and instead such evidence is selectively used to support normatively-aligned goals, and to justify increased control measures over even young adults. For instance, findings that the prefrontal cortex of the brain continues developing until age 25 (Arain et al., 2013), rather than troubling adult/child binary distinctions, have been utilised to argue that young people under that age should not be allowed to medically transition, or be considered capable of consenting to it. Accordingly, multiple US state legislatures are currently considering bills that would ban gender-affirming care for anyone under 26 (Legiscan, 2023; Migdon, 2023; Schoenbaum, 2023). Notably, this same logic is not used to restrict other kinds of healthcare, or to dispute the legitimacy of young adults' consent to more normative significant decisions like getting married or joining the military.

3.5.2. Normalisation and futurity

Developmentalism also facilitates the government of children and young people through normalisation. From the early nineteenth century, medical and educational institutions enabled the scientific observation and measurement of groups of children categorised by age; using this data, average behaviours or task performances could be produced as developmental norms. Individual children could then be assessed against these norms and subjected to particular interventions intended to re-align them with the expected developmental trajectory (Rose, 1999) – thus preventing exploration of alternative paths and thereby ensuring the continual reproduction and reification of the 'truth' of normal development. Hence, what is considered normal is not just a neutral reflection of some natural reality of childhood, but as with all knowledge, it is produced through power relations. Rose further explains that 'normal' is frequently an extrapolation from the scientific study of those children already socially identified as problematic or 'abnormal' – those "who worry the courts, teachers, doctors, and parents". Therefore, he argues, "[n]ormality is not an observation but a *valuation*. It contains not just a judgement about what is desirable, but an injunction as to a goal to be achieved" (p. 133, emphasis added).

Gender development is normalised thusly, with the child expected to follow a linear trajectory associated with a fixed assigned sex – through asexuality and proto-heterosexuality to reach cisgender and heterosexual adulthood (Castañeda, 2014; Stockton, 2009). Accordingly, children's education research has generally been "keen on securing knowledge concerning developmental

stages and building professional capacities for realigning children's growths that occur along calculated, horizontal, and heteronormative lines" (Dyer, 2017, p. 292).

Such 'realigning' with normative development is framed as being in the best interests of the child – or perhaps more accurately, the interests of the future adult, who it is assumed will be best served through the ability to integrate with normative society. Correspondingly, Roscigno (2019) argues that the use of punishment to alter autistic children's 'abnormal' behaviour[7] is "violence aimed at recuperating the normative future"; the child's potential future inclusion in capitalist society is leveraged to justify coercive technologies of control, which are "rebranded as philanthropic ventures" (p. 405). Discouragement or denial of children's gender non-conformity and/or trans identity can be understood analogously, as ostensibly an attempt to 'protect' the interests of a future adult who would be better off being cis. In one concerning example of such practice, Horton (2023a) relays the experience of a supportive parent who had removed their trans child from a UK primary school, because staff there wanted to take the child "for conversion therapy, to make them conform to gendered expectations" (p. 83).

Moreover, it is theorised that such high importance is attributed to ensuring 'normal' development not solely (or even primarily) for the sake of the particular individual's future – but rather, for what they, and children and childhood as a whole, *represent* about the future of society. Specifically, it is the adult desire for their own futurity, for security in the reproduction of existing norms and power relations (Prout & James, 2015). It is further argued that the developmental narrative, constructing the child as incomplete, also produces them as malleable and able to be shaped towards this desired future (Castañeda, 2002; Gill-Peterson, 2018). In this way, children "constitute an *investment* in the future" (A. James et al., 1998, p. 15, emphasis added); they are seen as teleological, as *serving the purpose* of creating normative adults and futures. Correspondingly, fears about 'threats' to childhood – including from queerness – are also tied to this plasticity and its consequence, namely that the futurity predicated on 'normal' development is not guaranteed. As Dyer (2017) for instance explains, the child "is a locus of anxiety for homophobic culture because on it rests the reproduction of a heteronormative future" (p. 291).

Thus, discourses of child protectionism and control are effectively used to represent the desire to protect a future normative or desired social order – and hence are regularly invoked in response to adult fears and uncertainty about this societal future. Accordingly, Katz (2008) contends that, "the spectacle of childhood is associated with the rise of ontological insecurity provoked by anxieties around the political-economic, geopolitical, and environmental futures" (p. 5).

[7] This is part of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA): "the shaping of human behavior through operant conditioning – [which] has risen to a state of eminence in the teaching and treatment of autistic children" (Roscigno, 2019, p. 405).

In his influential work *No Future*, Lee Edelman (2004) argues that queerness (figured in the *sinthomosexual*) is effectively the constitutive outside of the pervasive *reproductive futurism* that locates the purpose and value of all socio-political actions within the future – as represented by the (idealised, innocent) child. That is to say, the queer is marginalised through being positioned as oppositional to this prioritised figure of the child, and to the signified future of which it (the queer) can never be a part. In fact, this reproductive futurism could be considered a game of truth, in that it defines the *rules* of legitimate debate; it is a rhetoric that avows that the issue in question is "like an ideological Möbius strip, only *permitted* one side" (p. 2, emphasis in original) – the side of the child. The obligations attached to this truth by the corresponding regime (Foucault, 2014) dictate that one cannot legitimately be *against* this child – yet, this is exactly what Edelman argues that queerness is or must be.

However, there are also notable texts (e.g., Muñoz, 2009/2019) that specifically counter Edelman's call for a queer *antirelationality* in the face of such an apparently immutable negation; by emphasising the heterogeneity – which Edelman arguably obscures – of both queer and child referents, such work brings to the fore the salient point that reproductive futurism and the cult of the child in fact harm *actual* children. As Muñoz identifies, "[i]n the same way all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer antirelational formulations, all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters" (p. 94). Accordingly, there is a more positive and indeed ethical way forward through intergenerational solidarity, rather than an 'opting out' of relationality that is in fact only available from the perspective of (adult) queer sexuality as a singular (and otherwise privileged) dimension – contesting the reproductive futurism that contributes to multiple axes of marginalisation, yet also refusing the call to abandon hope or a queer form of futurity. Indeed, in subsequent sections and also in Chapter Seven, I take such a critical orientation – identifying how such dominant futurity and figurations of the child work to harm trans children, including in schools and teachers' narratives, and considering how this might be otherwise.

3.5.3. Child protectionism and the defence of social reproduction

One notable manifestation of reproductive futurism is the widespread concern about a contemporary 'loss' of childhood, frequently expressed in socio-political discourse and corresponding to adult anxieties about threats to normative social reproduction. Indeed, mythical safe, free, and happy childhoods of the past are often juxtaposed with the dangers of the present, which are perceived to threaten the child's normal development towards their appropriate adult social role – their 'socialisation'. Also underlying such narratives is the continued influence of romanticist notions that childhood should be an innocent, protected space distinct from adulthood – and a desire to return to an imagined historical time when this was the case (Cunningham, 2021).

Whilst this is not to dismiss the particular challenges that young people face in contemporary society, the developmental paradigm as truth regime is the dominant frame through which their experiences are interpreted, and hence a narrative is constructed in which modern children are now being inappropriately exposed to 'adult' experiences, disrupting the proper process of their socialisation. This leads to their failure to 'correctly' reach adulthood, at which point, no longer the mouldable clay of the child, they have suffered – as Abigail Shrier (2020) titled her trans-critical polemic – *irreversible damage*. This failure of proper socialisation, the failure to reproduce an existing social order, is suggested by Prout and James (2015) to effectively equate to a "failure to be human" (p. 12).

Moreover, what Jacob Breslow (2021) calls the 'psychic life of the child' – the adult memory, and fantasy, of one's childhood and how it might have been otherwise – has been rhetorically mobilised in service of this 'protection' of trans children. Prominent anti-trans activists engage the third conditional grammatical structure to "articulat[e] the hypothetical threat of a transition that did not happen but is imagined, in retrospect, to be not just possible but forcibly enacted" (2022, p. 575): "*if I were growing up now, I would have been transitioned*" (p. 576). This is a claim that 'being transitioned' is an externally-imposed danger that is unique to present times, a contemporary response to childhood gender non-conformity that would apparently have simply been left alone in the past – as, in their memory, it *fortunately* was for the adult in question, allowing them to naturally develop into their current cisgender subjectivity. Therefore, the argument goes, *current* trans youth should be prevented from transitioning – returning to an imagined time when children could freely express gender differently without the risk of being 'made trans' – which is also taken as an inherently negative outcome.

In ways such as this, the figure of the child – or *moral rhetoric* of childhood (A. Meyer, 2007) – is explicitly weaponised against trans and queer lives, including specifically trans and queer youth. Whilst this latter part could appear counterintuitive, the queer is – as Edelman (2004) argues – oppositional to the child; thus, in such protectionist rhetoric, either there is no legitimately queer child, and/or once a child has been tainted by queerness, their innocence and worthiness of protection is irrevocably gone – and it is *other* children who need protecting from (knowledge of) them. Correspondingly, Meyer describes how "the category of childhood is preserved through the removal of 'errant' children who do not fit adult conceptions of 'the child'" (pp. 94-95), but also highlights how dynamics of inclusion/exclusion depend on whether the child in question is framed as blameless (e.g., sexual abuse victims) or to blame (e.g., perpetrators of violence) for this errancy. This means that trans youth can variously be positioned in both ways, either as innocent (cis) child harmed by adults 'transitioning' them (often trans boys), or as 'knowing', adultified (J. Davis, 2022) non-child who threatens the innocence of 'normal' children (often trans girls; A.L. Stone, 2018).

The first of these two representations is demonstrated, for instance, in the framing of various legislative attempts in US states to restrict trans healthcare for young people, with bills given titles such as "Protect Children's Innocence Act" and "Save Adolescents from Experimentation Act" (Migdon, 2023). These clearly draw on narratives of the pure (actually cisgender) child who is in imminent danger from transness – and needs adults to act urgently to defend and safeguard them.

Additionally, both techniques are evident in the *heteroactivism* that Nash and Browne (2021) name as the strategic resistance to LGBT rights and inclusion – "that seeks to reassert the superiority of monogamous, binary cis-gendered, coupled marriages as *best for children* and society" (p. 74, emphasis added). However, it is the *second* framing that is predominant in their example of the opposition of the Rowe family to a trans child's presence in their own son's school class. The authors identify the heteroactivist position that "the space of the primary school needs to be protected and 'made' safe for children" (p. 83) – with safety defined as cisheteronormative, and thus transness as a danger that must be kept out. It is the *other* children – the innocent cis children, the 'normal' majority, who deserve protection through the preservation of 'their' safe school space, as explained:

> *'All the other kids' become more numerous through these discourses, 'all' versus the one who is refuting gender norms, and whose dress is contesting the ideologies of gender upon which not only children but 'good society' and in turn 'good citizens' rely. The dangers of gender fluidity are not based in the body or dangers to the child 'pretend[ing] to be a girl', but to all the children who witness them being supported, and become 'confused and upset'* (p. 86)

Heteroactivism here is particularly effective through playing into the dominant, taken-for-granted truth of cisheteronormativity as natural, as best for children, and as the *desired* future that adults wish to (re)produce.

Correspondingly, it is not entirely that, as A. Meyer (2007) states, "*any* opinion can be justified by simply referring to children" (p. 99, emphasis in original). Indeed, as they also point out, "the power of the moral rhetoric to invoke the sacred status of the child is not independent of social context" (p. 100). Whilst Meyer considers how this context creates a hierarchy of harms to children in terms of socio-political focus and outrage – child *sexual* abuse garners more interest than physical abuse because of the associated "infringement of adult ideals of childhood" (pp. 102-103) – I would also suggest a central point is that it is only *normative* arguments that can be successfully defended using this rhetoric, and thereby framed as the only possible or legitimate side (as in Edelman, 2004) without, as Meyer says, "having to explain *why* and *how* children justify it" (p. 99, emphasis in original).

Hence, the narratives described in the outlined examples of anti-trans legislation and heteroactivism are produced as legitimate and 'true' arguments even where actual evidence disputes their claims,

such as the demonstrable benefits of transition healthcare for trans youth (Riggs et al., 2021). Yet, in contrast, appeals to protect the child do *not* effectively work in the same way, at least within dominant socio-political discourse, when such appeals position normative inequities as the threat to children – such as transphobia and cisnormativity, rather than transness itself.

By this I mean, for instance, that statistics demonstrating disproportionately high levels of mental ill health and suicide are regularly used as evidence in attempts to convince professionals, policy makers, and the public of "the critical importance of acceptance" and affirmation of trans youth (Tanis, 2016, p. 373). However, perceived from a normative perspective that is not already inclined towards trans inclusion, such appeals simply do not work as intended. Again, this comes back to the oppositionality of the child and the queer (Edelman, 2004), and the consequent impossibility of their legitimate co-existence. As such, these statistics do not incite a protection of the trans child *as trans*, and instead only serve to confirm a pre-existing belief that *transness* is the threat (to children). Accordingly, media narratives variously frame transness as the cause (or effect) of any mental health issues, entirely deny the authenticity of trans suicide statistics (e.g., Transgender Trend, n.d.), or claim that trans children make "suicide threats [as] a demand for compliance" from parents (Freeman, as reported in Hansford, 2023b). Thus, there can be no moral rhetoric of the *queer* child.

Ultimately, protectionist narratives marginalise children, and actively oppress those who deviate from normative developmental expectations. The child, apparently vulnerable and pre-rational, is considered to therefore require protection from external threats but also from themselves. The crux of this is that adults deny children autonomy on the premise of protection, yet it is ultimately not the actual child they are protecting, but rather the 'best interests' of a theoretical future adult and moreover of future society. It is assumed that this adult will be happier and more successful if they are as closely aligned to normative social expectations as possible. Thus, the child must be protected from queer knowledge, and prevented from exploring queer desire – because the plastic child, with its 'true' proto-heterosexual origin, can and should be shaped into a cisgender and heterosexual adult, and thereby saved from the failure of development that is queerness (and social reproduction saved from those who might threaten it).

3.5.4. Precocious knowledge

Accordingly, knowledge about sexuality – and *especially* about queerness – is constructed as inappropriate for children and as corruptive of their innocence and proper development towards "the good moral heteronormative adult citizen" (K.H. Robinson, 2012, pp. 264-265). Thus, children's access to such information is heavily censored and strictly regulated. However, far from being protective, this manufactured ignorance actually heightens their vulnerability, as they are denied the accurate knowledge necessary to competently navigate their experiences and relationships (Kitzinger, 2015; Farrelly et al., 2023). It is a "purposeful obfuscation of the materiality of young

people's embodied gender and sexuality becomings" – also negating their own desires for this education and their capability to engage with it (Atkinson et al., 2023, p. 2141)

Indeed, narratives of age inappropriateness are particularly directed at LGBT-related topics. Whilst Section 28 was repealed two decades ago, the underlying normative discourses remain that frame the child and the queer as oppositional (as in Edelman, 2004), and indeed the impact of the legislation persists in schools today (C. Lee, 2019; Llewellyn, 2022b). Whilst cisheterosexuality, established as neutral 'truth' in a way that allows its workings as a discourse to be invisibilised, "is a socially sanctioned integral part of children's everyday educational experiences" (K.H. Robinson, 2012, p. 268), *queer* forms of gender and sexuality are uniquely problematised. Queerness alone is perceived as overtly sexual and inherently destructive to childhood innocence (Renold, 2006) – and thus in need of regulation. Accordingly, LGBT+ curricular inclusion is framed as difficult, threatening, and controversial (K.H. Robinson et al., 2017), whereas similar content, but with cisheterosexual people and themes, is considered unsexed and benign (McKinnon et al., 2017).

Such narratives also specifically attend to transness. In some cases, this manifests as teachers simply assuming that trans-related information or training is not 'relevant' to younger age groups (R.A. Marx et al., 2017). However, it is often also framed as inappropriate in a more threatening way, and as something that children should actively be protected from exposure to. As one elementary school teacher surveyed about trans-affirmative policies by Martino, Omercajic et al. (2022) stated, "adults/parents are afraid that the students are too young to be exposed to these conversations" (p. 84). In another illustrative example, Maughan et al. (2022) highlight how such dominant claims were the justificatory logic used by educational gatekeepers for rejecting permission to conduct trans-related research in early years settings. Moreover, trans children themselves may also be perceived as an inherently hypersexual and corruptive influence on their peers, including by educators (Smith & Payne, 2016).

Further, the 'danger' to children posed by knowledge about trans identities has featured significantly in recent UK political discourse. As attorney general at the time, Suella Braverman (2022) asserted that schools that teach trans-inclusive information – or even *words* such as 'transgender', 'intersex', or 'queer' – "are breaching their duty of impartiality and indoctrinating children into a one-sided and controversial view of gender". Nadhim Zahawi also weaponised the figure of the innocent and imperilled child in launching his Conservative Party leadership bid, proclaiming:

> *I will also continue to focus on letting children be children, protecting them from damaging and inappropriate nonsense being forced on them by radical activists* (Milton, 2022b)

Most recently, MP Miriam Cates led a group of colleagues in calling for a review of sex education in schools. Denouncing what they called a "catastrophe for childhood", they claimed that classes currently include "graphic lessons on oral sex, how to choke your partner safely, and 72 genders",

and that “even primary school children are being indoctrinated with radical and unevidenced ideologies about sex and gender” (Lothian-McLean, 2023; Woolcock, 2023; see section 3.3.3). Incidentally, it is notable here that these assertions rhetorically link information about ’72 genders’ (read: more than two) with instruction on carrying out specific non-normative (and presumably therefore threatening) sex acts, effectively framing both as equivalently inappropriate. Perhaps ironically, it is Cates’ own claims that are unevidenced – regardless, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak enthusiastically agreed to initiate the requested review. Irrespective of whether these assertions aligned with the reality of school practices, they followed the rules of a child protectionist and cissexist game of truth, and thus were easily accepted and discursively mobilised. As indeed A. Meyer (2007) contends regarding the power of such moral rhetoric of the child, there is no need for evidence or for Cates to justify *why* or *how* such lessons are threatening to children.

3.5.5. Direct government of children: A balance of adult interests

As was explored in preceding sections (3.3.2 and 3.4.6), Foucault contends that in contemporary society, governmentality is particularly effective because it involves “the subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies” (1993, p. 204). In this section I make the point that for children, the balance is shifted significantly towards the side of coercion and control – with opportunities for self-technologies gradually increasing with advancing age. This approach is popularly justified as a necessary consequence of immaturity, aligned with the natural biological development of increasing rationality. However, it can also be understood as a mechanism through which adults seek to ensure the ‘normal’ development of young people and thus to eventually produce them as self-governing adult subjects, securing normative futurity. Correspondingly, in contemporary (Western) society, intergenerational power relations are organised such that – whilst children’s opinions may be sought on issues that affect their lives (including the possibility of their transition) – almost exclusively it is adults who ultimately have the authority to make such decisions. Any negotiations or contests of control are predominantly between parents (or other adult guardians) and state institutions (Wyness, 1996).

Yet, as Rose (1999) explains, the rights of parents (or the family) to autonomy and privacy in how they raise their children are – in principle – not in fact in conflict with state regulation. Rather, this is an intentional technique of indirect government – “it stands rather as a testament to the success of those attempts to construct a family that will take upon itself the responsibility for the duties of socialization and will live them as its own desires” (p. 213). Thus, one technique through which the state governs childhood is the responsibilisation and ‘freedom’ of families, for whom their children are “an economic and psychic investment in the future” (Katz, 2008, p. 9). Parents thus desire for their children to develop normally and successfully, and are guided in striving for this by expertise, and through images of normal and good parenting that teach the ‘right’ way to monitor, teach, play, and interact with children – to avoid compromising their academic and life chances. Hence, “‘the

family' has come to operate as a social mechanism for producing and regulating the subjective capacities of future citizens and as the privileged pathway for the fulfilment of individual wishes and hope" (Rose, p. 155). Accordingly, parents tend to be heavily invested in their children's development towards a normatively *gendered* future, as a repository for their own desires and futurity.

Moreover, the construct of parental authority is a powerful rhetorical weapon specifically in circumstances that serve (cishetero) *normative* interests. Perhaps analogously to the way that the moral rhetoric of childhood is primarily only effective for normative or idealised children (section 3.5.3), here parental rights claims have discursive weight when their own desires of futurity (through directing their child's development) align with dominant social reproduction. For instance, mainstream and influential media outlets such as *The New York Times* report sympathetically on parents who believe that their own rights have been breached by schools, where the school has followed a child's request not to inform their parents that they are trans (K.J.M. Baker, 2023). In other cases, parents are similarly framed as having legitimate grievances when they are fully informed, but it is without their *permission* that teachers have agreed to use a different name or pronouns for their child (Griffiths, 2021).

In such situations, developmentalism as taken-for-granted 'truth' justifies an assumption that the child lacks their own legitimate right to have such a request fulfilled. They are instead conceived as the *property*, or an extension of the personhood of their parents (Gill-Peterson, 2018); hence, in respecting the child's wishes, the school is perceived to have taken something away from the parents, to have inappropriately influenced the futurity that the parents have the right to control. Correspondingly, in her aforementioned speech opposing support of trans youth, Suella Braverman (2022) asserted that:

> *schools and teachers* who socially transition a child *without the knowledge or consent of parents or without medical advice increase their exposure to a negligence claim for breach of their duty of care to that child* (emphasis added)

Here Braverman's linguistic choices frame transition as something done *to* a child; the child themselves is only an object and not an agentic subject.

Additionally, parental authority is utilised as a heteroactivist (see section 3.5.3) strategy. In this context it is the right of the parents to control how their child is educated, and what information they can access, a right that is wielded in opposition to LGBT+ inclusion in schools – or from the heteroactivist perspective, "opposition to so-called state indoctrination and opposition to the promotion of gender 'theory' that will create gender confusion in (their heterosexual) children" (Nash & Browne, 2021, p. 75). Hence, the aforementioned Rowe family objected to a trans child co-existing in class with their own son – which they believed that the school had breached their

parental rights in allowing, and to their particular dismay, without consulting with or obtaining their permission first.

However, parental authority does *not* hold the same weight when it is activated towards non-normative goals – in which case it may be framed as going against 'expertise' regarding the child's apparent best interests. Notably, in the Rowe case, the parents of the trans student were not discursively constructed as having an equivalent right to determine their own child's education or how they should be gendered in school. More broadly, parental support of trans youth – particularly regarding access to medical transition – is often treated with suspicion, or as not within their legitimate right to authorise. In such cases, the rights of the state or society at large to encompass the child within its own ambitions for futurity may be seen to take precedence over the parents' personal interests.

Accordingly, Rose (1999) details how expertise is wielded by professionals in state institutions, enacting normalisation in their (medical, psychological, social) work with families – allowing abnormality "to be acted upon with a degree of force, universality, and certainty but without disabling the family mechanism" (p. 131). Hence, deviance could be 'corrected' whilst maintaining the integrity of indirect government through the family. This technique appears evident in the experiences of supportive parents with NHS children's gender services, as shown in research by Horton (2023b). Clinicians were primarily trans-negative and positioned cis identity as the desired outcome, attempting to establish a 'cause' of the child's transness and leaving parents feeling judged. Further, parents described "clinician discouragement or even rebukes for supporting their trans child" (p. 80). In this way, professionals used their 'expert' positioning to direct parents towards denying their children affirmation, and thereby attempted to ensure that the parents would carry out the responsibility of facilitating normal (cisgender) development that the state had delegated to them.

Moreover, the state and its institutions also retain the authority to directly intervene should parents fail to meet this obligation. As such, parents in Horton's (2023b) study:

> *spoke of the potential consequences of disengagement from the gender service, mentioning a wide range of potential repercussions for a trans child and their family, including potential social services involvement, potential problems with schools and GPs, denial of access to healthcare at puberty, and even potential custody issues for children in separated families*

Hence, they "felt compelled and coerced into continuing with assessments and clinical sessions" (p. 80) that opposed their own position of supporting their trans child, as despite the notion of 'parental rights' that apparently holds such authority in (for instance) heteroactivist cases, as parents they do *not* have the right to overrule state-mandated normativity. This point is also particularly and

disturbingly evident in legislation recently proposed in Florida that would take state custody of trans children whose parents support them receiving gender-affirming healthcare (Baska, 2023).

Such direct state intervention is also enacted more broadly where parents fail to sufficiently facilitate their child's normal development, for instance if a parent does not ensure school attendance or refuses consent for life-saving medical treatment. This intervention is purportedly safeguarding the actual child in question. However, it is also responding to a threat to the production of the child as a normalised, healthy adult subject (Taylor, 2012), in line with biopolitical government and reproductive futurism.

Overall, the treatment of children is about adult authority and interests. Hence, in reference to laws that remain contemporarily in force (1989 Children Act; 1988 Education Reform Act), Wyness (1996) contends that:

> *the general thrust of legislation, as it has been for all childcare policy in Britain since the 19th century, is to reassert a more protectionist strategy of care and control over children and strengthen the interests of adults who have 'claims' over the child's welfare* (p. 433)

Hence, adult authority is assumed, and any contest to power relations is framed in terms of parental sovereignty against state intervention – "the 'adult-centric' opposition between family and state" (p. 435). However, this apparent balance of two sides is consistently weighted in any given situation towards the side whose claim follows the rules of the societal game of truth – or, the side that aligns with the normative. As such, the same political and media sources will variously emphasise parental rights or state intervention, seemingly without contradiction, in service of the same normative goal. The Florida state government that is advocating the bill to remove trans children from affirming parents, for example, has also passed legislation banning teachers from mentioning LGBT+ topics, explicitly in the name of 'parental rights' (Wakefield, 2022).

3.5.6. Counter-discourses and constrained child agency

Conversely, there are also counter-discourses that critique developmentalism and the naturalisation of adult dominance. Indeed, since the late twentieth century childhood studies research has emphasised that constraints on the agency of young people are produced through social structure and through developmental discourse itself, rather than being an inherent consequence of age or biology. Accordingly, children – *and adults* – are "*potentially* competent social actors, who have limitations placed on their abilities to act as agents in certain circumstances and who are not fully independent beings" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 256, emphasis in original). Further, the notion of *becoming* also does not apply exclusively to children; all people, regardless of age, are constantly changing, and there is no final fixed self to be achieved (N. Lee, 2001; Kesby et al., 2006). This undermines developmentalist arguments that children should be prevented (or 'protected') from

making potentially irreversible decisions – such as medical or even social transition – for the sake of their 'true' adult self.

Moreover, as highlighted in section 2.8, (trans) children do exercise agency and resistance. In one illustrative example, Slovin (2023) highlights how high school students taking a course about social justice contested the normative hierarchy between adults/teachers and youth/students. Trans and queer students challenged the teacher's authority on LGBTQ topics, expressing their own expertise and rejecting for instance the teacher's attempted imposition of essentialist narratives of sexuality onto their own experience. However, at a structural level this agency is constrained by inequitable and adultist power relations (Horton, 2023c).

Counter-discourses and challenges to developmentalism do have influence – on some individual educators who work to deconstruct adultism in their own practice (Gandolfi & Mills, 2022), and on a broader level associated for instance with societal shifts towards granting children their own rights. However, it is also the case that developmentalism remains dominant, and with it the constraints on children's abilities to exercise agency that are justified by an assumed universal requirement for adult protection. As K.H. Robinson (2012) contends, "[t]he articulation of rights given to children is only ever partial and/or conditional on adult regulations" (p. 258).

This is demonstrated in, for instance, the 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* – which has also been criticised as attempting to apply a specifically Western idea of childhood as an international standard (Gadda, 2008). In Article 12 of the convention, children are granted the right to express their views about things that affect them. However, their views must simply be *considered* in the decision-making process; it is still adults who make the final decision. It is also adults who determine how much weight to attribute to a child's opinion, with the language used in the convention appealing to developmental narratives in the recommendation that such assessments are done "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (p. 5). Ultimately, a child's decision has no inherent authority on its own, and must be judged acceptably rational by adults. Thus – at least within adult-dominated spheres of society and public institutions, and certainly in terms of socially legitimate courses of action – a child's only real recourse against adult authority is through an appeal to (other) adults, who may or may not consider the child's claim to be valid.

3.6. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical and philosophical framework for this thesis, namely an integration of Foucault with critical realism. I have argued that the resultant combination of ontological realism and epistemological relativism can account for the distinction between the

ontological real, and those truth discourses that are naturalised as fact not through genuine correspondence with reality, but through socio-culturally contingent power/knowledge relations, or games of truth. I then introduced and discussed the workings of three such discourses, each of which are relevant to the investigation of contingent causation regarding how teachers come to have particular approaches to trans students: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism. In the following chapter, I explain the methodological approach through which I have gone about that investigation.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1. Research approach

4.1.1. Complexity and contingent causation

In this chapter, prior to outlining in detail the methods used in this research, I will first develop the Foucauldian and critical realist onto-epistemological framework, specifically focusing on the associated approach to investigating causation. This approach takes an observed phenomenon – teachers' particular approaches to trans students – and works backwards from this, following a retroductive inferential logic, to analyse how it has contingently come to be that way and not otherwise.

Accordingly, I am taking a case-based approach to investigate this research question, with individual teachers as the unit of analysis. Following the theoretical perspectives that I have outlined (section 3.2), these human agents (or subjects): a) have emergent properties, meaning that they are not reducible to constituent elements at higher or lower levels; and b) are contingently produced. This is notably distinct from the positivist assumption that causal properties are deterministic and predictably produce a certain outcome, regardless of context – which underlies the aforementioned epistemic and ontic fallacies and the idea that empirical observations directly equate to the real (Bhaskar, 1986/2009). Positivist approaches therefore attempt to demonstrate causality through constant conjunction, isolating individual variables and their apparent discrete contribution to a particular outcome. In contrast to this, my research here views each case holistically, as an open system that communicates with other agents and social structures – and considers how it may have been contingently and contextually produced through the interaction of various causal tendencies.

I am also drawing on the theory and language of complexity – the combination of which with critical realism has been termed 'complex realism' (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012; Reed & Harvey, 1992). This facilitates an account of cases (teachers) as complex systems for which a change in 'state' (approach to trans students) is *possible* – as opposed to simple systems "to which a notion of state can be assigned once and for all" (Rosen, 1987, p. 324). This is also not 'restricted' complexity (Morin, 2008), in which "the complex emerges from rule-based interactions among simple agents" (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014, p. 5). Instead, it is 'general' complexity, to which the aforementioned concept of *emergence* is integral – the complex system has properties that cannot be understood only in terms of the simple interactions of its component parts. In line with this, Byrne and Uprichard describe contingent causation as "why something and particularly any complex system has come to be the kind of thing that it is and not something other than it is" (p. 112). Accordingly, the different possible states (here, approaches to trans students) that a system can reach are conceived as qualitatively distinct in *kind*, not just in (quantitative) degree.

Moreover, Foucault's genealogies are themselves an investigation of this contingent causation (Koopman, 2011); they aim to identify how intransitive social structures and truth discourses – such as the modern penal system or sexuality – were not inevitable but emerged within a particular historical context. As Garland (2014) contends, the "intent is to problematize the present by revealing the power relations upon which it depends and the contingent processes that have brought it into being" (p. 372). Through this approach, Foucault de-naturalises taken-for-granted practices and suggests that they might be otherwise. Hence, he explains:

> *What I am trying to do is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us; I am therefore trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape.* (interviewed in Simon, 1971, p. 201)

Returning to the discourse of cisnormativity, whilst it is not explicitly addressed by Foucault using such terminology, Judith Butler (1999) highlights that in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (1978) and *Herculine Barbin* (1980b), he considers oppositional binary sex categories to have been contingently "produced in the service of the social regulation and control of sexuality" (Butler, p. 120). A discourse of sex as innate is made to function as truth, such that it can be referenced as the natural cause of (hetero)sexuality – "as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, to perpetuate power relations" (p. 121).

4.1.2. Investigating causation

Following this approach to contingent causation, my research in this thesis investigates how teachers may have come to have a particular approach to trans students – at that point in time – rather than any other. To achieve this, critical realism advocates the use of *retroduction* as inferential logic: starting from a known outcome (the state of a system) and working backwards to find out how it came to occur. Accordingly, a description with retroductive adequacy would be able to explain how a system reached a certain state over time (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012). Thus, to investigate causation, data must be obtained that provides this type of information about the past and present of a case; such data may be described as case 'attributes'. Whilst attributes might otherwise be termed 'variables' under positivism, such variables and their effects cannot be truly separated out from their situated context within each case; as discussed, they do not deterministically produce specific events independent to systems. Instead, one considers the powers and tendencies that attributes might have, either independently or in combination – to produce a system state as an emergent property. These attributes are what can be observed and measured at the empirical level; Byrne and Uprichard describe (changes in) attributes as 'traces', left behind by the true underlying mechanisms and temporal *trajectories* of the system. From these traces,

knowledge may be inferred about what left them – namely, the intransitive objects that exist at the deeper ontological levels of the actual and the real.

Moreover, my research approach follows Byrne and Uprichard's (2012) argument that it is possible to go further than the idiographic, individual-case-based limitations of retroduction, to utilise *retrodiction*:

> *modes of inquiry that not only try to explain what has happened, how any system has come to be as it is, but also through informed purposive action, how to intervene in order to produce a desired future state of a system* (p. 112)

Following this, results that are (cautiously) generalisable may be obtained through systematic classification and comparison of multiple cases of the same kind (*near neighbours*) – evaluating similarities and differences in the trajectories of systems over time and in relation to their outcomes. In this research, teachers are considered to be *near neighbours* in this sense; they are complex systems located within the ontological stratum of individual agents, and are of the same kind (as opposed to other agents such as students, administrators, or parents).

Retrodictive methods might then facilitate *prediction* of the potential future trajectories of other cases. Crucially, combining retroductive and retrodictive logics may enable identification of *leverage points* (Meadows, 1999) for effective intervention – here, this would be points at which intervention could change a teacher's trajectory and lead them towards an anti-cisnormative position in their approach to trans students. As I will elaborate in the following section, my research design follows such a combinatory approach across two complementary stages: detailed explorations of individual cases (interviews and thematic analysis); and systematic comparison of a larger number of cases (questionnaire and Qualitative Comparative Analysis).

4.2. Research design

4.2.1. A two-stage approach

To reiterate, the overall research question is:

How do teachers come to have particular approaches towards trans students?

My research design sought to answer this question in keeping with the theoretical approach that I have described, and is as follows – initially presented in summarised form to provide an overview, and subsequently with each stage explained in detail.

1. *Stage One*
    a. Through (15) semi-structured interviews, I obtained detailed descriptions of cases, including data about individual teachers' approaches towards trans students (their *state*), and about the *attributes* that may have influenced their trajectories to reach that state.
    b. I used thematic analysis to retroductively produce insights about the salient features of these cases. Aspects of cases and their outcomes were used to inform questions asked of participants in the second stage data collection. These questions primarily reflected codes rather than the final themes, as the latter were developed as part of a recursive and iterative analytic process into which consideration of the questionnaire data itself was integrated.
2. *Stage Two*
    a. I collected data about attributes of (93) teachers' experiences, using an online questionnaire that primarily consisted of multiple-choice, Likert-style questions. After considering data from both stages and thereby finalising the themes (or attributes), I systematically classified each questionnaire participant with regard to their state (outcome) and each of the attributes.
    b. I then used Qualitative Comparative Analysis to systematically compare cases in this classified data, producing potential mechanistic pathways to trans-positive and negative outcomes. This thereby facilitated retrodictive inference regarding possible sites of intervention for influencing teachers' trajectories towards anti-cisnormative approaches.

4.2.2. Additional analysis and theory development

Finally, I considered all of the findings together, theorising the potential mechanisms of interaction of multiple attributes in complex causal pathways. The exact nature of this work, which constitutes Chapter Nine, was not anticipated prior to commencing the research, but instead was dependent upon and developed during the analysis in stages one and two. It led to a focus on the particular sub-question of the *barriers* to teachers adopting trans-emancipatory approaches – and how these might function in practice. I found that taking a hybrid approach to social theory here (M. Murphy, 2021), and specifically drawing on insights from Honneth's (1995) *recognition theory*, enabled a greater depth of analysis – considering not only how identified attributes influenced teachers' approaches, but also why these frequently led them to adopt practices that upheld trans marginalisation and exclusion, despite commonly believing that they were in fact being appropriately inclusive. This conceptualisation of *why* supportive intentions are not currently translating into trans-emancipatory approaches, through examining an *experiential* dimension for both teachers and trans students, may have the potential to inform practical methods of effective intervention at the relevant identified sites. It may help to provide an informed *empathy* with trans

students' position and needs, supporting teachers to understand why existing 'inclusive' practices do not confer school belonging and in fact contribute to the material conditions of trans vulnerability and marginalisation.

4.3. Ethical considerations

4.3.1. Formal requirements

All decisions were made in compliance with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018), and following the framework for research ethics provided and required by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2015), as the research funder.

Ethical approval was granted by Durham University School of Education Ethics Committee, initially on 1 March 2019 and subsequently on 25 September 2020 (Appendices A and B). This was done in a two-part process to best facilitate the ongoing nature of ethical decision-making necessitated by the research design. As the intention was to use interview data to inform the content of the questionnaire, ethical approval for the latter could only be appropriately sought once the former stage had been completed and hence sufficient information was available on which to base ethical decisions. In line with this, the following two sections will now address each of these stages in turn.

4.3.2. Interviews

An important principle of behaving ethically towards participants is ensuring that their involvement in research is based on their voluntary consent. In order to ensure this, it was necessary for me to provide potential participants with sufficient and transparent information, to allow them to make an informed decision (Wiles, 2013). Prior to an interview, this took the form of two documents: an information sheet and a privacy notice. The former explained the study in lay terms, and described what would happen to them if they took part. It also made their rights as a participant clear, including their freedom to withdraw, and the confidentiality and anonymity with which their data would be treated. The privacy notice gave further detail about the types of data that would be collected and why, as well as the compliance of this with legal obligations (primarily UK GDPR[8]). Additionally, potential participants were given multiple opportunities (such as on first contact, and immediately prior to the interview) to ask me questions or discuss any concerns, and they were also provided with contact information for my supervisor.

Participants gave their written consent by signing a consent form. This form requested signed confirmation that the individual had read and understood the information about the study and data

[8] UK General Data Protection Regulation, the law governing most personal data processing in the UK.

management, as well as specific acknowledgement that questions may ask about potentially sensitive information (e.g., politics, LGBT+). Additional consent was requested (and was given by all participants) for audio recording of the interviews. It was also important that participant involvement was voluntary not only at the point of signing the consent form, but throughout the whole process (ESRC, 2023; Klykken, 2022). I endeavoured to ensure that participants were aware that they could stop the interview at any time or choose not to answer any particular question, and that they would feel comfortable exercising this right (Bos & Lepianka, 2020).

I also had a responsibility to minimise any potential harm to participants. As the interviews involved discussions about participants' life experiences, potentially including negative or difficult events, it was possible that this could be upsetting and cause emotional distress (D.W. Jones, 1998). I attempted to mitigate the risk of this by informing them in advance of the topics of the interview, and again through the option to stop at any time or skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering. I would also have addressed any appearance of distress during an interview by offering options of taking a break, stopping entirely, and/or accessing support resources – whilst respecting the participant's autonomy to make this choice (Whitney & Evered, 2022). However, in practice and as far as I could reasonably be aware, this was not required.

Furthermore, I aimed to make the interviews as convenient and comfortable for participants as possible by giving them the option to choose the time and location[9] (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The majority (11) took place virtually via video or phone call; for the other four, I travelled to meet them at their school. Practically, distance is likely to have constrained the true choice between physical and virtual locations for many participants, although I did travel outside of the North-East (my own location) for one interview.

For in-person interviews, as an alternative to their workplace I also offered participants the option of using a meeting room at my university. These two locations were considered an appropriate balance between the privacy necessary for confidential conversations, and being sufficiently 'public' to minimise personal safety or comfort concerns for both parties (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Although it was an intentional decision to provide multiple options, I do think that the school option likely facilitated a more comfortable and open interview dynamic than may have occurred at the university. At the latter, participants' lack of familiarity with the environment and my own role at the institution may have affected (perceived or actual) power relations between us.

Immediately following each interview, the audio recording was saved to my computer, anonymously and with no connection to personally identifiable information. As soon as an interview had been transcribed, the corresponding audio recording was destroyed. I also completed all of the transcription myself, thereby keeping participants' voices (which theoretically could be identified)

[9] Interviews took place prior to Covid-19 restrictions, so this did not affect their choice.

confidential. This data was all stored on my personal computer, and the transcripts transferred to online cloud-based storage once analysis was complete; both locations were and are password-protected and accessible only to myself. Additionally, the only identifiable personal data that was stored was the signed consent forms, which were kept separately from the interview data and with no information that could allow them to be linked to specific interviews. These consent forms were scanned and saved securely within online password-protected cloud-based storage, and the paper copies then destroyed.

Participants were made aware of the intention of anonymous data storage, and the implications for them in terms of withdrawal of consent. If any individual had chosen to withdraw during an interview, all data recorded up until that point would have been destroyed. However, with the exception of the signed consent form, it theoretically may not have been possible to withdraw their data at a later point in time, because the data specific to them would not be directly personally identifiable. In practice, because only 15 interviews were conducted, and they were sufficiently distinct in content, had a participant actually requested to withdraw, I would likely have decided ethically to fulfil this request, as I would have been able to distinguish their data based on my own memory of the interview. However, no participant actually did make such a request.

Finally, in analysing and reporting the data, I assigned pseudonyms to participants. I also anonymised references to particular schools and student names.

4.3.3. Questionnaire

Participants in the questionnaire stage of the research were also required to provide their voluntary informed consent in order to take part. The most significant difference between the process here, compared to obtaining consent for the interview stage, was that I did not (physically or virtually) meet or discuss the research personally with questionnaire participants; their decisions and completion (or otherwise) of the questionnaire took place anonymously online. To ensure that potential participants were appropriately informed, an information sheet was provided on the webpage prior to the actual questionnaire. This explained the purpose of the project, what would be involved in participating, and how their data would be managed. It also included contact details for myself and my supervisor, providing individuals with an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns they may have had prior to deciding whether to participate. Due to the entirely anonymous nature of data collection, meaning that no personally identifiable information was stored, a privacy notice was not relevant and so was not provided. Consent was provided by participants through their completion of a webpage form, on which they indicated their consent by ticking appropriate boxes to confirm agreement that they had read the information provided and consented to take part in the project. The questionnaire could only be accessed once participants had confirmed consent in this way.

As with interview participants, those who took part in the questionnaire were made fully aware of the nature of data storage – in this case on a password-protected computer, again with access restricted to me only. They were also made aware of the implications of this anonymous data storage for their ability to withdraw consent; whilst they could do so at any point prior to submitting their responses simply by exiting the webpage, this would as a rule no longer be possible after submission, because personally identifiable data was not obtained.

However, I was presented with an unexpected decision when one participant emailed me soon after their submission, requesting for me to indeed delete their data. Such situational ethical dilemmas whilst conducting social research are certainly not uncommon, and generally do not have a single 'correct' answer; decisions require "careful consideration, evaluation and justification" on the part of the researcher (Wiles, 2013, p. 69). My first priority, ethically, was my responsibility to the participant and their right to control or consent to what happens to their data (Klykken, 2022). On the other hand, there were two main points of concern, the first being that I could not be absolutely certain which data set belonged to that individual. The second related to my responsibility to the wider research community in terms of integrity and high-quality data (BERA, 2018), given that deleting a questionnaire response after submission would contradict the information initially given to participants (that this would not be possible), and that additional data would likely be beneficial to the overall research. Ultimately, I did delete the participant's data (and informed them as such), as based on the information they gave me (including the date and time of their submission) I was able to confidently distinguish which belonged to them. I discussed this with my primary supervisor prior to taking this action, and she agreed that this was appropriate. The decision may have been different had a participant made such a request at a later point in time after submission (the accuracy of a recalled time and date may have been in question), or if multiple submissions had been made by different individuals at a similar time.

4.4. Stage One: Interviews

4.4.1. Sampling and recruitment

The sample consisted of 15 participants, each meeting the inclusion criterion of having been (past or present) a teacher in UK school(s). Recruitment to the sample involved two primary methods: online advertisement through social media; and directly emailing schools using publicly available contact information. One-to-one interviews were conducted with participants between March 2019 and January 2020. With the exception of one retired participant, all were practising teachers to some extent at the time of interview, including one trainee and one who was semi-retired. The age range was 22 to 59. Four participants were men and 11 were women. I did not explicitly collect detailed

demographic data beyond this; however, a minority did discuss experiencing marginalisation associated with race, disability, sexuality, and/or being trans.

As is predominant in qualitative social research (Patton, 2002), I used non-probability, purposive sampling. This strongly contrasts with the representative or random sampling that is a pre-requisite for much statistical testing and generalisability (Berk & Freedman, 2003), and in claiming to facilitate the isolation of individual variable effects is in fact epistemologically incompatible with complex causality and the case-based approach of this research. Indeed, I instead aimed to follow principles of maximum variation (or heterogeneity) sampling; this would include participants demonstrating a variety of different (combinations of) life experiences and perspectives (Merriam, 2009) – or, different 'kinds' of cases – such that I might be able to identify multiple distinct causal pathways and attributes. However, for practical reasons including lack of access to a complete sampling frame of UK teachers and their characteristics, sampling also involved opportunistic (or emergent) methods – "adding to a sample to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities *after* fieldwork has begun" (Patton, p. 240). In one notable example of this, which also aligned somewhat with snowball sampling methods, during an interview the participant offered to refer me to a colleague who they were aware had experience working with a trans student; this colleague subsequently also took part in the research.

On the whole, I was reasonably successful in obtaining a heterogeneous sample, including diversity in length and breadth of teaching experience, training route (e.g., BEd., PGCE, Teach First), and student population. Significantly, participants varied in their experience with and approaches towards trans students. However, although there was geographic diversity within England, unfortunately experiences of teaching in the other UK nations are not represented in this sample. Overall, the final sample size (n= 15) struck a balance between facilitating such case diversity, and remaining small enough to enable in-depth knowledge and exploration of each particular case – within time and other practical constraints. Participant pseudonyms are listed in Table 1, with limited personal characteristics so as to protect confidentiality.

Table 1

List of Interview Participants

Participant number	Pseudonym	Age	School type and teaching role
1	Erin	25	Primary school teacher
2	Michael	57	Secondary school Geography and Religious Education teacher (semi-retired)
3	Amanda	39	Secondary school Biology teacher
4	Sarah	53	Primary school headteacher
5	Rachel	46	Primary school headteacher
6	Bethany	24	Primary school / Early years teacher
7	Tracy	44	Special school (Key Stage 4) headteacher
8	Jenny	29	Secondary school English teacher
9	Daniel	22	Secondary and Further Education (FE) SEND[10] teacher
10	Patrick	24	Primary school teacher
11	Chris	42	FE college (previously secondary school) Media Studies and English teacher
12	Georgia	22	Secondary school English teacher
13	Laura	23	Secondary school Religious Education trainee teacher
14	Hannah	27	Secondary school French teacher
15	Wendy	59	Primary school (head)teacher and forest school teacher (retired)

4.4.2. Methods

The interview method was chosen to facilitate the collection of in-depth information about participants' lives and experiences, in a way that is appropriate to a critical realist approach; this enables "access to a complex social world of causal interactions" (Brönnimann, 2022, p. 1). Interviews were semi-structured, broadly based on 15 questions (Appendix C). This meant that there was a basic structure to tie our conversations to the relevant topic, but it also allowed flexibility to explore the specificity of each case and participants' particular experiences and knowledges, hence facilitating access to new or unexpected information (Ruslin et al., 2022).

As discussed in section 4.3.2, interviews were conducted either in person at a participant's workplace, or virtually by phone or video call. Most lasted about one hour, with a range of 46

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minutes to one hour and 44 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded (with explicit participant consent) to facilitate subsequent transcription.

4.4.3. Power and positionality

Each interview, as an interpersonal interaction, inherently involved the exercise of power relations between myself and the participant (Foucault, 1984/1997; see section 3.2). These power relations were influenced not only by our situational roles as researcher and researched (Edwards & Holland, 2013), but also by our various other personal and social identities. Correspondingly, England (1994) argues that "the positionality and biography of the researcher plays a central role in the research process, in the field as well as in the final text" (p. 87). It is therefore important to address this (and beyond an uncritical or 'confessional' list of identities [Boveda & Annamma, 2023]), both for ethical reasons and in terms of reflexively considering how my own and participants' subjectivities shaped the research data and results (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Whilst in this section I will focus on power and positionality primarily in relation to the interviews, the following section (4.4.4) also attends to the role of researcher subjectivity in data analysis. Of particular relevance in this latter regard is my experience as a trans person, as conducive to an intuitive awareness of subtle manifestations of cisnormativity and an understanding of how particular teaching practices may contribute to or mitigate trans marginalisation – albeit of course trans people are a heterogenous group of which I do not represent the entirety.

Indeed, researcher positionality is nuanced and fluid (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019); it is more complex than either being an insider or else an outsider to a participant group that may homogeneously be of higher or lower social status than oneself (Merriam et al., 2001). In line with this, whilst there were certainly also commonalities, I found that the particular dynamics were different in every interview – reflecting the multiple facets of social identity, and particularly where I was positioned in *relation* to each participant.

Broadly, I would be considered an outsider in the sense that I am not myself a teacher. Whilst this meant that I did not have immediate familiarity with this experience, it did not necessarily create significant interpersonal barriers; as a postgraduate researcher, I plausibly shared various aspects of cultural capital with participants, for instance in terms of university-level education and arguably a middle class 'professional' subjectivity. I was also acquainted with their work role and environment to a reasonable extent, having been through the school system in England as a student myself. However, particularly with those participants who were older and more experienced, in some ways I did instinctively feel a greater distance between our positions and perhaps a level of deference to their authority in this regard. In these interviews, I often felt quite anxious to ensure that I came across in an appropriately professional manner; I have considered whether I may have been attempting to present myself as clearly more akin to the 'teacher' than the 'student' position.

In terms of other socially mediated identities, a notable and perhaps unusual dynamic was present in that the category of participants as a whole (teachers) was not a marginalised group, yet the topic of research *did* pertain to one such group, trans people – of which I myself was (am) a member, but they (for the most part) were not. Moreover, none of us were at this point trans *children*, even if some of us may have been in the past. Accordingly, and whilst none of the participants were explicitly trans-hostile, the majority were advantaged by cisnormative forms of power, and in some parts of the interviews it was challenging for me to hear about practices and opinions that were potentially harmful to trans students. Additionally, this power dynamic influenced my choices regarding whether to inform participants of my own trans identity. Although several were already aware, for instance due to how they had been recruited, in most cases I did not explicitly discuss this. To some extent, I was cautious about whether participants might perceive this as a form of bias, or feel influenced towards giving particular kinds of answers. However, I would have answered honestly if a participant had asked me directly.

On the other hand, in some interviews, and especially with the one (known) trans participant (Daniel), being open about my own transness was actively beneficial to rapport and shared understandings (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021). This may have also facilitated greater comfort in the interview context and potentially trust regarding the motivation and intentions of the research, particularly given the significant history of research enacting harm on trans communities (Keenan, 2022). Additionally, although not discussed to the same extent, I also found similar benefits to sharing elements of my own experiences with queer sexuality and disability, where situationally appropriate (Llewellyn, 2022a). Conversely, there were also situations in which participants discussed identities and experiences of marginalisation which I did not share, including for example with regard to race. From my own position as a white researcher, I sought to reduce the associated unequal power dynamics by approaching such instances with humility and respect for participants' knowledges, and through expressions of empathy and solidarity. Such inequalities cannot be entirely mitigated, and indeed whiteness may function as "a key dimension of difference shaping research" (Britton, 2020, p. 340). Yet, this was also but one of the many different intersecting facets of our constantly shifting positional relations. Relevant to all of the interviews is, as England (1994) identifies, "the situated and partial nature of our understanding of 'others'" (p. 87).

Finally, although in many ways I was dependent on the participants' knowledge and willingness to share this with me (England, 1994), as the researcher I ultimately had control over the interpretation and reporting of their narratives (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023); they were effectively trusting me to represent them respectfully and appropriately. I took this responsibility seriously and approached the analysis with this in mind.

4.4.4. Thematic analysis

I chose to use thematic analysis (TA) as a method which could facilitate the identification and exploration of patterns, differences, and similarities between cases, and the potential use of both data-driven and theory-driven elements (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) within an overall retroductive inferential logic. Specifically, I used a particular version of TA that aligned with my onto-epistemological assumptions and was able to produce the kind of explanatory information that I was interested in. As the foundation for my method, I used *reflexive* TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b). This approach is also epistemologically relativist, with the outcome as themes that are understood to be *generated* through researcher engagement with the data, rather than 'discovered' in the positivist sense that would equate the empirical to the ontologically real. Accordingly, and in line with the position outlined in the preceding section (4.4.3), in reflexive TA "researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a *resource* for knowledge production, which inevitably sculpts the knowledge produced, rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility" (2021a, pp. 334-335, emphasis in original). Thus, my positionality as a trans person (for instance) is beneficial to my ability to produce analytic insights, as opposed to a problematic source of bias. In fact, it would be impossible for any researcher to approach the data in an entirely neutral way, uninformed or unaffected by their own subjectivity and how this is produced through discourse (Foucault, 1977, 1978). As such, this approach notably contrasts with positivist 'coding reliability' TA (Boyatzis, 1998), which does claim that 'objectivity' is both possible and beneficial.

However, whilst I followed the general principles and stages of reflexive TA, there were also some distinctions in my method relating to my critical realist approach. In particular, my analysis was *explanatory* in nature, and therefore the development of themes was the production of (potentially) *causal* explanations – of teachers' different approaches to trans students. These may align with what Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021), in their realist TA, refer to as 'dispositional' themes: "theories about the properties and powers that must exist in order to produce the phenomena being studied" (p. 164). Whilst Wiltshire and Ronkainen also propose 'experiential' and 'inferential' themes (associated with empirical and actual ontological strata), in my own approach such descriptions and concepts align more with the *coding* process than the resultant themes. Interestingly, my method corresponds quite well with Fryer's (2022) account of a critical realist TA, especially regarding the causal themes – although the article in question had not yet been published at the time.

In conducting my analysis, I therefore broadly followed the six stages of the reflexive TA process that Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021b) delineate, encompassing data familiarisation, coding, developing themes (searching, reviewing, defining), and writing the report. Significantly, in this process the steps are not completed discretely and in simple order, but instead 'the analysis is recursive and iterative, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases as necessary" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1398). That being said, I started at the first step, familiarising myself with the data; this

arguably was already occurring during the interviews themselves, but began to be addressed explicitly in their transcription.

Accordingly, I chose to complete all of the transcription (from audio to written format) myself. This was time-consuming, but I believe highly worthwhile in terms of my familiarisation and immersion in the data. Indeed, many other researchers have commented on the value of transcription as itself a part of analysis; Bird (2005) for instance describes it as "key" (p. 227). The slow nature of the process, and the necessity to listen and read through the data multiple times to ensure accuracy, meant that I was spending time considering every word that participants said, as well as my own communication choices and our reciprocal interaction. As I progressed through the data, I made initial notes of my thoughts, ideas, and possible codes. I also found myself instinctively making links between what I was transcribing at any given moment and things that I had heard in previous interviews.

In this way, transcription itself can be interpretative and contributory to the creation of meanings (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). In contrast to, for instance, if I had run the audio files through speech-to-text software (and leaving aside the question of accuracy), my human brain as the processor does not simply mechanically convert one data format to another; it inescapably also interprets the data in the context of my prior knowledge and experiences. However, that is not to say that the transcripts were not, as recommended, "a 'verbatim' account of all verbal (and sometimes non-verbal – eg, coughs) utterances" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88); rather, I simply mean that the analytical coding stages were already beginning during transcription.

Additionally, I felt that completing this stage myself would be the most appropriate and ethical option, given the often sensitive nature of the data. Particularly in cases where participants discussed individual trans students, I was cautious about any possibility (however remote) of their identification, were any external person to hear the recordings. There are not a very large number of (known) trans youth in schools, or at least not enough to negate this possibility entirely. Pre-transcription, I would not have been able to ensure that any and all potentially identifiable information was removed, including any real names used which would not yet be replaced with pseudonyms. This held particular importance given that any trans students discussed would (most likely) not be aware of this or have given consent, as it was the teachers who were the participants.

Next, I moved on to a more systematic coding of the data, working through the interview transcripts in order and assigning codes to data items. This was done manually, using paper copies. At this point, my approach was primarily data-driven (inductive); although I generated codes with an underlying awareness of my research question, I included all data and potential codes even if they initially did not appear to have direct relevance. Boyatzis (1998) describes codes as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way

regarding the phenomenon" (p. 63). Accordingly, in this stage I generated a large number of different codes. These were then developed through collation and consolidation by conceptual similarity – whilst ensuring that the new or more general codes continued to appropriately represent the data (descriptive and interpretative validity; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

It was at this point that I used these developed codes to inform the production of the questionnaire for the second stage of the research. This is described in more detail in the following section (4.5), and the questionnaire itself is reproduced as Appendix D.

Whilst the questionnaire was open to participants, I returned to the thematic analysis, at this point considering the development of themes. As Byrne (2022) explains, in reflexive TA, "themes are produced by organising codes around a relative core commonality, or 'central organising concept', that the researcher interprets from the data" (p. 1393). In my critical realist version of this, the kinds of 'central organising concept' that I was interested in were those that could contribute to a causal explanation of teachers' approaches towards trans students. As suggested by Fryer (2022), the development of such themes came from my own interpretation of the data and retroductive reasoning, as also informed by previous research.

The process of developing and refining themes was a long one, and continued through the second stage of the research and even as I was writing up the relevant sections of this thesis. It began with bringing together all of the applicable data under each code, and involved comparing and connecting ideas in many different ways, forming and re-arranging potential categories and their underlying narratives. Eventually, I reached my three final themes. I believe that these meet the criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Further, I am confident in terms of their theoretical validity, or plausibility, as causal explanations – which in critical realism, can be assessed under judgemental rationality (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Finally, the production of the report, as the last stage of (reflexive) thematic analysis, is represented by this very thesis.

4.5. Stage Two: Questionnaire

4.5.1. Sampling and recruitment

The population of interest was individuals who were currently teaching, or had previously taught, in school(s) in the UK. This was the same as for the first research stage, excepting the influence of the later time frame on individuals moving in or out of the category. The non-probability sampling approach was also the same as previously outlined for the interviews (section 4.4.1; excepting the specific example given).

Ninety-three respondents completed the questionnaire; this was a significantly larger sample compared to those who were interviewed. This was likely primarily associated with the reduced time and other demands involved (Yan & Williams, 2022); participation may also have been encouraged by the anonymous nature of the online questionnaire. The larger sample size was also an intentional product of a compromise in detailed information about each individual case at this stage, in order to access a greater range of responses and their corresponding combinations of attributes. As I will explain in a subsequent section (4.6.4), this is also important to minimising the 'limited diversity' problem in QCA.

To recruit participants, I first created an advertisement on the website 'callforparticipants.com', which is connected to the academic website ('onlinesurveys.ac.uk') that I used to create and host the questionnaire. Although few participants were recruited directly through this website, it also provided an additional function which generated a poster that I used more successfully across other methods of recruitment. These methods included distribution via my own social media and personal networks, and I also contacted schools directly using their publicly available email addresses. Conscious of the geographical limitations present in my previous sample, I took particular care to ensure that I contacted schools and teachers in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (and not only England). As the questionnaire did not include a location question, I cannot be sure how effective this was. However, among responses to an open question about teaching roles, one participant referred to Scotland, and another to Wales (the majority did not mention location). I also received positive replies to several of my emails to schools.

Additionally, in the recruitment materials and also the questionnaire itself, I chose to frame the research in broader terms of equality, diversity, and inclusion, rather than specifying the trans focus from the start. Whilst not deceiving participants, giving a more general or vague purpose for the survey has the advantage of potentially reducing social desirability bias (Ried et al., 2022). Further, it was an ethical and methodological choice based on the desire to avoid appropriation of the survey by trans-hostile actors, who may be motivated to respond disingenuously. Whilst this may have been a particularly cautious approach, it was also a response to my experience during the interview stage of the research, in which someone opposed to trans inclusion in schools posted my recruitment information on Mumsnet, an online forum with a reputation for facilitating trans-hostile discussion. After being informed of this by a concerned acquaintance, I initially attempted to engage in good faith. However, I subsequently had to request that site administrators remove the post due to commenters seeking out my personal information and photographs online and making several transphobic comments about my body, name, and competence in conducting research. Therefore, in addition to the potential methodological benefits, the more cautious approach to recruitment for the questionnaire stage was effectively an act of ethical responsibility towards myself as a trans researcher. The importance of such self-protection is emphasised by Ruth Pearce (2020) in an article outlining the idea of "a methodology for the marginalised" (p. 809).

4.5.2. Methods

To design and collect responses from the online questionnaire (which is reproduced in Appendix D), I used the aforementioned website 'onlinesurveys.ac.uk'. I was able to access this academic survey tool through my institution (Durham University). It is GDPR compliant and certified to ISO 27001 standard, and thus I could be confident that participant data was secure. The online format was chosen over paper-based or other options for several reasons, including feasibility in the context of Covid-19 risks and restrictions, and the reduced risk of social desirability bias (Joinson, 1999). Offering multiple options was also not considered appropriate, as theoretically any effect of format on response style could have affected calibration of the final outcome and condition categories.

The questionnaire was open to responses from 16 October 2020 until 31 January 2021. This time frame was extended from an initial two months, in response to feedback from one school requesting that I contact them again in January when they anticipated having more availability, due to Covid-related demands at the time.

There were 97 questions, which were all optional except the initial consent to participate. These were split across 15 pages. The second page included an open question asking about teaching roles, which in part was intended to ensure that respondents genuinely met the study inclusion criteria – acknowledging that I could not be 100% certain of this because participation was anonymous. However, on balance this was considered an acceptable level of risk, given the likely importance of anonymity for encouraging participation and reducing potential social desirability bias in responses (Joinson, 1999; Ried et al., 2022).

The remaining questions were designed to measure either a participant's (non-)alignment with various potentially causal attributes, or with a 'supportive' approach towards trans students (the 'outcome' measure). As previously discussed, these questions were informed by codes produced in the thematic analysis process, and some interpretation of these ideas in the context of previous literature. Since neither the final themes nor the exact definition of a 'supportive' outcome were established at this stage, many different codes and potentially relevant factors were intentionally represented in the questions, with the understanding that some of these would likely not be used in the final analysis. However, this variety was also balanced against concerns of reducing the overall size of the questionnaire and the corresponding response burden, to avoid disincentivising participation or compromising data quality (Yan et al., 2020).

The majority of these questions were in the format of statements, with participants asked to select which single answer from a multiple-choice list best represented the extent to which they agreed with the statement. The answer options were: 'Not at all'; 'Somewhat agree'; 'Largely agree'; and 'Completely agree'. This measurement of qualitative levels of (dis)agreement was designed to be

directly translatable to the fuzzy sets that I would be using in QCA (Emmenegger et al., 2014); this form of data is further explained in section 4.6.2.

In order to reduce the potential issue of acquiescence bias – "the tendency for survey respondents to endorse any assertion made in a survey question regardless of content" – I included different questions that were phrased in opposite directions in relation to the underlying concept being measured (S. Hill & Roberts, 2023, p. 1). For instance, for the coded concept of 'individual responsibility', a positively keyed question was '*The successes I have achieved in my life are primarily down to my own hard work and abilities, and I would still have been able to achieve them under different external circumstances*'; the associated negatively keyed question was '*It is not a young person's fault if they struggle to cope with school and daily life*'. Whilst it is not a perfect solution, this approach may help to 'balance' any acquiescence effect, which if present should theoretically exist in both directions and thus to some extent cancel out (Ray, 1979; Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2010).

4.6. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

4.6.1. Introduction to QCA

Using the data collected from the questionnaire, I used the technique of Qualitative Comparative Analysis to identify the salient features of the conditions through which a teacher may come to have a trans-positive (or negative) approach.

QCA was originally designed by Charles Ragin (e.g., 2008; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009), who used the idea of configurational comparative methods to address methodological conflicts about appropriate approaches to social research and causation. Whilst it retains a strong qualitative focus on considering individual cases holistically, it also brings advantages traditionally associated with quantitative methods, by providing a rigorous and systematic method for comparing these cases, through tabulation of a numerical representation of their features.

The QCA technique systematically compares the features of ('near neighbour') cases that exhibit the same outcome (reach the same 'state'). It thereby establishes what set theoretical relationships exist between particular configurations of attributes, and the outcome. Hence, it is a tool that aids in reducing the numerous and complex conditions involved in causation in social reality, down to those configurations which may be *necessary* and/or *sufficient* to produce an outcome – distinguishing them from less relevant elements (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009).

4.6.2. Underlying principles and logic

Causality in QCA

QCA is based on a specific understanding of causation, namely *multiple conjunctural causation* (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009). This strongly aligns with the conceptualisation of causality in critical and complex realism, and hence my overall research approach. It has four main aspects: equifinality; asymmetry; non-permanence; and conjunctural causation. This form of causality contradicts the assumptions of traditional variable-based statistical analysis, which cannot effectively account for complex causality; its attempts to do so through, for instance, interaction effects are insufficient and often technically problematic for reasons such as violated statistical assumptions, reduced degrees of freedom, and multicollinearity (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010).

Equifinality is the 'multiple' part of 'multiple conjunctural causation', referring to the idea that the same outcome can be reached in several distinct ways (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). The *conjunctural causation* aspect reflects complexity and means that a causal pathway usually involves a combination of multiple conditions. Correspondingly, the presence or absence of any particular condition can be part of one or more causal pathways, thus acting in different ways depending on which other conditions it is combined with. This runs counter to how the effects of variables are assumed to behave in statistical analysis, namely in an *additive* way – and in the *same* way, regardless of their context (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009).

Moreover, causality in QCA does not accept any assumption of permanence (Ragin, 1987). This accords with the complex realist principle that cases *can* (usually) change state (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012) – as they are complex open systems, rather than simple systems which could be assigned a permanent state (Rosen, 1987).

Finally, the assumption of *asymmetrical causation* (Ragin, 2008) means that the presence and absence of an outcome are explained by discrete casual pathways; they are not simply the opposite or negation of each other. In contrast, statistical correlation analysis, which runs tests in a symmetrical manner, produces results which do not distinguish between, for instance, a connection between the presence of a variable and the corresponding presence of an outcome, and any link between the absence of the variable and the absence of the outcome. The difference is that QCA considers 'set theoretic relationships', which are inherently asymmetrical – as I will go on to explain in the following section on the mathematics underlying the method.

Mathematics of QCA

The analytical foundation of QCA is a combination of set theory, formal logic, and Boolean algebra. Firstly, the principles of set theory are important to understanding the aforementioned asymmetrical causation, as well as the kinds of output that QCA can produce.

A *set* is simply a group, in this context a group of cases, and any set has specific criteria for membership. This is distinct from the approach to case classification in statistical analysis, in which the focus is on variables, as traits for which *every* case has a measured value. For example, a variable could be 'age', and every case (individual person) would have a recorded value on a numerical scale. However, with the sets and case-based analysis of QCA it would be non-sensical to have a set of 'age' – *but* 'age 16-25', for instance, could be a set, for which every case could only be classified in binary terms, as either a *member* of that set, or a *non-member* (also referred to as the set's *complement*). This is an example of a 'crisp set', which only allows for this binary scoring of cases as a member (1) or non-member (0).

However, my research instead uses 'fuzzy set' QCA, which allows for (qualitative) differences in *degree* of set membership as well as differences in kind (Ragin, 2008). Accordingly, it includes Set Membership Values (SMVs) of 1 and 0 as with crisp set QCA, but also values in between these two extremes. It is possible to conceptualise a fuzzy set using either continuous or fixed values, depending on the approach to data calibration (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). Continuous fuzzy sets might be appropriate if the researcher is transforming existing interval-scale numerical data into SMVs for QCA, and uses mathematical techniques such as logistic functions or regression. Conversely, in this research I used fixed value fuzzy sets, specifically a four-value fuzzy set. Values 1 and 0 still refer to full membership and full non-membership respectively, but there are also two other SMVs: 0.67, meaning a case that is 'more in than out' of the set; and 0.33, meaning a case that is 'more out than in' (Ragin). This was a theoretical choice based on the characteristics of the concepts I was assessing in my data collection. For instance, a trans-positive outcome regarding approaches to trans students is something that can vary in degree between cases; there is more nuance than only fully supportive or fully unsupportive, as suggested by Horton and Carlile's (2022) staged model of trans inclusion in schools, which has four levels.

Further, the types of associations that QCA can uncover are conceived in terms of relationships between condition and outcome sets (set-theoretic relations). As mentioned, these are asymmetrical. This means, for example, that if the set of all cases with attribute X is a subset of the set of all cases demonstrating outcome Y (i.e., all cases with the attribute also exhibit the outcome), this does *not* require all cases without the attribute to also not demonstrate the outcome. This subset relation would be an interesting finding, which would not be highlighted with the alternate method of correlational analysis.

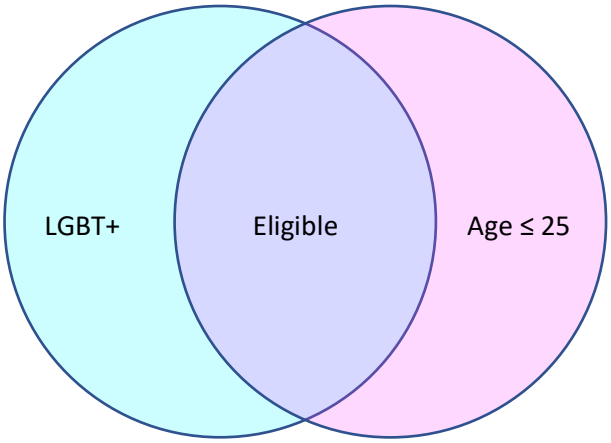
The focus of QCA is on two particular kinds of subset relation: *sufficiency* and *necessity*. The situation I have just described is of a sufficiency relationship; to give a simple example:

A hypothetical support service provides for LGBT+ people. The set of all trans people would be a subset of an (outcome) set of everyone who is eligible for this service. Being trans is therefore *sufficient* for eligibility. However, this relationship is asymmetrical, as it does not follow that all people who are not trans would also not be eligible for the service. The condition of transness is sufficient but not *necessary*, because a person could also be eligible for different reasons, like queer sexuality.

Conversely, if a condition is necessary, the set of cases with that condition is a superset of the outcome set. Figure 2 shows an example in which the condition 'being LGBT+' is *necessary but not sufficient* for an outcome of eligibility for LGBT+ youth services.

Figure 2

Eligibility for LGBT+ Youth Services



QCA can illuminate both of these scenarios. However, it primarily concentrates not on individual conditions, but rather the combinations that may be necessary and/or sufficient. Causal conditions, under this conjunctural approach, are most often of a type referred to as 'INUS': an **i**nsufficient but **n**ecessary part of an **u**nnecessary but **s**ufficient path to an outcome (Ragin, 2008; Mackie, 1974). Conventional statistical methods are unable to appropriately study this kind of condition.

4.6.3. QCA in education research

Since Ragin's (1987) germinal work, QCA has primarily been used within research disciplines like management, political science, and sociology. A systematic mapping of its application found 313 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1984 and 2011, reporting that the majority were analysing cases at the macro level (Rihoux et al., 2013). This corresponds with the original design and application to comparing countries (Rihoux & Marx, 2013). However, Cilesiz and Greckhamer's (2020) systematic review of QCA research in education demonstrates that the uptake has been slower in this field; whilst they searched from 1987 to 2018, the first eligible article was published in 2009. In education journals, they found 26 relevant articles, and a further 30 on education topics published in other journals. A significant number of these articles were within educational administration, which may be due to links with management research. Despite its as yet unrealised potential, Cilesiz and Greckhamer argue that QCA could be very useful in education and particularly in policy-oriented research, through providing insight into phenomena with complex, conjunctural causes.

Similarly to my own research, there are some existing uses of QCA within the sociology of education, and that relate to diversity and (in)equalities. For instance, Glaesser and Cooper (2012a; 2012b) investigated combinations of individual school students' attributes (ability, gender, parental education, type of school) as potentially sufficient and necessary conditions for academic achievement. Their use of individuals as cases, as opposed to the more common comparison at the institutional or geographical macro level, provides support for the viability of my own choice to compare teachers as cases.

Further, QCA may be particularly appropriate for this kind of research because, as Cilesiz and Greckhamer (2020) point out, its complex and conjunctural approach to causation is theoretically consistent with important social justice concepts like intersectionality. Intersectionality means that the effects of different aspects of identity and marginality cannot be understood separately, but instead must be considered holistically (Crenshaw, 1989; K. Davis, 2008; see section 2.7). Accordingly, dimensions of marginalisation (e.g., being Black, a woman, trans, or disabled) are not internally homogenous 'variables' producing a discrete and consistent effect regardless of context. They do not combine additively, but rather their outcomes – in terms of power relations, and how people are treated interpersonally and institutionally – have *emergent* properties, as in the critical realist sense. Thus, the experience of one dimension differs based on its conjunctural context; using the example of Crenshaw's original application to race and gender, Black women's and white women's experiences *of womanhood* are different. Incidentally, this point also counters anti-trans arguments that attempt to exclude trans women from womanhood on the basis that their experience is not identical to that of cis women. Further, the experience of transness can likewise differ based on other intersecting factors. For instance, for a trans child subjected to an oppressive

school environment, a middle-class family may be able to leverage social and economic capital to move them to a different, more inclusive school – whereas a working-class family may not have that option. Correspondingly, in Horton's (2023c) work with parents of trans children:

> *Several interviewees drew a connection between their social status (referencing being white, middle class, or holding professional status) and their confidence and success in tackling school-based discrimination. In contrast, parents who described holding minoritised or marginalized identities, reported more obstacles and less swift success in challenging discrimination.* (p. 200)

QCA, as situated within my overall methodological approach, is an appropriate technique for attempting to illuminate this conjunctural form of causality.

4.6.4. Conducting the analysis: Process and analytical choices

Case selection

Prior to discussion of the data analysis process, it should be noted that the selection of cases is also an important methodological decision in QCA research, involving theoretical, empirical, and practical considerations (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). Theoretically, cases must of course be relevant to the research question and provide insight into the phenomenon being investigated. For the purposes of this research, the appropriate cases (and therefore participants) were individual UK school teachers.

In many applications of QCA, particularly those with a smaller *N*, each case is selected individually based on pre-existing knowledge about its characteristics and known relevance to the outcome (Ragin, 2008). This may be particularly appropriate at the macro level, for instance in research comparing countries (Ebbinghaus, 2005). However, my particular case-selection process was somewhat different; as only part of a two-stage research process, the intention was to gather data about a relatively large number of cases and thereby expand on the in-depth case knowledge obtained in the interview phase. The combination of stages was strategically designed to efficiently achieve both depth and breadth to a good standard within the time and resource constraints of a PhD. Thus, here case selection involved the aim to recruit approximately 100 eligible participants to complete the questionnaire. As detailed earlier (section 4.5), diversity in respondents was attempted with some success through methods such as targeted advertisement of the study to different groups.

Empirically, the primary consideration is that cases need to be "similar enough to be comparable, yet not exactly alike" (Kahwati & Kane, 2020, p. 48). They are therefore *near neighbours* (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012). A potential problem in ensuring sufficient variation between cases was that the research used a prospective design – their characteristics and outcomes were not known when cases

were selected. Therefore, I could not be certain that I would achieve this variation when I was planning for and collecting the data. However overall, I consider it to have been an appropriate approach; through both personal and academic experience of the data context, at a minimum I fulfilled Kahwati and Kane's recommendation to be "reasonably familiar with the type of data being used to determine outcomes and reasonably certain that variation among cases is likely" (p. 49).

Selecting and defining conditions and outcome

It is an important premise of QCA methodology that conditions and outcomes are selected on the basis of substantive theory and knowledge (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). Accordingly, my choices were developed from the results of my thematic analysis of the interview data, which also considered previous literature. The final conditions therefore represented substantive theories of potential causes of the presence or absence of the outcome (a trans-supportive teacher approach). As the definition of each condition and outcome set was informed by the results of the first stage, I will postpone their elucidation until the latter has been set out in Chapters Five through Seven.

However, I will highlight here that the *number* of conditions included is an important consideration in QCA. It would be theoretically problematic to leave out a genuinely contributory condition from the analysis, but the inclusion of too many conditions is empirically a potential concern. As the number of conditions increases, the number of their possible combinations increases exponentially. This creates the issue of *limited diversity*, where there are possible combinations which are not represented by actual cases in the data; this can compromise the validity of results. A. Marx (2010) tested the likelihood of accurate models being generated by (crisp-set) QCA using random data, and based on this there are recommended practices for avoiding the type one error of falsely claiming meaningful results. A benchmark is a case-to-condition ratio of at least 4:1, with a maximum of seven conditions, given at least 50 cases (Thygeson et al., 2013). Anticipating and aiming to prevent this potential problem of limited diversity and false positive results was a significant aspect in my reasoning for conducting the questionnaire stage of my research, in order to obtain data for a greater number of cases than would have been achievable with the interview method alone. Ultimately, I only included three conditions in my analysis. However, as 93 participants completed the questionnaire, I would have been able to validly analyse several additional conditions, had this been theoretically indicated.

Data preparation and processing

From the raw questionnaire responses, I initially produced a standard data matrix, with each participant (case) as a unique row and each question as a column. I converted the responses from multi-choice questions (not at all; somewhat agree; largely agree; completely agree) into the numerical SMVs that they had been designed to represent (0; 0.33; 0.67; 1, respectively). For each condition and the outcome, several of these questions were combined to define degree of set

membership. This is detailed further in section 8.1 and Appendix E. Each case was then accordingly assigned SMVs for each set.

I then created a separate data matrix with only four columns: one for each of the three conditions; and one for the outcome. Five cases had at least one missing value, due to corresponding missing values in their raw data. These cases (24, 54, 55, 66, and 87) were not included in the analysis, as the QCA technique requires complete data. This left 88 remaining cases.

I used fs/QCA software (version 4.0; Ragin & Davey, 2022) for the analysis.

The truth table

The first step of the analysis was to produce a 'truth table' from the data. A truth table has one row for each different possible (crisp) combination of causal conditions. In general, this includes both combinations that do exist in the actual empirical data, and combinations that do not; the latter are called *logical remainders* (and reflect the aforementioned limited diversity problem). However, in my analysis all possible combinations were represented by actual data, so there were no logical remainders.

Each case in the data is assigned to only one of these truth table rows. With fuzzy-set data, as in this research, most cases have partial set membership in multiple rows; this is because a score of 0.33 or 0.67 in any set means that they are not full members or full non-members. However, any case will only have a SMV > 0.5 for one truth table row; the fs/QCA software calculates using Boolean algebra which row this is and assigns the case accordingly (Kahwati & Kane, 2020).

Figure 3

Truth Table Format for Three Conditions

Condition A	Condition B	Condition C	Number	Outcome	Consistency
1	1	1			
1	1	0			
1	0	1			
1	0	0			
0	0	0			
0	0	1			
0	1	0			
0	1	1			

Figure 3 shows the foundation of a truth table for an analysis with three conditions; there are eight (2^3) logically possible combinations, and therefore eight truth table rows. The 'number' column states how many cases have been assigned to each row.

The 'outcome' for each row represents whether or not that configuration of conditions is considered *sufficient* for the outcome in question (a trans-supportive approach). The software does not determine this, as it is up to the researcher to assign each row an outcome value of either 1 (sufficient) or 0 (not sufficient). This decision is informed by the 'consistency' (of sufficiency) column; this displays a score, calculated by the software, for the consistency with which cases that exhibit that row's configuration of conditions, also demonstrate the outcome. For a row in which this consistency is 1 or 0, this is simple, as all cases in that row either do or do not exhibit the outcome, and it can be scored accordingly. However, there are usually – including in this research – contradictory truth table rows. This means that some cases in that row exhibit the outcome and some do not, and therefore the row consistency is between 0 and 1 ($0 < \text{consistency} < 1$).

In some contexts, it may be appropriate to attempt to resolve contradictory rows by making alterations to the analysis, for instance changing the conditions used, or revising how the condition and outcome sets are defined and calibrated (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). After careful choice of conditions and their operationalisation, I then followed standard practice of using a *consistency threshold*, above which the researcher accepts that there is a strong enough sufficiency relationship demonstrated to assign the outcome value 1; rows below this threshold are assigned 0. Consistency above 0.8 is generally considered to be strong (Kahwati & Kane, 2020), with a minimum threshold recommended as 0.75 (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009); the particular data set patterns are also considered (Ragin, 2008). In my analysis for the presence of the (trans-positive) outcome, the threshold was 0.75, and for the absence of the outcome it was 0.9. I explain the rationale for these choices in section 8.2.

Standard Analysis

From the completed truth table, I conducted a *Standard Analysis* (as described by Ragin, 2018), which is a process for sufficiency analysis. Whilst the truth table itself is essentially a description of which combinations of conditions are sufficient for the outcome, it is the most complicated version, and contains many redundancies which must be eliminated prior to causal interpretation (Baumgartner & Thiem, 2017). Hence, the Standard Analysis uses a procedure called the *Quine-McCluskey algorithm* (Quine, 1952, 1955; McCluskey, 1956) to conduct logical minimisation of the truth table. This process has two stages. Firstly, the truth table rows that are sufficient for the outcome (*primitive expressions*) are minimised using Boolean algebra to produce *prime implicants.* All possible pairs of expressions are compared; if two expressions differ only on one condition (thus, the condition can be present or absent without changing the outcome), the pair can be merged

(minimised) by removing that condition. Subsequently, the second step constructs a *prime implicants chart*, which is solved (producing the final result of the analysis) by identifying a subset of prime implicants which together is wholly sufficient to imply the entire original list of primitive expressions (Duşa, 2018).

In some analyses there will be more than one possible solution to the prime implicants chart, and thus *model ambiguity* – where "multiple causal models fare equally well in accounting for the same set of configurational data within one and the same analysis" (Baumgartner & Thiem, 2017, p. 955). This can limit the validity of analytical findings, and is especially problematic when the ambiguity is not reported by the researcher (Thiem, 2014).

There are two points at which this ambiguity can arise. The first may be somewhat controversial, in that it is inherent to the Quine-McCluskey algorithm; Baumgartner and Thiem (2017) argue that it is inappropriate for causal modelling that this algorithm selects, by design, the *smallest* subset of prime implicants as the solution. Researchers using software based on Quine-McCluskey may not be aware that there are other potential solutions which have been dismissed because they contain a greater number of alternative causes. It is contended that these solutions are not any less likely to correspond to reality based on their higher level of complexity.

Secondly, if there are multiple logically tied and equally simple solutions, the way that fs/QCA software handles this is to present the possible options to the researcher, and it is recommended that they choose which to use "based on theoretical and substantive knowledge" (Ragin, 2018, p. 57). However, this did not occur in either of my analyses for this thesis (for presence or absence of the outcome).

Further, I have also been able to clarify that the former kind of model ambiguity does not affect my results. Because there were only three conditions, it was feasible to check the analysis by hand (see Appendix F), and I found that for both versions there was only one possible solution – the same as that produced by the fs/QCA software. Thus, my findings do not appear to be impacted by model ambiguity.

The standard analysis produces three types of solution: parsimonious; intermediate; and conservative (or complex). The difference between these lies in the treatment of the logical remainder rows of the truth table; specifically, it is whether they are included in the truth table minimisation. Firstly, as the name implies, the parsimonious solution prioritises *parsimony* – the simplest acceptable solution. Any logical remainder row can be assumed sufficient for the outcome and thus used in the logical minimisation, if doing so will allow for a simpler solution; this is therefore called a *simplifying assumption*. In contrast, for the conservative solution, none of the logical remainder rows can be used in the minimisation process. Some QCA researchers describe this as 'ignoring' all logical remainders (e.g., Kahwati & Kane, 2020), but it could equally be described as

making the assumption that all logical remainder rows have an outcome value of 0. Finally, the intermediate solution requires theoretical input from the researcher, regarding their directional expectations for each condition – whether they expect its presence or absence (or either) to potentially contribute to a case exhibiting the outcome. The minimisation process is then conducted using only those logical remainder rows which are consistent with these expectations. Such rows can also be called *easy counterfactuals*; logical remainders that oppose directional expectations are *difficult counterfactuals*.

Interpreting the **parsimonious** *solution: Logical remainders and limited diversity*

As previously noted, my data in this research covered all possible combinations of conditions and thus had no logical remainders. Therefore, effectively only one solution was produced in my analysis; the parsimonious, intermediate, and conservative solutions were equivalent. However, having initially not known that this would be the case, I had made the methodological decision to interpret the *parsimonious* solution – a choice I will now explain.

It is common in QCA research for the intermediate solution to be preferred for interpretation purposes, with the reasoning that it is a sensible balance between the 'extremes' of excessive parsimony that relies on potentially untenable assumptions, and excessive complexity that prevents useful or meaningful interpretation (Schneider & Wagemann, 2013; Ragin, 2008). However, the accuracy of the intermediate and conservative solutions has been contested both theoretically and through empirical testing, leading to the argument that only parsimonious solutions should be used (Baumgartner & Thiem, 2020; Thiem, 2022).

To elaborate, there has been a relatively longstanding presumption in methodological work on QCA that the conservative solution is the most accurate, with its main disadvantage being the difficulty in interpreting its larger and often unwieldy solutions. It is perceived to be more accurate because it does not include any logical remainders in the minimisation process, and therefore (it is argued) it *only* uses actually existing data – unlike the parsimonious and intermediate approaches. For instance, Schneider and Wagemann (2013) state that in the conservative solution, in the treatment of logical remainders, the simplifying assumptions of neither difficult nor easy counterfactuals are allowed. They interpret this to mean that this solution *does not make any assumptions* about logical remainders, and therefore is the most 'conservative' in its claims.

However, Thiem (2022) interprets this differently, proposing that in actuality the conservative solution makes the *strongest* assumptions. This is because it claims that *all* logical remainder rows must be insufficient for the outcome. In contrast, the parsimonious solution claims only that *some* logical remainders could be sufficient.

Moreover, Baumgartner and Thiem (2020) conducted thorough testing of QCA with inverse-search trials using simulated data, with three types of conditions: ideal; with incorrect factor frames (omitted relevant condition or erroneously included irrelevant condition); and with limited empirical diversity. Whilst acknowledging that there are some situations not covered by these tests, their results demonstrated that whilst conservative and intermediate solution strategies produced incorrect results, parsimonious strategies consistently produced *correct* results – supporting the use of the latter as an effective method of analysis.

Thiem (2022) provides a methodological explanation for these findings, proposing that the conservative and intermediate solution types "systematically supplement empirical data with matching artificial data [which] regularly induce causal fallacies of severe magnitude" (p. 527). In sum, the causal fallacy in these two solution strategies occurs because they claim that some or all logical remainders are *definitely* non-sufficient. Thus, if a condition is present in the actual data and linked to the outcome, but insufficient data exists without that condition to show whether or not the outcome would still occur, the conservative (and potentially intermediate) approach would attribute causation to the condition – which may not reflect reality.

The parsimonious approach does not have this problem, and is therefore a more appropriate and accurate method for generating causal models based on the existing evidence. However, as with any method, it cannot claim to definitively produce all possible solution terms and causal paths – and can only be as good as the data with which it is provided (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009).

Choice of analysis

My decision to use the *Standard Analysis*, rather than Schneider and Wagemann's (2012) *Enhanced Standard Analysis*, is an additional point at which I diverged from certain procedures which some QCA methodologists and textbooks (e.g., Kahwati & Kane, 2020) consider 'best practice'. However, the treatment of logical remainders is a significant part of the difference here as well, and so ultimately this choice did not affect my analysis as much as anticipated. However, as it formed part of my methodological rationale, I will briefly explain the relevant evidence for this approach.

The premise of the Enhanced Standard Analysis (ESA) is the argument that under the Standard Analysis, logical remainders that could be used in the minimisation process (in parsimonious and intermediate solutions) may involve 'untenable assumptions' – meaning that claiming their possible sufficiency for the outcome would "contradict common sense, formal logic, or both" (Schneider & Wagemann, 2013, p. 212). These assumptions can be untenable in two different ways. Firstly, they could be *incoherent counterfactuals*: either they do not include a condition which has been identified as necessary for the outcome in a separate necessity analysis on the same data; or the same logical remainder has been used as a simplifying assumption both for the outcome and for the

negated outcome. Secondly, there are *implausible counterfactuals*, where the combination of conditions in the row could not possibly occur in reality[11].

In ESA, any 'untenable' logical remainder row is 'removed' from the truth table prior to the minimisation process; its outcome column is coded as 0, and it cannot be used as a simplifying assumption. It may initially appear logical to prevent the possibility of problematic counterfactuals being considered sufficient for the outcome. However, as may be clear from the a priori assumption of definite non-sufficiency for certain logical remainders, this approach inherently moves parsimonious and intermediate solutions towards the conservative strategy, thereby creating the very issues described in the previous section.

Two useful lines of reasoning in the argument against ESA are provided by Thiem (2016) and B. Cooper and Glaesser (2016). Thiem's critique focuses on countering the requirement for separate necessity tests to be conducted prior to, and their results used to constrain, the main analysis. He argues that not only is it inaccurate to consider a necessity relationship (outcome set is a subset of the condition set) to be inherently causal, but that the main issue lies in the use of isolated, individual conditions in necessity analyses. This is theoretically problematic, given that the underlying logic of QCA relies on *conjunctural* causation. It is also demonstrably problematic in practice, as shown using a meta-analysis of 31 studies using ESA for QCA; when the analysis was re-run to include compound as well as individual conditions in necessity analyses, for the vast majority using ESA prevented *all* of the logical remainders that would otherwise have been used as simplifying assumptions in the minimisation process from doing so. Thus, using ESA did not improve parsimonious or intermediate solutions; it simply ensured that only conservative solutions were produced.

On the other hand, B. Cooper and Glaesser (2016) demonstrate a different problem – although still one concerned with a priori necessity analyses – describing ESA as "self-defeating" (p. 309). Say a necessary conditions analysis is conducted, and it finds that condition A is necessary for the outcome, and also that condition B is necessary for the negated outcome. This logically implies that A must be sufficient for the outcome *not* to occur, and B must be sufficient for the outcome *to* occur. This leads to the strong, and usually difficult to justify, claim that no cases can possibly exist that exhibit both A and B. Furthermore, in ESA, these necessary conditions would mean ruling out any contradictory logical remainders from the truth table minimisation. However, when the Quine-McCluskey algorithm cannot use those logical remainders as simplifying assumptions, it is unable to

[11] The example of an implausible counterfactual given by Schneider and Wagemann (2013) is the combination of pregnancy with being male, which is somewhat ironic in the context of trans research.

produce the (sufficiency) solutions that should in fact be implied by those very same necessary conditions.

As a final point regarding the choice of analysis, it is worth acknowledging that at least some of the issues described could potentially be ameliorated through the use of an alternative algorithm to Quine-McCluskey; in particular, the method of Coincidence Analysis has been proposed (Baumgartner, 2015). However, on balance I decided that QCA (with Standard Analysis) was the most appropriate method within my overall research design, whilst acknowledging its limitations and likely future changes and development.

4.7. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, which concludes Part One of the thesis, I have outlined the methodological approach taken to answer the research question of how teachers come to have particular approaches towards trans students. Using a critical realist paradigm and integrating Foucault and elements of complexity theory, I set out a two-stage research design, in which interviews and thematic analysis are followed by an online questionnaire and Qualitative Comparative Analysis. In the following section, I will introduce Part Two of the thesis, which contains the findings facilitated by the methods detailed here.

Part Two: Results and Discussion

In this second part of the thesis, I report on the results of my research and advance a theoretical discussion of their meaning and implications. Firstly, the three chapters that follow (Five, Six, and Seven) each explore in depth one of the three themes produced from the thematic analysis, as introduced in Chapter Three: neoliberalism; sex/gender essentialism; and childhood innocence and developmentalism. In these chapters, I analyse interview participants' narratives and thereby demonstrate how these dominant discourses appear to create barriers to teachers adopting equitable approaches towards trans students – and conversely, how resistance to such normative 'truths' may provide potential *pathways* to a more genuinely trans-inclusive education.

Subsequently, Chapter Eight details how the questionnaire data were used to operationalise the three themes and to evaluate their causal salience through Qualitative Comparative Analysis, producing models for both the presence and absence of the 'outcome' of an anti-cisnormative approach. Chapter Nine then draws all of the research findings together, developing theory on potential mechanisms connecting the themes and their conjunctions to particular outcomes, and particularly forwarding an explanation of the divergence between teachers' caring intentions and trans students' marginalising experiences. Finally, Chapter Ten presents some concluding remarks, reflecting on both the implications and the limitations of this research, and also considering future directions.

Chapter Five: Neoliberalism

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore neoliberalism as the first identified truth discourse that may influence teachers' responses to trans students. Firstly, I consider various demonstrations in participants' experiences of the manner in which the neoliberal marketisation of education incentivises institutions to prioritise external accountability measures over (trans) inclusion work and other broader goals of schooling. In many cases, this was raised by participants in the context of their expressing disagreement with this system. Whilst some did make comments suggesting a degree of naturalisation of neoliberal education and the associated integration of performativity within their own subjectivities as teachers, generally they tended to object – at least in principle – to the broad effects such as restrictions on school activities and accountability demands on their teaching practice. However, their agency to resist these effects in practice was significantly restricted. Thus, and as explained in section 3.3.2, for school staff the market-based reconstruction of education is evidently not enacted solely through self-technologies and submission to the obligations of a neoliberal 'truth'; these also require support from technologies of coercion. Accordingly, teachers who do take on trans inclusion work – often motivated by their own ethical and pedagogical values – frequently do so at personal and professional risk, and without institutional reward or support.

On the other hand, participants appeared to accept to a greater extent a naturalised neoliberal definition of equality – as decontextualised individual rights. This framing justifies as natural and non-discriminatory a system in which market pressures determine what is considered fair and justifiable in terms of 'inclusion' – with minority and marginalised students' needs positioned as individual deficit and as requiring 'balance' against the rights of others, rather than an institutional responsibility to correct structural injustice. Correspondingly, participants frequently endorsed individualised responses to particular identified trans students – to varying degrees of accommodation. Following other trans studies researchers, I advocate a shift in focus to problematise and actively address the unjust culture of cisnormativity and cissexism at an institutional level, responding to the limited potential of existing individualised approaches and also the burden that these place on both trans students and their teachers.

5.2. Teachers' objections to neoliberal education priorities

5.2.1. Narrow focus on human capital and economic success

Firstly, participants expressed concern about the types of provision that schools were incentivised or able to offer. Michael, who was semi-retired, spoke about changes over the course of his career:

> *I do think that the questions you're raising and this issue [trans inclusion] is important and it does touch at the very heart of the values in schools, it does worry me a little bit that the drift of education in my time, for example with Michael Gove going on about the EBacc*[12] *and all that mattered was your English, Maths, and that kind of stuff, and over time that kind of narrowing of the curriculum, and having worked in a school that due to budget issues, removed drama from key stage three curriculum and got rid of pastoral support staff because they couldn't afford to pay them anymore, it does worry me that a lot of the safe spaces in schools, all the safe people in schools that kids can go to to get support and just chat about things, have gone, […] instead you've got this complete mindless obsession with outcomes and exam results*

His experience here reflects the effect on education policy of a neoliberal 'truth' that positions only those activities and knowledges that best develop students' human capital – and thus their expected future financial and competitive success – as legitimate and desirable for schools to prioritise, with this ostensibly being in students' best interests. Yet, this is to the detriment of a broader curriculum and more equitable and humanistic provision (Ball, 2003; Torres & Van Heertum, 2009). As Michael's comments suggest, even if teachers and school leaders disagree in principle with these priorities, in the marketised school system they are responsibilised to use a limited budget to score as highly as possible on external accountability measures. Hence, funding cannot be spared for certain subjects and pastoral staff that do not sufficiently contribute to these measures, and is instead consumed by the "complete mindless obsession with outcomes and exam results".

Correspondingly, those programs and student needs which do not provide adequate 'return' on invested resources are deprioritised. This is also extensively demonstrated in other research; for instance, Ball and Olmedo (2013) quote one teacher explaining that at her college, "values/ethos are highly disregarded because they are 'soft' concepts and not quickly translated into measurable impact" (p. 91). Indeed, Georgia told me that her department had chosen a teaching approach that specifically "benefits the mid-ability pupils [because] your Ofsted rating and your national average goes up if the mid-ability students do well"; she expressed strong disagreement ("I really really hate") with such a practice in which "at the expense of the high-ability students, and the low-ability students, you are just working to raise your school". Chris also described a previous school where certain classes – "the lower sets, who [one teacher] used to refer to as the gremlins", and "kids who were just like, the bad ones, they were from quite sink hole kind of estates" – were completely dismissed as not worth teaching:

[12] EBacc refers to the English Baccalaureate, which the Department for Education (2019a) describes as "a set of subjects at GCSE that keeps young people's options open for further study and future careers".

> *management very rarely visited those classes, those classes were sort of off books, it was just, keep them from running about, that was the edict […] I walked into the room and I noticed a stack of The Hunger Games, and I pulled them out and went, have any of you done this? And they were like 'no sir we don't read books in here', I thought okay, it's English, but fair enough*

This issue wherein performativity encourages inequitable resource allocation is also reflected in Greany and Higham's (2018) finding that in English schools, "leaders regularly felt incentivized to prioritise the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of, usually more vulnerable, children" (p. 12).

5.2.2. Students as differentially valuable resources for a school's market position

Further demonstrating this inequity, Michael's experience also highlighted that the financial responsibilisation of schools can distort their relationship with students – who become differentially valuable resources for maintaining a strong market position. This instrumentalisation of students was suggested in his explanation of certain institutional approaches to transfers:

> *there were schools who seemed to be determined to make sure managed moves failed if they were receiving what was clearly a troublesome kid, they would make pretty minimal efforts to make it work and then would terminate the trial period as soon as something went wrong, […] not really wanting any of these kids that don't bring much value to the school to be honest*

Previous research has also demonstrated schools' strategic use of student selection "to secure advantage over competing schools" (Rayner, 2017, p. 27), disadvantaging 'low-attaining' children and those with high (expensive or disruptive) needs (Ainscow et al., 2006; Keddie et al., 2020). Interestingly, in their work with English sixth form students, Lewis and Pearce (2022) use very similar phrasing to Michael as they explain that "the marketisation of the education system leads to students being valued only in as far as they bring value to the school" (p. 261). This framing of students in terms of the 'value' they bring is perhaps a demonstration of the neoliberal discursive shift away from the understanding of education as public service – or away from schools as *providers* more than investors looking for the best return.

This point is also reflected in the disproportionate permanent exclusion of marginalised and underprivileged students (Kulz, 2019), who may have greater resource needs than schools can justify providing. R. Murphy (2022) found that such children generally attributed their exclusion to schools "misreading symptoms of social injustice, bullying, and special educational needs as misbehaviour and non-compliance" (p. 43). It may be easier for schools to exclude students whose behaviour is identified as academically or reputationally detrimental, rather than expend resources on

investigating the context and providing the necessary support. This also provides a potential insight into the fact that several participants mentioned trans children having transferred into their school – often having been bullied at previous institutions. This was particularly common in Michael's experience, for whom these transfers were the primary reason he was aware of any trans students. Indeed, the frequency of this for trans children is also evidenced by Horton (2023a), who found that due to systemic failures by UK schools to provide a safe environment for pre-adolescent trans students, a significant proportion of their sample of 30 of these children "had left at least one school, had missed a year or more of education or had dropped out of mainstream education entirely" (p. 87). In parallel with Murphy's findings, whilst it may not have been the explicit intent of previous schools to respond to the 'problem' though the removal of the object of systemic injustice and its violent manifestations, this was effectively the result – allowing (cis)normative school cultures to continue undisrupted rather than taking the more difficult and resource-intensive option of working to change them.

5.3. Performative teacher subjectivities and obligations: Resistance and naturalisation

As may be suggested by the examples given thus far, many participants and indeed many teachers more generally express opposition to these broad effects of performative priorities on their work – and to the apparatuses of control and coercion which limit the possibilities of resistance. Indeed, performative demands regularly "go against their professional judgements about best practice" (Marshall & Ball, 1999, p. 75) and conflict with their moral and pedagogical values (Ball, 2003). In line with this, it may be more difficult to produce performative self-technologies in teachers when the obligations that this would require them to accept are countered by an existing commitment to an alternate game of truth which defines professionalism and quality in education differently – perhaps particularly for those who have directly experienced, as Michael relates, "the drift in education in my time". This discordance is evident, for instance, in Plust et al.'s (2022) finding that for one participant, "being authentic as a teacher was experienced as being *incompatible* with the current educational system" (p. 719, emphasis added).

Accordingly, participants regularly challenged neoliberal instrumentalisation of students, instead framing them as worthy of care and investment regardless of narrowly defined attainment. For instance, Tracy told me that:

> *I always try and look for the strengths, […] some of the students that I work with are just amazing people, they're very caring, very kind, they're amazing peers, and lovely to others, and just that to me is an absolutely fantastic trait, and that's equally as important as being good at an academic subject*

In a similar vein, Erin exemplified objections to the demand for standardised test results at the expense of students' needs and wellbeing, explaining:

> *I hate standardised testing, just completely loathe it […] one of the kids doing their SATs last year had an absolute mental breakdown when he was doing his maths paper, and he cried and he cried and cried because he thinks he's going to fail, and I had to put him to the side and I had to tell him 'okay honey, it's okay! Like you don't need to do this it's just, it's a test', […] and he was saying 'oh because my mum said if I fail, I fail', you know, and that's heart-breaking*

Plust et al. (2022)'s aforementioned participant also had similar feelings about standardised assessment, describing it as "sucking out the results out of children" (p. 727). In fact, unable to reconcile her own values with such mandated aspects of the teaching role, she had ultimately left the profession entirely. This is also consistent with the reasons given for (considering) leaving teaching by many other educators, as surveyed by Perryman and Calvert (2020), who found that "it is not just the issue of the workload, and the stressful environment but the *nature* of the work, the accountability agenda that deprived teachers of the creativity and variety for which some had joined the profession" (p. 16, emphasis added).

Likewise, participants commonly cited this *type* of work, specifically bureaucracy and accountability demands, as negative and often superfluous parts of their jobs as teachers. Georgia, in explaining her own intention to leave teaching, took issue with such technologies of control as applied to students as well as teachers:

> *after the Teach First programme I'm not actually going to continue teaching in a school, I might continue doing work with children but I just really dislike the really rigid school environment, with all their policies and all the little things like, we care so much more about whether a kid has a tie on, than about whether they're learning, and developing as a human being, or you know all of these little nitty gritty behaviour policies and admin bits and there's just so much unnecessary stuff for teachers to do […] – I get discouraged from the profession when I do those things*

Notably, as head of a special school, Tracy framed the priorities and purpose of education for her students as quite different to standardised tests and careers, explaining that:

> *our students who come here have missed large proportions of education, for anxiety, mental health issues, illnesses, so this to me is the last chance as a school to get this right, because I want my students when they leave here in years to come, to be able to sit in a pub with their friends having a beer, and talk about school, and talk about school experiences positively, I don't want them to feel excluded from conversations because they didn't go to school, or*

> *because they feel they can't talk about school because it was problematic for them, or they're ashamed of school for whatever reason, I want them to have happy memories*

Although other participants may have similar values but struggle to implement them within a performative school system – and indeed Tracy herself was not immune from accountability demands and financial pressures ("a lot of the time, what I want to do, and what I think is best for my students, isn't always achievable because the funding is a massive issue") – there is potentially greater scope to focus on more humanistic goals in a special school, which is already positioned under neoliberal ideology as 'other' to the more economically valuable mainstream.

Tracy also demonstrated resistance to the limitations that performative requirements to follow examined curricula place on opportunities for teaching students to think critically (Giroux, 2013; Torres & Van Heertum, 2009), emphasising that she considered it highly important to educate about "critical analysis, […] it is very much about analysing, understanding bias, looking at false media, fake news, recognising that everything you see out there especially on social media is not actually real". This potentially gives students vital tools for questioning and resisting both neoliberalism itself and other dominant 'truths', including cisnormativity and transphobia – thus undermining governmental techniques of subjectivity construction that aim to produce them as "job-ready zombies" (Hil, 2015, p. 5) for whom education as human capital is normalised, who desire to be economically productive neoliberal subjects and who do not question existing power relations.

Thus, some participants explicitly opposed the neoliberal attempt to redefine the 'truth' of teacher subjectivity – Georgia for instance lamented the technicalisation of her role that left her feeling "almost like an automaton now just delivering English to children". However, others did indicate a level of naturalisation of performative obligations, although not in isolation; as found by Stacey et al. (2022), teachers commonly held aspects of conflicting perspectives simultaneously. Indeed, in line with their finding that such ambivalence or contradiction often occurs regarding data collection such as "records of student behaviour and welfare issues" (p. 779), Laura appeared to hold such a position about her school's five-point behaviour system, on which she was required to score every individual student for every lesson. Whilst she told me that "it's useful for behaviour management in having a consistent policy across school", she also said that "it's a lot of admin really, and like the threes and fours aren't much of a deterrent really, to behaving badly".

Previous literature in fact suggests that this naturalisation may be more common among younger teachers (like Laura) who experienced their own schooling and training within a neoliberal system (Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Holloway & Brass, 2018) – and thus may not have the same level of conflict with prior truth commitments. However, in this research, the acceptance of performative obligations actually seemed to appear most clearly in the narratives of *head*teachers. For instance, Rachel framed aspects of her role in business and managerial language: "in my role now as the head,

what's great is that you're able to shape the vision, and the mission of the school and drive the strategic direction of the school". She also suggested responsibilisation when asked about aspects of teaching she did not like:

> *I suppose if you were to ask teachers now they would say it's the workload, but you know it's something that when you become a teacher you just have to be at peace with, because if you're not then it will eat you up and* you've got to be able to rise to the challenge of the job (emphasis added)

The naturalisation of extensive external accountability was also reflected by Sarah:

> *there's always the Ofsted looming, there is a lot of accountability which is right, you know, we're sitting on a lot of money which comes from DfE, so there's a lot of accountability, it's also trying to manage internal structures that we've devised for ourselves that we need to have in place to make sure that we maintain our status as outstanding*

This may be associated with the specific work of neoliberal policy on reshaping school leadership in corporatised and managerialist terms, with the headteacher's role "shifted away from pedagogic leadership towards managing the fulfilment of targets for school performance" (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 36). From the time of New Labour, and as is most evident in the first quote from Rachel, this has also become an "entrepreneurial model of management" – "emphasising the importance of the charisma of school leaders utilising their ever-increasing power to promote a transformative vision" (p. 37). Thus, to be professionally successful, school leaders may be especially required to demonstrate an alignment with performative and entrepreneurial values, and indeed even to embody this position through their own personal subjectivity.

Overall, whilst to varying degrees many teachers oppose performative priorities in principle, through responsibilisation and external accountability they are incentivised to differentially allocate value and resources to knowledges, activities, and students based on market demands and consequences – demonstrably exacerbating systemic inequalities (Keddie et al., 2020). In the following sections, I will demonstrate firstly (section 5.4) how this context constrains the agency of even motivated teachers in the extent to which they can undertake trans (and other types of) inclusion work, also burdening those who do so in a context where this is not institutionally supported and rewarded. Secondly (section 5.5 onwards), I explore how the neoliberal reframing of equality, as individual rights and responsibilisation, influences the extent and ways in which teachers (and other stakeholders) perceive that they *should* enact trans inclusion – legitimising, as the fair outcome of an apparently neutral market system, a normative position wherein this work is primarily done only to the extent that it is beneficial (or at least not detrimental) to a school's competitive position. Hence, even limited accommodation of trans students is often regarded as generous or additional work –

and further requests as demanding or unreasonable – rather than necessary actions to change a presently unjust school environment.

5.4. Lack of institutional investment constrains possibilities for trans inclusion

5.4.1. Prohibitively high teacher workloads

In the preceding sections, I have identified a context in which possibilities for trans (and other forms of) inclusion work are frequently limited, with schools compelled to prioritise accountability measures and protect their market position. Consequently, in the absence of institutional investment, this work tends to rely on individual teachers being willing and able to take it on in addition to and *despite* neoliberal performative pressures, and thus is often motivated by their own ethical and pedagogical values. Where such provision does exist, it is demonstrably important to trans students (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Ullman, 2022). Indeed, and although he was speaking more broadly than just about trans children, Michael reflected this point in explaining, "the positive impact of just an interested adult, just a kind caring adult who is interested in them, that is a hugely powerful thing in a school environment". Nevertheless, the individualised approach considerably limits what can be achieved, particularly with regard to the anti-cisnormative institutional transformation that is necessary for genuine trans justice, and also due to the risk and burden it can bring for the teachers involved, especially those who are (LGB+ or) trans themselves (see section 5.4.3).

In fact, some participants suggested that the extent of the work required of teachers under performative accountability pressures could leave them feeling simply unable to carry out any such 'additional' tasks. Michael himself contrasted his earlier career to his more recent experience:

> *when I was a younger teacher […] I invested a lot of time taking kids away on residentials, camping, […] even just running a football team, and that can be a really positive experience for kids, and the kind of stuff they remember and is really good for them, but again I think teachers now are under so much pressure around marking, preparing, and all that other stuff, that even relatively young teachers are just saying well you know there's enough demands and there's enough pressure, […] often, these things are being eroded because staff just feel under so much pressure and so exhausted at the end of it all, that they may be ducking out in a way that they didn't in the past*

In line with this, multiple participants cited such demands as a reason for (others) not intervening in anti-LGBT incidents. Patrick explained that in his opinion, teachers failing to challenge students using homophobic language "ultimately comes down to teacher workload really", describing how a lack of

formal rest breaks meant that "teachers just, as much as possible try to use breaktime duty as a break for themselves, sort of they're out there, but they're trying to mentally switch off as much as possible". He continued:

> *and that's the same thing when they're wandering through the corridors, like they've got something they need to do, they're printing something or getting something ready, and out of the corner of their eye they see children, you know or they hear someone swearing for example, then they make a judgement call in the moment like, am I going to deal with that, or am I going to pretend I didn't hear it and move on*

Whilst there is significant evidence that schools continue to be cisheteronormative spaces where anti-LGBT prejudice is often normalised (Hall, 2020, 2021), experiences like Patrick's suggest that this is not the (only) reason that teachers may "turn a blind eye" to queerphobia. He believed that "it's more that they are trying not to create extra work for themselves", rather than this approach being "anything specific to that issue". However, the impact on students may effectively be the same regardless of intent, as with previous findings that "institutional silence [is] interpreted by many as equivalent to school-sanctioned homophobia" (Atkinson, 2021, p. 451).

Further, the intensity of teacher workload was such that even though Chris, for instance, emphasised that he personally would prioritise intervention ("I would sort that out first"), the decision of others not to do so was considered understandable: "I can imagine a lot of secondary teachers thinking, that's just gonna have to wait, I need to do this now – I appreciate it, don't agree with it, but I appreciate it". Stacey et al. (2022) likewise demonstrate prohibitively high workloads in the Australian neoliberal policy context, highlighting that due to increasing performative demands of "administration, datafication and accountability" (p. 778), teachers "felt compelled to 'triage' their work" (p. 773), with some tasks unavoidably left incomplete. Correspondingly, in a systematic research synthesis, Creagh et al. (2023) identify that "teachers' capacity to deliver educational priorities which support the learning of all students is undermined by the experience of a heavy workload and heightened work intensification" (p. 1).

Whilst Hannah in some ways saw this as "a question of teacher priorities" –

> *personally in terms of individual interactions, it would be a priority for me, if I felt that I was one of the main contacts for a child, and one of the main people they wanted to talk to about any issues they had with their gender or their sexuality, I would absolutely make it a priority to find the time, you know even if it meant books didn't get marked*

– she acknowledged that she personally was able to do this in a context where her school did provide institutional support and structure for pastoral work, including "making sure that tutors have form time, to build those relationships" and "making sure that staff have training every week",

further recognising that this is something "which obviously a lot of schools don't do". Additionally, even though the school did facilitate, to an extent, teachers *individually* supporting students, this approach remained insufficient for trans equity, in what was still a cisnormative environment.

5.4.2. Job precarity undermines autonomous professional judgement

Trans inclusion work also appeared to be limited by teachers' concerns about their own precarity, under a standardised accountability regime in which they must demonstrate that they are "doing things right rather than relying on their professional judgement to do the right thing" (Sims, 2017, p. 5). Teachers may not feel confident or safe to decide by themselves, or outside of officially sanctioned approaches, to respond supportively to trans students, and therefore may seek confirmation or approval before acting. Correspondingly, Lindquist et al.'s (2009) work on teachers' strategies for coping with neoliberal "regimes of risk and audit" found that "[w]hen considering an action, teachers seem to balance the *risk of attracting blame* against the didactic potential" (p. 508, emphasis added). Indeed, some participants expressed such concerns regarding the decision to use a trans student's new name or pronouns:

Wendy: *I'd have to discuss it with the headteacher, and we'd probably need to take advice on that […] it's certainly something a teacher by themselves couldn't make a decision about*

Jenny: *personally I mean I would want to, but for fear of backlash you know from the parents I feel like I would follow it up with the pastoral team first and just, double check, 'cause it's hard to know what's the right thing if you've got parents saying one thing and children saying another, when they're underage, who do we have to follow, who do we adhere to*

Whilst neoliberal precarity is not the only reason that teachers may be uncertain of the best approach, Jenny's explanation in particular appears to directly reference relevant concerns; she feels that she must "double check", with designated pastoral team colleagues, that her desire to affirm a trans student is acceptable *officially* – "who do we *have* to follow" (emphasis added). She feels this is necessary not because she is unsure which approach she would prefer to take, but "for fear of backlash […] from the parents". She therefore suggests that she would seek reassurance that she would have official support in her response, to ameliorate the potential threat from parents and perhaps other forms of external accountability.

This interpretation may be supported by Ullman's (2018) findings contrasting educators at two types of institutions: those that took a minimal, anti-bullying approach; and those which explicitly "conceptualise[d] trans/gender inclusivity as integral to the school's mission" (p. 495). Whilst the first group saw trans inclusion "as a 'minefield', where a mistake might lead to termination" (p. 505),

the second group had the security of their school's official stance and thus were confident in affirming transness "whether or not th[is] would be viewed as acceptable by the parent community" (p. 506) – they were assured that it would not place them at professional risk.

However, it is a significant concern that the policy environment in which teachers will be seeking such reassurance, and to follow an approved approach, is in many countries increasingly trans-hostile – including in England, and perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent the rest of the UK (see sections 1.1 and 2.6). This socio-political context is likely to place teachers (and schools) under pressure to adopt a trans-oppressive approach, even if they may themselves want to pursue equity and inclusion. Those who do go against what is officially approved therefore take on substantial risk, as their professional or market position is threatened by a failure to meet the demands of external accountability.

5.4.3. Disproportionate burden for trans and queer teachers

It was further evident that equality work, in primarily relying on individual choice and motivation, seemed to be disproportionately completed by teachers who were themselves part of marginalised groups and had personal connections to specific issues. Indeed, as B. Johnson (2023a) highlights, "[e]ducating for LGBTQ+ inclusivity […] often falls on the shoulders of sexual minority teachers or motivated individuals rather than taking a school wide approach" (p. 545). These teachers may feel an obligation to ensure that this work is done, and a responsibility to improve the school environment for students who share their identity or experience (Iskander, 2021). However, without institutional support the quality of such work is highly variable, and again its transformational potential is limited; it also may create unreasonable burden and risk for these teachers.

Reflecting the point about responsibility, Erin, an Asian teacher with majority white colleagues, cited her personal experience of racism as a reason she 'should' challenge similar issues with her students:

> *I feel like because I've experienced it, because I know how it feels, I feel like I should teach children who may not be POC [people of colour] like, this is wrong if you do that, no, that's not acceptable, and, you know, I'm one of the first people, I could be one of the first people to tell them that*

Erin's point that she "could be one of the first people" to explain the unacceptable nature of racist behaviour to certain students highlights the burden of knowing that this work may not be done at all if she does not take it on herself. This issue can also be seen in other research; for instance, Ullman (2020) explains that in the experience of Alison, a transgender teacher in Australia, cisgender colleagues do not address students' homophobic and transphobic behaviour "particularly if they are *not personally invested* in GSD issues" (p. 76, emphasis added).

It is also often incumbent on these teachers to educate their colleagues, "in lieu of formal coverage – in either the curriculum or teacher education courses" (Ullman, 2020, p. 69). This was suggested by Hannah's experience, as she received staff training on supporting LGBT students solely due to the personal investment of one colleague. She explained:

> *we're lucky that we had this one guy who's passionate enough about it, and then confident enough to put himself in that position, and like it's a really big deal, saying to the senior leadership of a school, I think there's a gap in our training, and I would like to fill it, by doing this session*

Hannah's colleague not only had to take on additional work, but also had to be "confident enough to put himself in that position" – he is exposing himself to the potential threat of personal accountability. Further, as Hannah herself pointed out, the school facilitating this one session is "still pretty minimal", leaving her feeling underconfident when "dealing with students who have gender or sexuality issues that are different to mine".

Correspondingly, Ullman (2020) details the "time consuming and draining" (p. 77) demands on gender diverse teachers to educate colleagues about trans identity. In the absence of institutions taking any responsibility for addressing cisnormativity or acknowledging its harms, teachers such as Alison are left exposed to ignorance and trans-hostility, and any possibility of change falls entirely on them to create. As such, "[w]ith no other avenue for information, Alison herself bore the brunt of – sometimes benignly curious, other times, clearly transphobic – questioning from both students and colleagues alike" (p. 76).

The identities and experiences of marginalised educators can certainly be beneficial to their teaching and their relationships with students; indeed, Daniel told me that his "experiences of both being disabled and being LGBT, kind of help the way that I relate to the kids, and the way that I teach, because I tend to be more mindful of the experiences of the students". Similarly, Iskander's (2021) teacher participants "assert that their nonbinary genders are […] an invaluable and potentially transformative resource" (p. 215). However, and as suggested by Alison's experience in Ullman's (2020) research, this potential opportunity for authentic connection with students often becomes burdensome when it is experienced more as individual responsibility than choice, and they are not provided with much needed institutional support.

Laura's experience exemplified this issue; she described how she had "been trying to set up an LGBT club with another member of staff, an art teacher in our school, […] who's gay as well". She pointed to the challenge of wanting to provide this support for LGBT students, but as two of the most junior (and temporary) staff members, being poorly placed to do so successfully: "we haven't managed to get much done so far, so I do want to do that sort of support, it's just a bit difficult, being PGCE and stuff". Laura had not faced active resistance to the LGBT club idea, but neither had she received any

material institutional support; she described the headteacher as “kind of passively supportive I guess, not necessarily very proactive”. The school leadership therefore may ‘allow’ this extra work to happen, but do not necessarily resource or reward it.

A comparable scenario is also described by Slovin (2023), identifying how one gay teacher’s success in advocating for his school to offer an LGBTQ-related class was conditional on his (reluctant) agreement to be placed in charge of teaching it. In both situations, school leaders and colleagues did not actively object to the work taking place, with the caveat that they did not consider it to be a shared responsibility. Instead, it relied upon an individual teacher for whom the work “held special importance” (p. 221), regardless of whether they were the most appropriate person for the job. In a neoliberal education system, such optional activities were not *valued* by these schools in the same way as those for which they would be held externally accountable.

In such situations, LGBT+ teachers also tend to be placed within what Gilbert and Gray (2020) describe as “contradictory positions” (p. 2): on the one hand, compelled by a sense of responsibility to support queer students and be ‘authentic’ role models; and on the other, held externally accountable for presenting a ‘neutral’ professional subjectivity, which is threatened by non-normative gender and sexuality. Accordingly, the marginalised group teachers who are disproportionately likely to complete equality work are simultaneously the same teachers who generally face the greatest risk in doing so – which may also restrict what they are practically able to achieve, particularly in the absence of institutional support. I discuss this issue of risk associated with (LGB and) trans inclusion work in more depth in section 9.3.3.

Ultimately, an approach to trans inclusion – and other forms of social justice work that are not systemically implemented and rewarded by neoliberal accountability structures – that relies on individual teachers taking on additional work and navigating personal risk is not an effective or sustainable one (B. Johnson, 2023a). However, this normative situation, wherein trans equality in schools is limited by market value and hence reliant on motivated individuals, is also naturalised and produced as appropriate and fair under a neoliberal regime of truth. This is because neoliberal ideology constructs ‘equality’ in terms of individual rights and responsibilisation within an apparently neutral state – as I will now go on to explain.

5.5. Neoliberalism redefines ‘equal’ provision and inclusion

5.5.1. Individual rights and responsibilisation in a neutral context

Thus far in this chapter I have primarily outlined coercive limitations that performative accountability places on teachers’ ability to enact trans inclusion. However, in addition to these

constraints, which were frequently opposed at least in principle, participants also appeared to accept as good teaching practice certain inequitable approaches to trans students, influenced by a particular neoliberal 'truth' regarding what *constitutes* equal treatment.

This neoliberal concept of equality is understood as a recognition specifically of each individual's same 'freedom' to access an ostensibly fair and neutral marketplace (see section 3.3.1), framed in a decontextualised way that does not acknowledge structural injustice. Under the framing of *meritocracy*, it is argued that since all have this same opportunity, success is determined fairly based on ability and effort; individual freedom is also a responsibilisation (Rose, 1999), an obligation to ensure one's own particular needs and educational potential are met by effectively utilising the market (Hansen & Bjørnsrud, 2018) and making rational-economic choices. This also attributes any blame for failure, of inclusion or outcome, to individual inability or unwillingness to take advantage of the market, rather than to systemic inequalities – or indeed to an education system that, in line with the original satirical intention of 'meritocracy' (Young, 1958), in defining merit according to narrow hegemonic values actually only strengthens the continued advantage of dominant groups through the capacity to justify their position as legitimately deserved (Young, 2001; de Saxe et al., 2020). The neoliberal education system in fact *requires* this (justification of) failure, to maintain itself as a zero-sum market competition (Connell, 2012) in which people must be motivated to pay to succeed (2013a, 2013b). Following this, neoliberal equality does not require an institutional responsibility to ameliorate such failure or to provide specifically for minority and marginalised groups, beyond what the market incentivises; in fact, to do so would be considered an unfair redistributive intervention.

Accordingly, participants often framed 'equal' provision for trans students in terms of granting access – but not making significant changes – to an apparently neutral school environment, which according to neoliberal discourses is an unbiased natural representation of 'true' educational knowledges and inherently fair market-based demands. However, such a framing in fact obscures how cisnormative and otherwise unjust structural discourses and dynamics disadvantage marginalised groups. Further, I would propose that it also facilitates the justification, as fair and equal, of three out of the four distinct approaches identified in Horton and Carlile's (2022) staged model of trans inclusion in schools: trans-oppressive (no change allowed); trans-assimilationist (re-categorisation of the individual student); and trans-accommodative (limited 'reasonable' adjustments for the individual student; see section 5.6). It is primarily only the latter two of these, to various extents, that participants described. Yet, the commonality between all three is the maintenance of cis supremacy – in contrast to the advocated fourth stage, a trans-emancipatory approach which involves a "[g]enuine power shift to cis-trans equality" (p. 175). In fact, I would suggest that whilst all three persistently cisnormative approaches may be manifestations of a neoliberal concept of equality, distinctions between them may also involve the other two themes in my analysis, namely sex/gender essentialism (Chapter Six) and childhood innocence and

developmentalism (Chapter Seven). For instance, trans-oppressive and trans-assimilationist approaches diverge primarily regarding the (cis) gender group to which it is thought the trans child should be treated equally, that of their asserted identity or that of their assigned sex; this would depend on whether teachers and school leaders treat a ('binary') trans student's gender as *legitimate*, and also whether, as a child, the student is allowed or considered capable of making the decision to transition.

In the following sections, I will first demonstrate two ways in which participants tended to reproduce such constructions of cisnormative schooling as neutral and fair: in advocating an 'open' approach to diversity that treats all students the same; and in naturalising the absence of trans and queer knowledges in the curriculum. Subsequently, I will explore in more depth the justification and naturalisation of market-dependency in provision for trans students, before problematising the injustice and harms that this perpetuates.

5.5.2. A general diversity approach, or 'not seeing difference'

Firstly, such notions of the school environment as already fair and as conducive to equal treatment of trans students, without any need for change, were suggested in Erin's explanation that no policy was required regarding a student's transition, because "the school is very open minded". Martino, Omercajic et al. (2022) similarly found that some educators in Canada "considered their schools to be inclusive regardless of whether there was an explicit trans-inclusive policy" (p. 87) – stating, for example, that "it doesn't matter who you are and everyone gets treated the same" (p. 88).

Other participants took an approach that claimed not to 'see' or acknowledge differences between people. Patrick explained:

> *some of the other teachers are from like ethnic minority backgrounds, […] but I try not to think of them as being that, 'cause they are just people*

Here he describes actively attempting not to attend to the ethnicity of his colleagues, suggesting that the more appropriate or 'equal' approach is to treat them as "just people". This echoes a "universal personhood" (Brown, 1995, p. 96) discourse that assumes a neutral background within which it is both desirable and possible to consider everyone the same, outside of the influence of socio-political context. The premise is that if all are recognised as the 'same' (status), that equates to being treated equally. However, it is certainly not *equitable*, because the context is not actually neutral. The denial of systemic inequalities therefore enables the same injustice to continue unchallenged, whilst – reflecting the meritocracy myth – also re-attributing their effects as inherent deficits of individuals. Rachel also made similar points, both about her gay colleagues:

> *she's just like any other member of staff, and you actually forget about that, I mean it doesn't really register with me, she's the same person as anyone else*

as well as a trans student:

> *we don't even see it now, we all forget, and she's just one of the children, and that's the way it should be*

Rachel appeared to genuinely intend this supportively, saying for instance of the latter, "we accept and love her just like we love everybody". However, this could be understood as an assimilationist approach, attempting to bring gay and trans people into – but not challenge – the existing (cisheteronormative) institution. Such a general approach denies the differences in how individuals are affected by the social environment and the particular barriers that trans (and otherwise marginalised) people face (R.A. Marx et al., 2017; Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022). It means that when trans students encounter difficulties, the problem tends to be seen in terms of their own individual deficit, their personal failure to thrive in an apparently non-discriminatory environment. As such, Horton and Carlile (2022) found that schools taking trans-assimilationist approaches "can too easily frame a less easily assimilated pupil as troublesome or overly demanding" (p. 184).

The idea of treating all students the same is also demonstrated by Payne and Smith (2022), in relating the resistance of a district administrator (Sam) to trans-inclusive school changes:

> *Any time Megan proposed an idea that specifically recognized transgender identity, Sam argued that the proposal was too specific to be applied to "all students" and dismissed it. […] Sam asserted that policy should be good for every student and that every student should benefit equally, and he refused the proposition that students whose identities and very lives are marginalized by the institutional culture of school might need a specific policy or accommodation to be equal in their potential to experience school* (p. 61)

Sam's opinion here aligns with the neoliberal objection to redistribution, framing such interventions as *being*, rather than as necessary to correct, injustice.

5.5.3. Subjugated queer knowledges

Secondly, several participants, including some who were LGBT+ themselves, described approaches to trans and queer content that naturalised the cis(hetero)normative nature of the main school curriculum, positioning the latter as simply a neutral reflection of market demand, and of the most legitimate and useful knowledges. Daniel, a gay trans man, described his school's approach to LGBT inclusion as "really good", explaining that "we have a really open approach to diversity". However, when asked if there was any LGBT content in the curriculum, he replied, "not that I'm aware of".

Thus, a cisheteronormative curriculum did not seem to be perceived as inconsistent with an LGBT-inclusive school environment.

Moreover, other participants explained that trans-relevant content had been covered in a stand-alone manner, separately from the main curriculum – an approach also commonly found in prior research (Snapp, Burdge et al., 2015). Jenny, Rachel, and Hannah said that such content was provided in contexts outside of regular lessons – in assembly, library books, and form time[13] respectively. Whilst this approach may have some benefits, particularly compared to a complete absence of trans knowledges from the school environment, it may also reinforce the subjugation of these knowledges as 'other', as non-academic and of lesser epistemic value (Foucault, 1980c; see section 3.3.3). In Rachel's case, she had acquired two books for the school library as part of her response to one student's social transition, explaining that they were there "for other children to make sense of the situation". In one sense, this may begin to resist the subjugation of trans knowledges in that it grants a degree of validity through tacit institutional approval. However, it is also implied that the information contained in these books is only necessary, only relevant or useful, for the purpose of understanding one particular 'different' student – as opposed to the cis knowledges that are naturalised and made 'true' across the entire field, in both explicit and hidden curricula. The provision of separate content also potentially legitimises the normative situation wherein trans children are unable to be known through the knowledges available in the rest of the school environment.

5.5.4. Market-based provision and responsibilised trans students

Correspondingly, within such (cis, hetero, and otherwise) normative contexts that are presumed natural and fair, "the production of gender and sexuality is made to appear as individual choice and expression rather than imposed and shaped by structures of inequality" (Woolley, 2017, p. 84). Being trans is framed as an expression of individual freedom, the (market) consequences of which are therefore a personal responsibility; it is not something that institutions or society have a collective responsibility to support. This justifies a situation wherein the extent to which trans people (and other groups) are recognised and provided for by the state and educational institutions is *market-dependent*; it is done, or incentivised, to the extent that it is beneficial economically and in relation to the market.

Accordingly, participants outlined scenarios in which provision for trans students was considered unjustified or disproportionately burdensome on limited resources; as a small minority, trans needs are not understood as falling within the reasonable responsibilities of school provision, because the cost or effort involved in meeting them outweighs the limited market pressure that these students are able to exercise. For instance, Hannah noted that her school "wouldn't have a policy" on

[13] This may also be known as tutor group time, or 'homeroom' in the US for instance.

practical aspects of trans inclusion "because we don't have a trans kid, or we don't have *enough* of them for it to have been thought about in detail" (emphasis added). Additionally, Tracy explained that whilst she wanted to replace her school's gendered toilet facilities with gender-neutral ones, she was concerned about the "massive cost implication":

> *I've got to try and you know probably fundraise to be able to pay for that to be done, just so that I can be inclusive to all, it's really hard*

This work cannot be covered by the regular school budget; it is perhaps not a use of such funding that could be justified as a good investment against market pressures. Thus, being "inclusive to all" becomes associated with additional work and responsibility for Tracy, in having to raise separate funds; this also reflects how inclusion work relies on individual teachers, outside of institutional investment, as identified in section 5.4.

Woolley (2017) also demonstrates a similar point regarding market-dependency in gendered toilet provision, explaining that at one American high school, the 'choice' of some trans students to go off campus to use gender-neutral public facilities is constructed under neoliberalism as simply an appropriate exercise of their individual freedom. These students are seen to have a responsibility to use the market to meet their needs, rather than this being the ethical responsibility of the school – which instead faces a cost-benefit decision: "is the comfort of a few individuals worth the cost of remodelling old buildings with antiquated sex-segregated bathrooms full of stalls and lines of urinals?" (p. 93). Financially, and therefore in practice, the answer to this question is no.

Moreover, Bethany also highlighted how equality work may not be a high enough priority to justify funding, in a context of performative demands that positions this in conflict with – and as potentially unjustifiably detracting from – other activities that are better rewarded or even necessitated by the market. She explained that curricular inclusion, such as books with LGBT+ themes, "would be a really nice idea, although I don't think our school does that unfortunately, again it's money it's resources, and it's really tricky". It is something that would be 'nice' to have, but it is not *essential*; queer knowledges are positioned outside of the legitimate (cishetero) academic knowledges whose necessity is reified by their constitution of standardised assessments (sections 3.3.3 and 5.5.3).

Further, this issue of market-dependency may extend not only to specific aspects such as bathrooms and resources *within* schools, but also access to school *at all* – with parents responsibilised to find provision within the market that will accommodate their trans children, rather than all schools having an obligation to do so. Horton (2023a) found that not only did many UK trans children and their parents feel implicitly forced out of unsafe school environments – something that is also suggested by Michael's experience of school transfers (section 5.2.2), and also by Beck et al.'s (2023) US-based research – but also that one parent was explicitly advised by one of their son's teachers to

"take him to a different school" (p. 83), despite the parent's protests of the illegality of such a proposal.

On the other hand, market incentives may also influence the forms of 'inclusion' that schools do prioritise – specifically, those that facilitate successful academic work and thus standardised test results. This also corresponds with the OECD[14]-influenced construction of educational equality solely in terms of 'attainment gaps', considered worthwhile closing because doing so is economically beneficial at a societal level (Wilkins et al., 2021). For instance, Carlile (2011) identifies that whilst headteachers regularly argued against 'difficult' children with significant needs being assigned to their schools, with year heads feeling that these students were "'wasting' or 'using up' all their resources" (p. 310), the same headteachers were in fact eager to accept such children regardless of past behaviour if they had scored highly on the SATs – as this suggested they were likely to do well in GCSEs and thereby benefit the school's league table position. Correspondingly, some participants cited academic work as the priority in their approach to trans students. Tracy explained that:

> *my students are coming here to learn, and to me personally if they want to be called a male name, a female name, or a non-gender-specific name, I don't really personally have an issue with that because it doesn't really impact on their learning – if it impacts on their learning and they're messing on and they're not doing what they should be doing, that's different, but a name to me doesn't make a difference*

Names and gender recognition are positioned as comparatively superficial in relation to academic learning, and thus also potentially conditional upon it. Similarly, Chris, whilst not in opposition to allowing or affirming students' gender identities and presentation, suggested that this was perhaps less important to attend to in a learning-focused environment: "those things, to me, as a teacher, don't really matter, it's the academic side of it I'm more bothered about". This reflects the point that it is academic achievement which brings (market) 'value', both to schools and to individual students themselves as human capital. Accordingly, Georgia also told me that a trans student being "in school, he is attending lessons, he is getting on with his GCSE syllabus" was "a win on its own, because some kids who are going through way kind of less than he is, are just not in lessons". Whilst this is not necessarily a bad thing, it is notable that attendance and progress towards assessments are used as criteria for student wellbeing, or the school's success in supporting or including them.

[14] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: An intergovernmental organisation which advocates neoliberal solutions to global problems and inequalities, including in education (Robertson, 2021).

5.5.5. Impression management

Furthermore, participants' experiences also indicated the ways in which their schools' approaches to trans students were influenced by concerns about how particular actions would be perceived externally and thereby affect their reputation and market position. Indeed, such *impression management* is often important to schools; as Ball (2003) argues, the way institutions want to be viewed is "driven by the priorities, constraints and climate set by the policy environment" (p. 224) – as well as the wider social climate influencing parents' opinions and desires. In some contexts, promoting diversity and equality – including trans inclusion – may contribute positively to a school's relative market value, and thus they may include commitments to this in the "fabrications" (p. 215) of themselves that they present externally. On the one hand, this can be an effective way of achieving humanistic goals within neoliberal performative structures. Rachel for instance told me that:

> *we were awarded the wellbeing award for schools, we were the first school in [local authority] to achieve the award, which we're really proud of, and that demonstrates our commitment to the wellbeing of children whether it's anti-bullying, whether it's being mindful, whether it's managing, how to manage their own mental and physical health*

Whilst it may not be the only or primary reason for doing work on children's wellbeing, the fact that this is done within the framework of awards suggests that impression management is at least a consideration – with a competitive advantage implied by noting they were "the *first* school" (emphasis added) locally to achieve this. A comparable framework of awards also exists for LGBT+ inclusion, provided by organisations such as Stonewall (2023b) and Educate & Celebrate (2023) – which may provide incentive for schools to engage in such work.

However, the effectiveness of such strategies is often limited to topics and approaches that are 'safe' and broadly non-contentious; Rachel's school promoting children's 'wellbeing', for instance, is unlikely to attract opposition. Similarly, Stonewall's 'Different Families' – "the dominant approach for introducing lesbian and gay sexualities in English primary schools" – is strategically designed as a less controversial, 'child-friendly' initiative; this limits its potential and tends to reinscribe heteronormativity onto these 'different' families (Hall, 2021, p. 53). This is in contrast to queer praxis informed approaches such as *No Outsiders* (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009) that actively disrupted heteronormativity – and faced significant backlash (Brettingham, 2008). Correspondingly, Lewis and Pearce (2022) found that in one English sixth form student's experience, "[i]n assemblies teachers sometimes talk about social issues but generally in only a widely socially accepted way". In contrast, however, "[t]erms such as 'feminism' are seen as too controversial. The head of sixth form told a student they could not use the word 'feminism' in an assembly" (p. 272).

Additionally, de-politicised commitments to inclusion may benefit the school's externally facing image, but leave the underlying normative discourses and structures unchallenged (Iskander, 2022). In many cases, the actual effect on internal school culture and practices has been found to be superficial (Hernández, 2022). In the experience of Australian trans teacher Alison, Ullman (2020) writes that there is a "mismatch between her school's apparent value of diversity and awareness of the importance of curricular visibility for marginalised groups and their refusal to engage with GSD topics", further noting that "Alison describes the school as rife with homophobic and transphobic attitudes and behaviour" (p. 76). In fact, Ahmed (2007) argues that having such policies and documented 'commitments' to diversity and inclusion can not only grant performative value to institutions regardless of their lack of actual action, but can also obscure the very need to act and indeed the fact that there is any work left to be done on tackling inequalities – as the documents *themselves* become the measure and evidence of 'success' in this work.

Furthermore, in the current social and policy climate (section 1.1), LGB and especially trans inclusion is much more likely to be a potential threat to a school's market position than a 'selling point', and thus their impression management strategies tend to limit the possibilities for queer recognition. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2019) explore how this manifested in one Australian school "[e]mbracing cis hetero-masculinity", as for instance the principal explicitly sought to avoid a reputation as the 'gay school' for fear of the market repercussions: "what about those parents who don't want to send their kids to the gay school? You know we could lose students" (p. 140).

Ultimately, schools' approach to inclusion often comes down to being "eager to avoid controversy", as Lewis and Pearce's aforementioned participant said of her sixth form; she believed that "senior managers, who were responsible for maintaining the school's reputation in the community, did so because it might attract bad publicity for the school, a major concern in a marketised system" (2022, p. 275). This is not an unfounded concern, as demonstrated by 'heteroactivist' resistance to LGBT visibility in schools (Nash & Browne, 2021) and by media sensationalism of even minor changes – such as changing the title of a 'Head Girl' role to 'Head of School' (Vine, 2021). In practice, this manifests not only as eschewing LGBT topics, but in the active promotion and naturalisation of cisheterosexuality – as tied to protecting the school's market position (Neary, 2017; Saltmarsh, 2007).

The requisite impression management also affects how schools approach provision for individual trans students, often due to concerns about how other students' parents will react. For instance, discussing how she might respond to a (hypothetical) trans child, Wendy explained:

> *there is an awful lot of PR [Public Relations] to do with everybody else, […] each of the other 29 children are going to go home and say to their parents that this is happening, and then everyone's going to be having all those awkward conversations over the breakfast table,*

> *and then people are going to be up in arms to the head, you know, so it has to be managed really really sensitively*

Wendy expresses the *assumption* that other families will experience knowledge of a trans peer as 'awkward' and that parents will complain. Thus, this negative reaction must be avoided through 'PR' – managing the perceptions of the 29 families (and wider school community), which as a much larger group have a much greater market influence than the one trans child and their family. However, whilst such assumptions of parental disapproval of sexuality and gender diversity content in schools are common, they are not necessarily supported by the research evidence; Ullman et al. (2022) for instance found that 80% of 2093 Australian parents supported the inclusion of these topics in primary and secondary school relationships and sexual health education.

5.5.6. Problematising market-dependent recognition

The issue with this neoliberal approach to 'equality', of market-dependent recognition alone, is tautological – the problem is *that it is market-dependent*, rather than any ethical commitment to justice. This means that the recognition of marginalised groups is dependent on the desires and opinions of dominant groups, who – *without redistribution* – will always have greater resources with which to influence the market. However, this is legitimised by such narratives as the popular assumption that linear societal 'progress' is the inevitable response (supply) of the market to 'new' desires (demand), rather than the contingent result of marginalised groups actively fighting for justice. Accordingly, describing how "a lot of schools now, are trying to foster, to engender a more open culture", Chris suggested that:

> *you've gotta go with the times at the end of the day, […] you've gotta read the room and think, room's changed, you know what I mean, we need to move a little bit more with the times*

His position here implies that there is an underlying societal change towards inclusivity, and schools' and teachers' responsibilities lie in responding to and reflecting this change, rather than playing a role in creating it.

Correspondingly, under the neoliberal approach, legislative or policy interventions towards 'equality' are frequently enacted by states (Kondakov, 2023) and similarly, institutions such as schools (Neary et al., 2016), primarily to serve as symbolic markers of their 'progressiveness' – and done in contexts where this is beneficial to their own market position. Aligned with this is 'assimilationist politics', in which particular groups are promised recognition and rights as an appeal for their votes or business – for example, "rights are guaranteed on the premise of being good gay consumers" (Kondakov, p. 3). Any recognition is therefore precarious, liable to be withdrawn if and when it no longer serves

dominant interests. This is a similar principle to that discussed in the preceding section 5.5.5 regarding schools' approaches to impression management being dependent on social climate.

This precarity has been demonstrated clearly by the negative shift in the British social climate towards trans people over the last decade, impacting (amongst other things) political discourse regarding approaches to trans students in schools. Conservative[15] governments from 2010 under David Cameron and Theresa May attempted to present a more 'compassionate' and 'progressive' image, for instance through same-sex marriage legislation, in order to appeal to mainstream voters (B. Williams, 2021). Correspondingly, a reasonably progressive approach to trans rights was considered to align with market demand; in 2016, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee published extensive recommendations for improving trans equality in the UK, including that "[t]he Government must update the [Gender Recognition] Act, in line with the principle of gender self-declaration" (p. 3). This was in the context of perceived public support: "gathering momentum for change to bring about greater equality for trans people" (p. 6).

However, in the following years, trans-hostile sentiment has come to dominate media and political discourse (section 1.1). Subsequent governments and individual politicians have exploited this anti-trans moral panic for the advancement of their own market position. This was exemplified by the Conservative Party leadership contest in Summer 2022 that featured a significant focus on candidates asserting their support for anti-trans talking points; one such candidate was MP Penny Mordaunt, who notably sought to distance herself from previous trans-positive positions that were now a threat to her candidacy (Government Equalities Office & Mordaunt, 2018; Milton, 2022a).

This has also facilitated a significant shift in the official advice given to schools about trans students, particularly in England (see section 2.6). More trans-inclusive guidance documents have been withdrawn by multiple local councils and the Crown Prosecution Service, due to pressure from parents and anti-trans campaign groups, and threats of legal action (Parsons, 2020). In November 2022, in lieu of anticipated guidance from the Department for Education, a group of school leaders' unions and other school governance organisations (ASCL et al.) published advice "on provision for transgender pupils" (p. 1). This document – reflecting statements made in the August by attorney general at that time, Suella Braverman – advocates that schools take a trans-oppressive approach, opposing even assimilationist or accommodative responses.

Further, the document also plays heavily on the now common narrative cited in opposition to trans equality, namely that this is necessary to preserve the rights of other groups, and in particular "protecting women and girls" (as recently expressed by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (C. Turner, 2022)). This, firstly, reflects the idea of market-based equality – as Sunak for instance leverages the claim that he is protecting a broadly non-controversial group in order to advance his political

[15] 2010-2015 was a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

(market) position. Moreover, it is the neoliberal game of truth – that constructs 'equality' in terms of individual entitlement and not structural level justice – that creates the necessary epistemological conditions for it to be readily believed, or at least understood as a logical argument, that the rights of different groups can and do 'conflict'. This means that the equitable position is determined based on whose rights are seen to hold the most weight – a decision that therefore easily changes based on perceived market value.

The perceived validity of individual claims also depends on whether they are interpreted as a legitimate application of the general rights that are afforded to everyone, on an apparently equal basis. The inequitable context that precludes a universal application of these rights is obscured. Thus, this interpretation of claim legitimacy inherently privileges the dominant and normative. To use the ASCL et al. (2022) guidance as an example, this document argues that instructing a trans students' peers not to misgender them may be an unlawful restriction of freedom of expression. The individual rights approach frames this as a conflict of two claims: the trans student could make a claim that misgendering them constitutes a violation of their right to protection from discrimination; and their peer could claim, as ASCL et al. contend, that being required *not* to misgender them is a violation of their own right to freedom of expression.

Yet, only the latter claim is (normatively) interpreted as valid. In contrast, misgendering is not interpreted as an act of discrimination, and thus trans students are not granted a right to protection from it. As Spade (2015) explains, an incident is only (legally) considered to violate this right when it is demonstrably an act of irrational hatred on the basis of a protected characteristic; manifestations of systemic injustice are normatively accepted and do not 'count' as discrimination. Whilst the same guidance document (ASCL et al., 2022) does proscribe bullying, which *can* be framed as intentional discrimination, misgendering is produced by the cisgenderist regime as *truth*, and therefore apparently cannot be irrational hatred.

Thus, requiring correct gendering for trans people is seen not as fair treatment, but as a demand for 'special' rights beyond that which everyone is equally afforded (namely, gendering based on (perceived) birth assignment). This would be seen as the kind of redistributive approach that neoliberal ideology opposes. Correspondingly, Airton (2018) argues that the free speech objection is a claim that the demand to use *some* people's pronouns – those whose gender expression falls outside of limited (cis) norms – is a demand for *excessive* effort, which is an unreasonable burden to place on others and thus cannot be fairly justified as a 'right' for trans people.

5.6. Problematising the deficit model and individual-level intervention

As established, the neoliberal notion of equality assumes that all individuals have the same freedom, and concomitant responsibility, to access a fair and neutral education market. Further, whilst mainstream schooling practices are designed in line with dominant group needs and standardised developmental norms, this is naturalised as educational 'truth', and thus the inherent injustice denied. Accordingly, differences in experience and outcome are framed as due to inherent individual differences – and failure to thrive or succeed as due to individual *deficit* (Bartolo et al., 2007). Trans students, alongside other children who have non-dominant experiences or who do not meet expected norms of achievement and behaviour, have their needs problematised and considered 'additional' – as is quite explicitly suggested, for example, by the language of '*special* educational needs'. From this perspective, difficulties or inequalities in attainment must be tackled through change or intervention at an *individual level*, with an assimilative objective to 'improve' the deficit and thereby enable the child to succeed within the existing system – as Wilkins et al. (2021) contend, "equating economic/labour market capital as a proxy for social equity" (p. 40). Dadvand (2022) identifies this in one school's alternative education programme for disabled students, which "demanded a dispositional change on the part of the students. Absent […] was the permission to be different without stigma" (p. 1252).

Indeed, Amanda appeared to suggest such an essentialism of deficit as inherent to certain individuals, whom she contrasted academically to her own children (who "are good learners, and therefore they don't struggle at school"):

> *I think that's one of the difficulties that some students face, that school isn't an easy place for them to be, because they're not good learners, for whatever reason whether that's influence from home or whether that's just the way their brains work or don't work, I think that's really difficult for them to come to school and enjoy it because it's hard for them*

She also highlighted how this deficit narrative is given epistemic validity in psychological theories of learning:

> *there's a lot in […] education theory about cognitive overload, they just don't have enough cognitive slots to deal with the whole process of say, the malarial parasite invading red blood cells and the liver and then going into the mosquito […], some of the words and the terminology are just too high level, they just can't cognitively understand*

It is framed as a fixed quality of the individual children that makes them "not good learners"; the power/knowledge relations involved in defining the 'good learner', or how dominant curricula and teaching methods advantage particular kinds of students, are not questioned. As Bartolo et al.

(2007) critique, “the deficit is seen as arising from within the children themselves rather than from a failure to teach or a failure of the curriculum” (p. 46).

On the other hand, Tracy expressed resistance to such a deficit model that would justify the positioning of certain children’s needs as outside of the expected remit and resourcing of mainstream schools, specifically regarding disability:

> *in an ideal world we [as a special school] wouldn’t exist, because in an ideal world mainstream schools would be able to deal with these children and they’d never have to leave their comfort, their friends, they’d never have to feel excluded or isolated, by being taken away from that environment*

Incidentally, perhaps in such cases where teachers already hold positions of resistance regarding one characteristic, there may be potential in encouraging application of the same logic to trans inclusion – and indeed to other axes of inequality.

A parallel with Tracy’s point, albeit in a different context, can also be identified in R. Murphy’s (2022) critique of the approach taken with permanently excluded children. These students’ deviation from expected behaviour in schools was frequently interpreted as a deficit “intrinsic to the child […] the result of being a ‘bad kid’” (p. 50) – rather than the effect of “bullying, abuse, lower academic achievements, and other personal problems [that] stem majorly from social inequality” (p. 54). They were therefore responded to punitively, and with “blame and judgement” (p. 51). Significantly, it is again the case here that the problem is located within the child, and with their apparently excessive needs which the school cannot reasonably accommodate; they are consequently removed from the mainstream environment, allowing the inequitable norms to be maintained and reinforced.

Moreover, such a system that privileges normative student subjectivity is justified by the neoliberal responsibilisation that, as Dadvand (2022) contends in the context of (dis)ability, “prizes autonomy as a moral virtue through a narrative that essentialises vulnerability as an attribute of the individual and equates needs to deficit” (pp. 1250-1251). However, this ‘autonomy’ that non-disabled and otherwise normative students apparently possess – understood in terms of an ability to succeed without ‘additional’ support – is in fact constructed by an education system that sufficiently meets their needs by default, thereby obscuring the fact that they too are just as interdependent. Disabled, trans, and otherwise marginalised students simply *appear* uniquely ‘vulnerable’ because their needs fall outside of what is considered normal; they are positioned in negative terms of disadvantage and deficiency, and the norms themselves are not interrogated (Sharma, 2018).

Correspondingly, dominant approaches to trans inclusion in schools tend to construct trans young people as *essentially different* from other students, as uniquely affected by cisnormativity and transphobia and thus requiring special protection and accommodation. They are framed as having a

'deficit' that must therefore be addressed or accommodated at an individual level, generally involving assimilation into the dominant cisnormative school culture. However, such approaches disregard, and therefore naturalise:

> *the systemic barriers related to the institutionalization of cisgenderism, cisnormativity, and cissexism that are at the heart of trans marginalization and create conditions of vulnerability for trans students in the education system*
>
> (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022, p. 85)

Several participants indeed framed their understanding of trans experience primarily around this idea of difference as detriment, commenting on the associated "emotional burden" (Erin) and "stress or difficulty" (Michael) faced by these students. Some constructed transness itself in sympathetic, but inherently negative terms, such as "children realising […] that they don't feel happy in themselves" (Sarah) and "if you're not happy in the body that you've come into the world in" (Bethany). Prior literature has problematised such narratives that construct queer young people as inherently 'at risk' and leverage their particular suffering as justification for intervention (Bryan & Mayock, 2012; Airton & Koecher, 2019).

Although Rachel did challenge this narrative somewhat, explaining that a student's transition had been "a very positive experience" for the school community, she also cited assumptions of trans difficulty as justification for (individual) intervention:

> *I think just seeing how happy she is now, seeing how fulfilled she looks, how sociable she is, how well she's doing in school, I think you know when you look at all of that you realise that it was the right decision to transition, because if we hadn't done that, I do think that she would be struggling with who she is, more so, and because it's going to be a difficult path for her, because it's difficult to have gender dysphoria and to feel like that and what the future's going to hold in terms of puberty and the choices that she's going to be needing to make are difficult, but I think that if she hadn't have transitioned she would probably have faced more difficulties at not being at peace with who she is*

The issue is centred around a decision to allow the child to transition – to individually change in order to be "at peace with who she is" – rather than significantly problematising the cis norms within which she is then expected to again fit – just in the 'opposite' gender role.

Similarly, whilst Laura took a strongly trans-affirmatory approach, her framing in contesting 'gender critical' claims also draws attention to the primacy of suicide narratives in advocating transition support:

> *I remember some like gender critical people being concerned about giving trans kids hormone blockers and stuff, […] and they're like, worried about safeguarding these kids, and I'm like, but I don't want them to kill themselves, like, which is worse?*

In this way, there is a tendency to construct trans lives in terms that are "defined and delimited by necropolitical[16] violence" (Martino, 2022b, p. 37). The problem with framing support for trans youth as suicide prevention, skelton (2022) contends, "is not that it is wrong, but that it focuses on the harm done to trans people – not on the actual lives and experiences of trans people". It erases positive trans possibilities: "joy, and gender euphoria, and trans exuberance" (p. 245). On a similar basis, some researchers have advocated a shift in emphasis from queer youth suffering to their 'resilience' in the face of oppression (e.g., McCabe & Anhalt, 2022). However, there is a deeper core problem to this approach associated with its *individualistic* focus, as "harm done *to trans people*". This issue is retained by 'resilience' narratives that situate the response to an inequitable environment primarily within particular (queer) people, rather than transforming institutions (B.A. Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

Airton (2013) critiques this ubiquitous individualism through an argument against the idea that anti-homophobia work should *specifically* benefit queer young people, who are considered exclusively vulnerable to gender and sexuality-based harm. To extend Airton's (sexuality-focused) reasoning, this idea is problematic in that it considers transphobia as "intersubjective relation" (p. 543), needing specific people as its subjects and objects. It refuses to acknowledge the involvement of *everyone* in cisgenderist harm. Bounding the potential for harm only to essentially 'different' queer individuals constructs others – 'non-queers' – as "naturally thriv[ing]" in the extant gender system and thus not requiring intervention; it "tends to naturalize and render unproblematic the normative behaviour of (heterosexual, gender normative) peers, parents or teachers" (p. 544). Hence, framing trans inclusion work as specifically a response to the particular needs and difficulties of identified trans students actually naturalises cisnormative school culture as a neutral environment that due to individual deficit, these students must be individually accommodated to fit within, rather than acknowledging it as a barrier to educational equity and thus deconstructing it as a matter of ethical responsibility.

Just as queerphobia and cisheteronormativity operate structurally and regardless of individual subjects (Allen, 2020), Airton (2013) suggests instead a subjectless approach that takes *queerness* – rather than individual queers – as the beneficiary of gender and sexuality equity work in schools. Incidentally, in referring here to this notion of queerness as beneficiary I am not supporting a

[16] Drawing on Foucault's biopolitics, Achille Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics refers to "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (p. 39) – outlining how marginalised populations are "subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*", conditions under which "the lines between resistance and suicide […] are blurred" (p. 40, emphasis in original). See also Snorton and Haritaworn (2013) on 'trans necropolitics'.

teleologically antinormative interpretation that would imply gender abolition; as outlined in sections 3.4.6 and 3.4.7, this cannot account for the needs and embodied experience of all trans people. However, the central point is shifting from an *individual* to a *structural* focus – and correspondingly, trans studies scholars are increasingly advocating for researchers "to take cisgenderism, cissexism, and cisnormativity as their objects of analysis rather than trans people themselves" (Iskander, 2021, p. 202). This creates the potential for disruption of the predominant individualistic approaches that are significantly limited and indeed harmful. In participants' narratives, I identified two particularly notable features of such approaches, namely: reactive individual accommodation; and a primary focus on bullying. I will explore each of these in turn in the following two sections (5.7 and 5.8 respectively).

5.7. Reactive individual accommodation, not proactive trans inclusion

Firstly, and indeed in line with previous research (Martino, Kassen et al., 2022; Horton, 2020), many participants demonstrated how trans-inclusive interventions were only considered necessary in reaction to the needs of specific identified trans students; proactive work to challenge institutional cisnormativity was not generally considered. For instance, Sarah contrasted the approach of her own school, with no (known) trans students, to that of a colleague's, which had an identified trans student and therefore a 'reason' to make more significant changes: "we've not needed to do anything particularly big or different, but I think I've said to you about this colleague of mine, they had to".

Such approaches align with the neoliberal individual rights discourse that positions extant institutional environments as neutral and fair (e.g., Brown, 1995); the cisnormative school culture is assumed to be appropriate and unproblematic for the majority, only raising an issue specifically for trans students (due to their transness) if and when they are present. Hence, trans inclusion is equated to making special accommodations for particular needs, outside of or in addition to mainstream provision. Correspondingly, educators have frequently been found to resist broader changes to institutional practice, such as trans-affirmatory teaching, in favour of individual-level actions to integrate trans students non-disruptively into the existing (cisnormative) school environment (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Smith & Payne, 2016).

Further, Chris evidenced how reactive approaches also effectively make trans youth responsible for self-advocacy and negotiating their own inclusion. On the question of whether a trans student would be allowed to use gendered bathrooms in line with their identity, he explained:

> *I think it depends on whether it is required or not or whether the person who requires it, lets us know they require it and until we know we'll never know*

In this way, the burden is frequently placed on individual trans students to identify and articulate the specific accommodations they require (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Horton, 2023a), and often to educate staff as well as peers (Horton, 2020; Schmitt, 2023), as the cisnormative school culture is not prepared to expect trans people (skelton, 2022). Correspondingly, Hannah's explanation of her school's response to a student recently coming out as trans demonstrates how cisnormative institutions are unprepared and ill-equipped to provide for trans children:

> *he[17] wasn't comfortable using the boys' toilets, and we have boys' toilets and girls' toilets for students […] we had to think up a solution for him 'cause that was the first time that had happened in the school, and he was allowed to use one of the staff disabled toilets because they're non-gendered, but we didn't have a policy ready to go for that*

This suggests a comparable position to that found in Ullman's (2018) work with educators in New York City, where for some schools, "since inclusions were not viewed as socially relevant to the whole school community, individual trans/gender-diverse students were seen as the 'problem' that needed to be accommodated" (p. 503). For Hannah's school, considering gendered toilet provision was only relevant for this one student – in response to whom they had to find a 'solution'. Further, this individual accommodation approach potentially makes the trans student hyper-visible – standing out from their peers as the only student using this toilet usually reserved for (disabled) staff – and thus risks making them more vulnerable to harassment and violence (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022).

Reactive provision requires trans students to identify themselves as such to school staff, and if they are to be believed and accommodated, this generally means that they have to claim a specific and permanent identity (see also section 7.4). To again extend Airton's (2013) argument – which problematises the need to define specific 'gay' children as beneficiaries of anti-homophobia interventions – this restricts the possibilities of queer development, for children to come to understand themselves in potentially new ways and on their own terms. It "is unable to leave the door open for a queerness that is not 'already there'" (p. 548).

In contrast – and whilst he had initially framed his response in reactive terms – Chris also highlighted how proactive institutional decisions and design can potentially create a less cisnormative environment that meets trans students' needs without mandatory visibility:

> *some schools get rid of that issue before it starts, by having these sort of open cubicle sort of toilets, where they can go to, without having to worry about who is using them, which I think is a great idea*

[17] It was unclear whether this was the pronoun the student wished to be used.

However, for the majority of schools – and beyond the single issue of bathrooms – trans inclusion is broadly limited to the reactive accommodation of individual deficit. As Horton and Carlile (2022) note, there are very few documented examples of schools enacting trans-emancipatory approaches.

In school cultures where institutional cis supremacy is maintained, trans students are likely to continuously experience conflicts with their environment. Attempts to accommodate them through incremental changes within existing structures – to make (some) space for (some) trans people – will always remain unfinished, not least because transness (present and future) cannot be predictably defined and confined into static categories. Given that provision for trans needs is already framed as 'additional' to the normative or primary work of schools, when students continue to raise 'new' issues, they are liable to be perceived as "oversensitive or demanding" – with, as Horton and Carlile (2022) found regarding bullying – "schools losing patience in responding to each incident" (p. 179).

Additionally – and as previously discussed with regard to market-dependent recognition and 'conflicting' rights (section 5.5.6) – the individual accommodation approach often limits provision for trans students to only what does not impact their peers or disrupt the maintenance of a normative school environment (Blair & Deckman, 2020). This is often particularly an issue regarding gender-segregated facilities and activities, in which trans inclusion is framed as 'unfair' to cis students. Accordingly, Payne and Smith (2022) contend that "[s]chool choices about bathroom designation and access […] are often about limiting the impact of transgender student intrusion into cisnormative spaces (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021) and avoiding institutional change" (p. 56) – rather than ensuring equitable provision for trans students.

Interestingly, some participants suggested that the problem lay in the other students' *knowledge* that a peer was trans, for instance in Amanda's point that:

> *if they are a girl and therefore no-one's ever known them as not a girl, and if they go into a cubicle and use the toilet as a girl, […] who is gonna know, like genuinely who would know, and I think the difficulty there isn't as difficult as […] if some students had known a student as a male and now they're a female*

> *it's not fair that it makes people feel uncomfortable, but you can't tell those people how they can feel either, in the same way that a male [may] become a female student, and feels that way strongly, other students may struggle with that, and that's okay in some ways*

The concern is therefore more about the potential *discomfort* associated with noticeable disruptions to cis norms and expectations, rather than any genuine threat posed by a trans student's presence. Payne and Smith (2022) likewise demonstrate "how discomfort serves as a socially acceptable narrative for school personnel to prioritize the (actual or perceived) feelings of cisgender adults and

children over the needs of transgender students" (p. 44) – demonstrating how a district administrator employed such a position in preventing trans-inclusive practices from being enacted.

Incidentally, a similar narrative is employed by the UK Government (2023) in their rationale for using section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 to block the new less restrictive gender recognition law passed by the Scottish Parliament. One argument they put forward is effectively that this law would lead to more (perceived) gender non-conformity in 'sex-segregated' spaces, which would cause (cisgender) people to feel *uncomfortable*:

> *the nature of the new and very different cohort of GRC [Gender Recognition Certificate] holders makes it more likely that people will encounter others who do not conform to their expectations of someone they would expect to find in a single-sex service, space or role, which could result in their feeling uncomfortable, or even traumatised, and undermining the purpose of making these sex-segregated* (p. 12)

Further, the prioritisation of cisgender people's feelings about disrupted norms (above trans equity) may also be reflected in it being considered unreasonable for other students to adjust to or accommodate change – as is potentially suggested in Michael's point about a trans student:

> *the difficulty was there was some kids in the school who knew her [sic] from primary school, and knew that she had changed her gender, but he now as [name] insisted on being treated normally*

It therefore also leads to demands that trans students 'compromise', or otherwise be considered unreasonable ("*insisted* on being treated normally") – given that any accommodations they are given are already additional, even a generosity – "as a consolation for the lack of choice one has in determining the body one is born into" (Blair & Deckman, 2020, p. 18). Ullman (2018) demonstrates this idea of compromise in one school principal's position:

> *So the trans kid and the Muslim kid and this kid and that kid all have to understand* you have to give a little*, and if you feel like the school at least is taking your needs into account, that's the best probably we can get to. It's just a principle: you can't please everybody all the time* (p. 503, emphasis in original)

Blair and Deckman (2020) encapsulate such restrictions on allowable trans inclusion in their finding that:

> *trans and gender-creative identities are acceptable only in a benign form, without threatening the broader gendered social order. As long as trans and gender-creative students "know their lane," they should be tolerated in the classroom* (p. 18)

Overall, neoliberal discourses of individual rights encourage isolated school responses to trans students that are *reactive* to specific identified young people – as an 'additional' provision that is restricted to what is 'reasonable' to expect from a school that is responsibilised to follow market incentives and demands, and also must not infringe on other students and their 'rights' to an undisrupted normative school experience. In contrast, proactive trans-inclusive changes, where these are not in the school's market interests, would be considered a form of the redistribution that neoliberalism explicitly opposes.

5.8. Problematising a focus on bullying

The second significant manifestation of the liberal rights framework in participants' experiences was the dominance of an anti-bullying approach to transphobia in schools. This suffers from the same individualisation problem as reactive accommodation; it discursively neutralises and preserves the underlying cissexist culture by locating the issue (and its solution) exclusively within particular 'bullies' and 'victims' (Marston, 2015; Hammarén, 2022). For instance, Chris' position seemed to imply a primacy of individual behaviour over the structural context as he asked:

> *what's the difference? Between… a tall thin sporty kid picking on a short fat kid, and the same tall thin sporty kid, picking on a trans kid, what's the difference? To me there is no difference, it's just bullying, no matter what colour or shade it is*

Whilst his contention that there is 'no difference' between these bullying scenarios may reflect an intention that they should both be treated equally seriously by teachers, framing their particularity as irrelevant may also act to obscure the underlying social inequality – and how it may have been facilitated by the school culture.

Accordingly, Woolley (2017) found that the normalisation of such an individualised incident narrative within an American high school led LGBTQ students to see the regular queerphobic microaggressions and violence they experienced as simply "part of the normal everyday experience of schooling" (p. 91). They framed the institution itself in relatively positive terms, with its role in reproducing the structural inequality that facilitates such violence not acknowledged or addressed.

However, the 'bullying' behaviour that is constructed as an isolated problem can instead be better understood as a *symptom* of the underlying cisheteronormative school culture. Policing the 'moral order' of gender and sexuality is integral to this culture, and normatively enacted by everyone within it; bullying is simply an over-enthusiastic, but *not qualitatively distinct*, defence of this social order (Davies, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2013). An approach limited to punishing bullying is therefore inadequate because it is an attempt to regulate the more extreme behavioural manifestations of the

same cissexism that the school continues to reproduce and normalise. The implicit message is that certain acts or expressions might be wrong, but the associated gender order is not – as suggested by one youth work practitioner quoted by Formby (2015):

> *teachers in the moment...will go, you know, 'you can't do that, it's bullying'...but they don't challenge the actual...transphobia around that. They focus on the bullying and not the cause* (p. 636)

Further, the corresponding solution is often (again) one of (trans) compromise, in which both parties are expected to *tolerate* a difference in opinion or lifestyle – denying the power dynamic involved and that the normative gender order is itself inherently unjust. In this vein, Amanda explained her school's response to students treating a trans peer negatively:

> *I think that as a school we are very good at addressing it as, well, this is how [trans student] feels, [he] can feel that way and it's within her rights, or his rights to feel that way, so if they want to be addressed as such, or they want to be tret as such, that's how we treat them, and if we can't treat them that way then we just, you know we go on with our lives and we don't bother them*

Unwillingness or refusal to treat a trans student as their identified gender is framed as mere disagreement that does not need to be resolved – rather than a material equity issue. Instructing them to simply avoid explicit conflict is not a neutral position, but instead an implicit affirmation of the acceptability of trans delegitimation, which contributes to the reproduction of a cissexist school culture – indeed, the same cissexist culture that facilitates Amanda misgendering the student here. Amanda's solution is to expect *tolerance* – "if you can't live and embrace, live and let live, at least". However, tolerance again supports the maintenance of normative inequity; it "is a framework for dominant-group members to create conditions for coexisting with the Other without disrupting personal comfort or institutional status quo" (Payne & Smith, 2022, p. 50).

Additionally, the obscuration of structural power dynamics encourages the problematisation of *both* 'sides' involved in bullying – and hence the responsibilisation of the 'victim'. This situates a deficit in particular children who by virtue of their personal characteristics are apparently inherently more susceptible to bullying. Some participants suggested that interventions were therefore targeted at changing this 'deficit', as described for instance by Rachel:

> *if we feel a child is at risk of being bullied then the pastoral team will work with that child, so if children are vulnerable, if they are not particularly assertive, or we feel that they might struggle with friendships or not stand up for themselves in any way, as they're moving through the school and secondary school, we'll help them to become more assertive to be*

able to stand up for themselves, to know what to do what to say, have some little phrases up their sleeve

Whilst the intention is to protect the child from the harm of bullying, this is also another example of individual assimilation rather than structural or cultural change.

Moreover, the ubiquity of the anti-bullying approach may be further elucidated using an analogy with Foucault's (2004/2008) conceptualisation of neoliberal penal policy (as a technique of governmentality). In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault says that neoliberalism treats crime as a market like all others. Thus, the purpose of the penal system is not to eliminate all crime (or its causes), but to facilitate state governance of subjects through the manipulation of (dis)incentives of actions. It also works to balance competing market demands; political actors can sufficiently assure voters of their protection from crime, whilst avoiding undermining the dominant social order and inequalities that those with capital – and hence market influence – are invested in maintaining. Within this system, the 'criminal' is constructed as a rational economic actor who has made poor choices, thus falling foul of the risk of 'loss' (criminal punishment) in their pursuit of profit – which remains undisrupted as a socially valorised (and *expected*) goal.

For the school, an anti-bullying approach also balances different market pressures – it is effective impression management. On the one hand, protecting student safety appeals to parents as consumers and satisfies accountability measures such as inspections. This approach also manages disruptive behaviour that may impact learning and standardised test scores. On the other, there are also significant benefits to maintaining the normative gender order, and corresponding market costs of challenging it; going beyond de-politicised safety and tolerance is socially controversial and thus risks reputational damage (section 5.5.5). The anti-bullying policy acts as a disincentive to particular behaviour – and individual 'bullies' are held responsible for a poor choice of action – but the gender order, and the pursuit of the social benefits of reproducing it, are not problematised. Hence, this framework provides a safer way for schools to approach the problem of school violence (Formby, 2015), without the risk of being seen to take a 'political' stance against cisheteronormativity.

Anti-bullying approaches, therefore, effectively draw a (somewhat arbitrary) line above which specific violent behaviours are considered unacceptable, whilst tacitly endorsing the microaggressions and macroaggressions that harm trans students but do not meet the 'bullying' threshold – disregarding that the latter facilitate the former, and that the same cisnormative culture underlies the whole continuum. Further, the threshold for what is perceived as bullying is informed by cisnormativity; Horton (2023a) for instance found that much transphobic abuse was tolerated by UK schools because they "did not understand the particular dynamics or harms of transphobic harassment", and further – perhaps linked with deficit framings – they often "had a lower expectation of school safety for trans pupils than for cis pupils" (p. 81). Accordingly, the overall

impact of anti-bullying approaches is generally superficial, positioning the prohibition of specific and limited behaviours as a complete solution to transphobic violence.

Some participants referred to such an approach; for instance, Chris described his college's response to anti-LGBT language and behaviour as "zero tolerance, […] it is punished, severely". Whilst this punishment may offer temporary protection to students targeted in specific incidents, this kind of approach is limited in that it "concentrate[s] on 'silencing or stopping' certain behaviours without changing attitudes" (Marston, 2015, p. 163). It can foreclose the opportunity to address the underlying social inequalities with students (Formby, 2015; Walton, 2011), and so the problem is likely to persist. Subsequently, Chris further explained that "it's not right, not in this culture anyway, not in the college culture". Here he does explicitly problematise homophobia, and not only the bullying behaviour, as 'not right'. However, it is limited to an understanding of homophobia as individually held prejudice, which is considered unacceptable in the college culture, and not necessarily the structural heteronormativity of that same culture.

Another illustrative example was given by Patrick, commenting on homophobic language at his school:

> *the word 'gay' is thrown around a lot, I think that the children use it without being fully aware of what it means or the connotation, and yeah they say it without thinking a lot of the time, but whenever it is heard, we're quite quick to clamp down on it*

The response to "clamp down on" students' use of a specific word – whilst noting that they were not "fully aware of what it means or the connotation" – suggests a potential missed opportunity to discuss the meaning, and hence to challenge homophobia and heteronormativity in a deeper and more effective way. Marston (2015) similarly problematises simply banning the phrase 'that's so gay' or treating its use as an explicitly homophobic act, as this does not engage with the reasons it is used. They suggest that instead "it can be more productive to explore the role it plays in implicitly privileging heterosexuality" (p. 163).

The limitations of a pedagogical emphasis on individualised equalities and bullying are also clearly demonstrated by Hall's (2020) study of English primary schools. Whilst, in classrooms and other formal school spaces, children performed acceptance of diverse genders and sexualities and gave the 'right' answers, in informal spaces and peer group relations they retained "the compulsion to perform normative (hetero)gender/sexuality in order to achieve viable subjecthood" (p. 176). One school took an approach akin to 'zero tolerance' in banning homophobic language, including the word 'gay' (in a pejorative sense). However, whilst some teachers were certain this had successfully eliminated its use, students revealed that it was still used regularly, especially in the boys' toilets – the students had simply learned spatial boundaries of these peer group interactions, rather than actually disinvesting in (cis)heteronormativity. Placing this in the aforementioned context of

anti-bullying policy as market-based *disincentive* to certain actions, rather than elimination of inequity or prejudice: the rational, incentivised action in classrooms would be the performed acceptance, but this is not the case in peer groups away from the risk of sanction from teachers, where instead the greatest social advantage could still be gained from normative gender and sexuality.

Finally, the approach taken by these schools may be comparable to Chris' further point about LGBT education:

> *schools and colleges, particularly schools I think, do have a responsibility I think to introduce the elements of LGBTQ but to also ensure that the children, as they grow, are aware of the choice elements of it and the fact that you know you don't, shouldn't, differentiate or be prejudiced against someone for a choice that they have made themselves, we try to do that here*

Whilst his point about *responsibility* does challenge dominant assertions that LGBT topics are inappropriate and irrelevant in schools, this approach may suffer from the same problem that Hall (2020) describes – namely, the inadequacy of teaching children about gender and sexuality through an exclusive framework of accepting individual differences and anti-discrimination. Hall advocates instead for "a combined pedagogic focus on anti-homophobia and a curricular critique of heteronormativity" (p. 180), a point which can be extended to anti-transphobia and cisnormativity – and to the wider school approach to equity, as well as the curriculum.

5.9. Chapter conclusion

In summary, there are two substantial parts to the effect of neoliberalism on teachers' approaches to trans students. Firstly, through the marketisation of education and the school system, individual schools and teachers are made precariously accountable to external non-pedagogical agents. They are therefore incentivised to enact trans inclusion only to the extent this is rewarded by the market, which is severely limited in the current trans-hostile socio-political climate. Secondly, neoliberalism reconceptualises 'equality' as decontextualised individual rights and responsibilisation – as a limited recognition of one's right to access what are claimed to be neutral markets, and an explicit opposition to redistribution. This constructs extant school environments as already fair and non-discriminatory, and therefore any problems that trans students face as due to their own inherent deficit, which schools may accommodate as 'additional' provision. Thus, as evidenced through participant narratives and supported by prior literature, dominant 'inclusive' responses to trans students focus on this reactive individual accommodation, which must always be balanced to ensure it does not impose on other students or the maintenance of a normative school experience. Yet, to

achieve trans equity, the institutional cisnormativity and cissexism that neoliberal ‘equality’ obscures must be highlighted and actively opposed, as these are the unjust conditions that facilitate trans marginalisation. This would be an approach to gender justice at the structural rather than individual level, thus not relying on particular identified trans students as the rationale and “sacrificial lambs” (E.J. Meyer et al., 2016, p. 17) necessary for any change.

Chapter Six: Sex/Gender Essentialism

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the second truth discourse in my analysis, namely sex/gender essentialism. I initially consider how both investment in and resistance to this essentialism were present in participants' narratives regarding gender norms more broadly, before identifying that the apparent 'truth' of *cis* norms was generally more challenging to subvert. Indeed, the naturalisation of this discourse shaped participants' understandings of transness and often hindered their ability to consider trans students' genders as entirely legitimate. Indeed, they commonly advocated transnormative 'wrong body' narratives (see section 3.4) and frequently conceptualised sex and gender as distinct entities – a purportedly trans-inclusive approach that in fact acts to undermine trans legitimacy and thus is a barrier to equitable treatment of trans students. However, participants also demonstrated an appreciation of the importance of gender and its affirmation to many trans students – supporting a need to do justice to this experience and indeed the argument for gender democratisation over abolition (section 3.4.7).

6.2. Mars and Venus?

Firstly, I will discuss the engagement of participants with aspects of essentialism that are less specific to transness – in particular, the different roles and behaviours that are constructed as naturally inherent to girls/women and boys/men. Indeed, production and mandatory assignation of these oppositional positions is an important form of normalisation and government by the 'truth' of one's subjectivity (Foucault, 2014) – affecting everyone, not only the trans and queer individuals who are thereby identified as 'abnormal'. Within the interviews, participants generally expressed at least some resistance to these gender norms; this may have been made more likely by the self-selecting nature of the sample, as the choice to take part could suggest pre-existing interest in gender-related topics and diversity. However, some participants did express such forms of essentialist ideas. Amanda, for instance, described gender differences as a significant factor affecting her teaching experience:

> *I found that after four years in an all-girls school, […] I missed boys, I feel that the boys temper the girls, and the girls offer probably a moderation to boys as well, […] I do think there is something in the way boys respond, and the way girls respond to things, I always felt like girls hold grudges, and boys not so much, but that could also be because they forget stuff, but then again I don't feel that I hold grudges, as a female, and I do forget stuff as well, […] I did find that difficult in an all-girls school that I felt like they held on to these little*

> *grudges that they might have made on that first day in September, for that whole year, and that was difficult to overcome in an all-girl environment*

Here she quickly moderates her initial generalised assertion about boys and girls by acknowledging that she herself may be an exception to the rule. However, this does not negate the influence of gender determinism, as she goes on to restate her original belief about girls holding grudges and the difficulties that this created in an all-girls school environment.

Georgia also spoke of gendered differences, in this case regarding expectations of students' responses to non-normative peers. She told me about reactions to a trans student:

> *the kids are really good about it you know, […] even like all the boys who you would kind of expect, like almost expect to act a bit less mature about it or maybe a bit less sensitive about it, just 'cause girls have that little edge often, 'cause they mature a little quicker*

Georgia's expectations, in referring to maturity, imply the influence of a developmental narrative that is deterministically different for male and female children. Interestingly, teachers interviewed over ten years earlier have also been shown making similar gendered distinctions between students to both Georgia and Amanda – believing girls to interact in more complex and emotionally involved ways, and boys to be less accepting or tolerant of peers' differences (Martino & Frank, 2006). This parallel perhaps suggests the endurance of an essentialist 'truth' over time.

However, Georgia's position could be seen as less strongly essentialist, in the sense that rather than asserting a 'fixed' nature of gender differences, she seemed to expect a differential speed of maturity, but with the same 'mature' end point for all children. In fact, Georgia was not unusual amongst participants in expressing some elements of both essentialist *and* opposing ideas. She further demonstrated the latter when she attributed the increased difficulty she experienced in classroom behaviour management, compared to male teachers, to sexism from certain students who "don't really see women as authority figures" – rather than to something inherent to the traits and abilities of women. This combination of divergent beliefs aligns with previous research, such as Barbara Risman's (2018) finding that the majority of cisgender millennials were 'straddlers', both supporting gender self-determination and holding a commitment to binary genderism.

On the other hand, Wendy was very explicit in her opposition to the dominance of normative gender roles and restricted expectations of boys and girls, criticising how "we straitjacket kids into this polarised gender thing". She also expressed concern about increases in societal gender essentialism over time, telling me that, "I think things are a lot worse now than they used to be when I first started teaching [in 1982]". Her memory of the Early Learning Centre[18] when her children (now

[18] A children's toy company which, at the time, had its own physical stores.

around 30) were young, when toys were not divided by gender, was contrasted with more recent times:

> *now they have pink Lego for girls… what's that about? […] it's like those car stickers you get, 'daddy's little princess on board', what on earth is that about? What if that little princess actually likes getting dirty and climbing trees, […] what do they have for the boys, again it's something to do with you know, 'little monster', again what if that little monster isn't a little monster, what if that little boy actually is really caring and loving and doesn't want to go around beating people up and being rough and tough, and actually wants to play nurses with his teddies and dolls and, do you know, I think it's much harder now, than it ever used to be, for those things*

Her experience of this appears to be supported by research into gendered toy marketing over the twentieth century. Although primarily focused on the US, Sweet (2014) identifies that previous trends of reductions in explicit gender stereotypes in toys and increasing gender-neutral products, which corresponded with second wave feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, then began to be reversed as *implicit* gender cues became a new marketing strategy. By 1995, alongside a wider social revival of essentialism, gender distinction in toys returned to similar levels as in 1925 and 1945; however, rather than directly replicating expected adult social roles, there were now new types of cues such as colour-coding and fictional gendered roles, including the princesses and monsters that Wendy highlighted.

Although in recent years the UK Advertising Standards Authority has implemented a new rule against certain gender stereotypes in adverts (Committee of Advertising Practice, 2018), this is limited to those that are "likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence" (p. 2). It is therefore focused on *explicit* stereotypes rather than the implicit cues that Sweet (2014) highlights as contemporarily problematic; it is noted that the rule "doesn't prevent an ad from depicting children undertaking an activity stereotypically associated with their gender, using colours, language, music or settings which are also stereotypically associated with that gender" (p. 6).

Correspondingly, Sweet (2014) argues that contemporarily, gender boundaries "are more sharply defined in toys today than at any point over the 20th century", and thus "gender differentiation has become a more salient aspect of childhood than ever before" (p. 227). Wendy perceived this as a significant problem, repeatedly questioning "what if" a child does not match the expectations assigned to their gender role. However, for many children and adults, such gender essentialism (not limited to commercial marketing) is accepted as 'truth' and contributes to the reproduction and naturalisation of inequalities. Wendy herself recognised this firstly in parents:

> *I think there's also a resistance among parents to acknowledge that their boys might be caring and loving and sweet and allowed to cry, and that their girls might you know, be*

rough and tough and get mucky, I mean, in order for a girl to do all those things she has to be described as a boy, as a tomboy, she can't just be a girl

She also saw it with school colleagues:

when I qualified we never ever for instance would line up the children to go into assembly in a girls line and a boys line, now it's done all the time, […] I taught the oldest children, sometimes you'd have a message saying, can we have six strong boys to come and help us get the apparatus out for our PE lesson, and I'd send them six strong children, I'd say yes, let's have a look, who's feeling strong today everybody, and say, gee you're looking really strong today [girl's name], do you want to go, so I'd send like five girls and a boy, and they'd be like oh [laughs], and I thought sometimes the topics people do, I remember my reception class in the school I've just left, did a topic on knights and princesses… like, god's sake, knights and princesses? What century are you living in? Grr… and that wouldn't have happened in the 80s, in the 80s we were actually, you know, very very very much more careful not to do that, but now it's just okay, you know ooh knights and princesses, you know all the girls have got to be rescued, so yeah I think gender roles have taken a big big backwards step

Here Wendy describes intentionally challenging other teachers' gender stereotypes, by purposefully responding to a request for "strong boys" with a group of mainly girls. She clearly here disagrees with a gender essentialist view that would suggest boys to be inherently stronger than girls due to immutable biological differences. She also identifies methods through which gender differences are socially constructed and reproduced, for instance noting the (negative) effect that lessons based on "knights and princesses" could have on students' beliefs about gender ("all the girls have got to be rescued"). In contrast, in the past she and her colleagues had taken care to avoid such affirmation of gender roles.

Bethany, who worked in early years, also pointed to the social reproduction of gender distinction. The young age of the children meant that students had varying levels of gender awareness. For instance, Bethany told me that "some of them don't know, […] at the end of the day you go, boys go get ready first or something like that, and some of them won't know which, whether they're girls or boys". However, other students policed their own behaviour around the idea that their gender designation limited the spaces they could access, particularly around toilet use:

we have toilets in our area, and I believe they do have girls and boys on there, but some children just don't pay attention to it, they'll go in any one, but then actually thinking about it I have noticed some, like a boy will be standing outside the boys toilets and I'd see that the girls toilets is free, you know and I said it's okay, and they're sort of wiggling around like desperate, and I'm there like use the girls toilet, and not necessarily calling them the girls

> *toilets but just saying you can use the other one it's fine, but they obviously know it as, no this is the boys, some of them, recognise it as this is the boys this is the girls*

This was particularly interesting because it suggested that some children were strongly invested in gendered expectations – and much more so than others. Bethany, as the teacher, actively encouraged the child to use either toilet, something that other students already did. Thus, rather than any form of direct social pressure or government, the child's motivation in restricting themselves to use only the 'boys' toilets appears to have been their own acceptance of obligations tied to the 'truth' of their male subjectivity (Foucault, 2014). Their persistence in doing so despite clear physical difficulty ("wiggling around like desperate"), and indeed against their teacher's instruction, suggests just how strongly this investment is held.

Bethany opposed the separate gendering of the facilities, saying:

> *I don't think we should have girls and boys on the top of the toilets anyway, it's just two toilets, it shouldn't be there, but I think because… they've seen it there and they've recognised it they, in their head they think no, this is where I belong*

She noted here that the children had learned to categorise themselves by gender. This new knowledge already had an essentialist basis, for instance in the oppositional, mutually exclusive categories – they no longer *belong* in the whole class(room), but at least for the toilet area, only in one section and never the other. Indeed, as Rasmussen (2009) contends, "toilets give truth to the presumption" of sex/gender essentialism – they "don't just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don't belong" (p. 440). Further, Bethany also recognised the influence of this same idea on her own initial or automatic responses, despite on consideration not necessarily agreeing with it. She reflected, "I think you're just, almost programmed in a way to think right well that's what it says, boys and the other one is girls". The toilet signage is a means through which the gendered subject is interpellated, or discursively produced (Butler, 1997).

As a final point in this section, I also want to highlight how Chris showed a distinct lack of masculinity threat – potentially disrupting the reproduction of essentialism through the lack of motivation to reinforce gender norms. In general, when men (especially cis heterosexual men) witness others' gender non-conformity or experience gender norm violations of the self, they report increased support for gender essentialism and more negative attitudes about trans, LGB+, and gender non-conforming people (Ching, 2022; West & Borras-Guevara, 2022). It is argued that these are compensatory behaviours in response to perceived threat to their own masculinity or the distinctiveness of the male group, done to restore and reinforce their gender status (Armitage, 2020; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). However, Chris (who was also cis and heterosexual) firstly responded positively to the gender non-conformity of a male student:

> *he would wear full make-up, just, foundation, blush, everything, I'm not a, I don't wear any, uh but I do in media studies we do look at people like James Charles, Jeffrey Star, and you know that kind of like, rainbow-y sheen, you know on his cheeks, he looked magnificent [laughs] you know what I mean, he'd walk in and you'd go, why can't I look like that, you know what I mean, he made me think, I should start wearing make-up, I'd look a lot better*

He was also confident describing a gay man as attractive, rather than responding by reinforcing his own heterosexual masculinity:

> *he's great Jonathan Van Ness, he's my favourite, him and Tan France, if I could be anyone, Tan France, that man, could make a bin bag look good, you know, I mean he's ridiculous, you know what I mean, my wife is just [gasps] she looks at Tan France like he's lovely isn't he, isn't he marvellous, you know what I mean, yeah I think Tan France is really good looking*

In both examples, rather than attempting to reinforce his own normative masculinity by distancing himself from men who are violating norms or expressing compensatory prejudice, he positions them as aspirational, as having characteristics he would like to share. As it has been argued that belief in sex/gender essentialism can cause people to experience greater levels of distinctiveness threat (Broussard & Warner, 2019; Serano, 2007), the lack of threat shown by Chris may suggest that he is not strongly invested in this essentialism, or his own identity is not strongly attached to it.

This could perhaps also be understood, in line with Foucault's later work (e.g., 2014), as disrupting the *connection* between the game and the regime of truth "that constitutes the keystone of the government of human beings by the truth" (Lorenzini, 2022, p. 550); Chris may have accepted the truth of his male subjectivity "at the *epistemic* level of the game of truth", but he does not appear to submit to the associated obligations, "at the *practical* level of the regime of truth" (p. 549, emphasis in original), namely to perform and defend normative masculinity. However, it may also be notable that Chris mentions his wife in the second statement; it is possible that this worked as effectively solid 'evidence' to the audience (myself) of his heterosexuality, then giving him greater freedom to also express less strictly normative sentiments ("I think Tan France is really good looking") with less risk of serious threat to his masculine status.

In contrast to Chris' narrative, Payne and Smith (2022) describe how the resistance to trans-inclusive school changes that was expressed by the aforementioned district administrator Sam (see section 5.5.2) seemed to be associated with "the presence of a transgender child […] triggering some emotions about Sam's own masculinity"; his colleague, who was advocating for the child, felt that Sam interpreted this as "a *personal* challenge to *him* […] a personal challenge to boyhood" (p. 58, emphasis in original). Whereas Sam reacts *defensively*, Chris' positive and unthreatened approach

appears much more conducive to a potential willingness to question and make changes to the normative school environment, and thereby to treat trans and queer students more equitably.

6.3. The need to resolve gender trouble

Secondly, the influence of essentialism could also be identified in participants' experiences of the popular desire to resolve apparent gender violations. Indeed, as Morgenroth and Ryan (2021) argue, maintaining the 'truth' of the gender binary requires an individual's identity, body and appearance, and behaviour to align; thus, when these are perceived to conflict, people will often attempt to reconcile them in a more normatively intelligible way.

Some instances related to the assumption of heterosexuality as an important aspect of normative gendered behaviour, with attraction (only) to men being part of the essence that defines women, and vice versa (Butler, 1999). Correspondingly, gay people are not perceived as *true* members of their sex – as identified by Wittig (1992) in the critical assertion that lesbians were not women, since patriarchy defined women through their relation to men. In one example, Wendy described colleagues attempting to reconcile a student's gender non-conforming appearance by positioning him as homosexual:

> *I remember a little boy Ben[19] who had very very very long hair, hadn't had it cut, all the way to year 6, and again there was all this sort of, not very pleasant talk in the staff room about you know him not being boy-ish enough, and about oh he was probably gay, and it was said in not a nice way, you know, not as a description but as a criticism, as a put-down, and to me he was just Ben who had long hair, the length of your hair really hasn't got an awful lot to do with your sexuality, and he was just a really nice kid*

The essentialist male category, which requires masculine presentation, is protected in this instance by Wendy's colleagues through their positioning of Ben (who lacks this trait) as not 'really' or properly a boy, but rather as *probably gay*. The truth of the normal (essentialist) boy/man is thereby (re)produced *through* the identification and exclusion of the non-conforming – the abnormal – as its constitutive outside (Butler, 1993/2011; see section 3.4.6).

Although Wendy did not mention the gender of the colleagues in this situation, this could have also reflected the kind of compensatory response to gender threat that Chris distinctively did not exhibit. Previous research has suggested that male teachers often see constructing their own normative masculinity as important to establishing pedagogical authority and teaching effectively, and that their gendered interactions with students are important in demonstrating this identity (Krebbekx,

[19] pseudonym

2021; Martino & Frank, 2006). In the scenario Wendy describes, therefore, male teachers in particular may have been motivated to differentiate themselves from the 'feminine' boy, reinforcing their own masculinity through disparagement – something that B. Francis and Skelton (2001) have previously found to occur with male primary and secondary school teachers.

Additionally, some participants appeared to associate trans identity with gender non-conforming appearance, particularly with clothing and especially for AMAB people wearing 'female' clothes. For instance, when I asked Erin if she was aware of any non-heterosexual students, she responded, "we have one kid who, he likes to, so far he just wants to be called a he, for now, but he wears the school skirts, you know the female uniforms". Somewhat similarly to Wendy's colleagues with Ben, Erin instinctively associates gender non-conforming appearance with (a question about) non-heterosexuality – although she does not do so in a deprecatory way. Further, there is a suggestion that wearing the 'opposite' gendered uniform may indicate a future expression of trans identity, implied by the reference to his pronouns and the intimation ("for now") that his preference for 'he' is liable to change.

This idea that certain clothing is especially troubling of expected gender alignment was also present in other participants' narratives. With Rachel, this was in describing her prior awareness of trans people as, "when you're at the shops you know and sometimes might have seen somebody who was dressed differently". In addition, Patrick spoke about someone who lived locally to him, saying, "I suppose they must identify as non-binary because they dress um, like people would say some days he's dressed as a man and some days he's dressed as a woman". However, he did later critique an automatic association when discussing a male (early years) student who played with dresses (instead of superhero costumes), telling me that "it doesn't necessarily mean that they are trans just 'cause they're choosing to, it's just that it's, as you'll well know it's the tying of gender to like conformist ideas isn't it". This suggests that an awareness that gender presentation does not equate to transness does not necessarily prevent normative truth discourses from influencing assumptions about gender identity, as with the person Patrick presumed must be non-binary.

Moreover, in some cases trans identity was associated with expectations of a concurrent change in sexuality, which perhaps could also be tied to attempts to resolve destabilised gender alignment and to reconcile the person in question with an essentialist truth. Amanda for instance expressed surprise that her cousin coming out as non-binary had not also changed their sexuality:

> *with my cousin, them being non-binary, I don't think has massively changed they, their, lifestyle, really, [they] seem to be very happy and, you know, had a relationship with a man, didn't really change how they felt about that side of things, so I think it was quite, interesting in a way, that one I hadn't known, but two that there was no real shift in how*

> *they lived their lives, that was just their decision to make that they didn't want to be known as a male or female*

The implied expectation that a certain gender identity would be associated with a particular 'lifestyle' was also shown in Amanda's description of a non-binary student:

> *I think if I'm right, they are more non-binary, but, is happy to be a girl, in terms of appearance and things, in terms of the skirt, she wears a skirt, she has the longer hair and those physical characteristics that you would I suppose associate mainly with girls*

Although she does state that these characteristics are "*mainly*" associated with girls, her overall statement does not just describe the student as a non-binary person who chooses to present in a 'feminine' manner, but as someone who is "happy to *be* a girl" (emphasis added) in that regard – suggesting that presentation has inherent ontological implications about who the person actually *is*.

On the other hand, some participants also challenged stereotypical associations of transness with gender presentation and sexuality. One example was Michael's awareness that such assumptions by others could be problematic, as he explained of a new student:

> *a big part of the reason they were moving schools [was] because they were trying to get away from people who were intolerant and kind of, were confusing issues, you know for example assuming that if they were transgender they were also gay, that kind of thing*

There may be a parallel here between the position of the "intolerant" people that Michael describes, and the conflation of (trans)gender and (homo)sexuality that Bhana (2022) identifies amongst primary school teachers in South Africa – "the misrecognition of trans as simply a *manifestation* of sexuality" (emphasis added). Although the national and cultural contexts are of course different, these constructed knowledges and essentialist truth discourses are not entirely separate in origin; indeed, Bhana highlights that this is "part of the continuing legacy of the colonial-apartheid assemblage" (p. 155).

Lastly, the desire to restore intelligible alignment of gendered characteristics may also connect to the finding that trans people tend to be held to a more prescriptive standard of gender norms than cis people for their gender to be perceived as legitimate (e.g., Bradford & Syed, 2019). As an example: for a trans woman's female identity to be accepted, she is expected to alter her body and appearance, and to behave in normatively feminine ways – including attraction to men. Not doing so creates a perceived misalignment that others may resolve by classifying her as a man (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). This categorisation as male is much less likely to happen to gender non-conforming cis women – perhaps aside from situations of misgendering by strangers in for instance women's bathrooms (C. Jones & Slater, 2020); once their status as *cis* is known, whilst they may still be

treated negatively based on presentation, the misgendering itself tends to be understood as an *error*, and misalignment resolved through different means (such as presumed homosexuality). In contrast, trans people's genders are considered more open to question. Such regulatory responses are further evidenced by findings that gender non-conforming trans people experience higher levels of discrimination than gender conforming trans people (L.R. Miller & Grollman, 2015).

Exemplifying the prescriptive gender norms often required for trans intelligibility, Chris spoke of the particular difficulty that some teachers had in understanding trans students whom they perceived as gender non-conforming, or who did not present a clear ('passing') representation of a binary gender. Discussing one trans boy who "wears very masculine clothing, yet has a very feminine haircut, […] it's kind of like, it's moving upwards you know what I mean, and yet, you know, still paints his nails", he described the response of certain colleagues:

> *I think for some teachers, they sort of, they would look at this student, and they wouldn't particularly know, you know, whether – and I think maybe that's what he's looking at, that's what he's aiming to do, that you wouldn't know that he in fact was born, she, and still is 'she' essentially but, is not identifying as 'she', I think there's that sticky point where they're not particularly sure*

Not being able to resolve the 'gender trouble' presented by this student is constructed as problematic or uncomfortable ("that sticky point") for these teachers, as it denies the normative impulse to categorise people as intelligibly male or female. Chris himself also appears to not entirely perceive the student as male ("still is 'she' essentially"). However, his use of the word *still*, in addition to his previous positive comments about men wearing make-up (section 6.2), suggests that this might be related less to the student's apparent gender non-conformity and more to their relatively early stage in transition. Such a notion of trans students not being their gender *yet* was also present in some other participants' narratives, and is considered further in the following section (6.4).

6.4. Persistent investment in cis norms: The problem with 'trans 101'

As shown, many participants tended to challenge fixed and deterministic gender roles and traits, although there were demonstrably also instances where their gendered expectations were influenced by essentialism. However, overcoming *cis* norms was generally a much more difficult conceptual barrier. One simple example of this was Hannah's statements that "obviously I am female" and that her friend group consisted of "obviously both genders"; this suggested an unquestioned ontological belief in two ('both') genders, of which she was clearly one (female) based on physical (e.g., appearance, voice) and social cues (e.g., name).

Thus, whilst participants may have intended to acknowledge or respect trans people, their understanding was nevertheless premised on culturally dominant narratives of transness that ultimately reinforce cisnormativity. That is to say, it was frequently aligned with the *transnormative* and 'wrong body' narratives outlined in Chapter Three (section 3.4), which retain the 'truth' of essentialist binary sex categorisation.

For instance, consider Amanda's phrasing of "a boy trapped in a girl's body or a girl trapped in a boy's body" – the implication of this framing being a discrete separation between a gendered mind and the 'opposite' gendered body. Whilst, in terms of the first half of Amanda's statement, a trans boy may be recognised as a boy, the body remains definitively female because of its physical sex characteristics. The body is not just female in this statement, but "a girl's", belonging to a girl – the trans boy is trapped inside a body that is not his own.

Participants' statements in fact variously appeared to align with both interpretations of 'wrong body' narratives. Some suggested the first version, namely the construction of (medical) transition as the process of *becoming* the opposite sex. For example, Amanda also described a student who:

> *was… I believe not able to transition fully into a boy until an age where they could give consent themselves, […] although they want to live in that way, they can't until they are of an age where they, you know can sign surgical waivers and so on, to actually change in that way*

The phrase "transition fully" firstly suggests the idea of a linear transition that can be 'completed', and here Amanda suggests that this 'full' transition requires more than "liv[ing] in that way" (as a boy), specifically referencing surgery as necessary to "actually change in that way".

Additionally, from other participants there was the idea that a trans student may *become* their identified gender in the future, as suggested by Tracy's recollection of a staff discussion about a trans student's pronouns:

> *there was this whole, he/she, debate, […] this young person wants to be referred to as a he, and you would have people who would deliberately I suppose say she, because that was what they were, and they would put this argument forward and say no, actually, they're a she, they're a she, they're not really a he, yet*

Whilst the trans student is presented as definitively female ('a she') based on their assigned sex, the word "yet" implies an expectation that they will 'become' male ('a he'). This position gives primacy to an essentialist physical sex that apparently necessitates specific appropriate pronouns, but does not necessarily require this to remain fixed, should the extensive medical and legal criteria to acceptably become the other sex be met.

On the other hand, the second version of the 'wrong body' narrative – the separation of sex and gender – was presented by some participants as their current and more trans-inclusive understanding, which they contrasted with prior ignorance. Patrick described his knowledge development as follows:

> *I think originally I sort of, would have been confusing transsexual as opposed to transgender, so it's only been much more recently that I've properly looked into the differences between, you know, sex and sexuality, and then gender, […] sexual is much more like, the biology of the body and the sexual organs that a person has, whereas gender is how somebody identifies, which is sort of like in the brain rather than whether or not someone's got a penis or a vagina*

The sex/gender distinction may be considered a useful model for 'trans 101', as a conceptual bridge that assists the development of the new knowledge of transness through reference to the existing cisnormative framework. For instance, Wendy explained that she previously:

> *just thought it was something that… men did with their wives' clothes, when the wife was out they did it as a sexually titillating thing as opposed to, feeling they were a different gender, in the wrong body, so I'd kind of not really got my head around the issue very well at all*

The 'wrong body' model was a new way for her to conceptualise transness that was more legitimising, but was still comprehensible from her existing position. However, one significant problem is that this perhaps introductory explanation allows cisnormativity to persist, validating inequitable practices, whilst simultaneously claiming to be trans-inclusive. It is problematic that following this model, the acknowledgement of a trans person's identified gender, and the use of their appropriate name and pronouns, does not remove or even conflict with the persistent belief that they remain a different sex. Indeed, in the first example quoted from Amanda ("a boy trapped in a girl's body"), the trans boy's *gender* is male, but his sex remains female – which inherently delegitimises his self-identification.

Corresponding issues also appear in teacher training and professional development, in which trans-related content is often non-existent (Milsom, 2021) or provided in a limited way (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Brant & Willox, 2022) – both situations which were reflected in participants' experiences. Introductory forms of training are insufficient for critical and anti-oppressive practice; Smith and Payne (2016) for instance found that "Trans 101 for Teachers" (p. 39) training – which notably included teaching a distinction between sex and gender – did not in fact lead teachers to adopt gender-affirming pedagogy. Further, Keenan (2017) contends the inadequacy of isolated training sessions, without ongoing critical work, for addressing trans educational injustice – also specifically highlighting that, in dictating particular separate definitions

for gender and sex (and sexuality), "the Genderbread person and similar terms-and-conditions-based materials *simply replace one script with another*" (p. 547, emphasis added). Thus, whilst this form of 'wrong body' narrative and the corresponding differentiation between sex and gender may be intended as a readily understandable tool for teaching towards trans-inclusive attitudes and practices, somewhat ironically it actually undermines rather than advances trans equity (by reifying the 'truth' of the assigned sex); this is likely a particular problem when it is taken as a complete explanation, rather than one step or idea within a more complex process.

Further, the associated requirement placed on trans people to endorse such a transnormative framework, in order to obtain institutional acceptance (whether medical, legal, or educational; Riggs et al., 2019), may be reflected for instance in Rachel's explanation that she would (hypothetically) advocate for a trans child to unsupportive parents by "chat[ting] to them about you know that gender dysphoria is a recognised condition, if you like, that the feelings that your child is experiencing are, you know, true feelings". Here, the (external) medical 'diagnosis' of gender dysphoria is relied upon to justify that the child's "feelings" are genuine; essentially, the medical institution has the authority to decide whether any particular person has a condition for which they may be given treatments and accommodations, on an individual basis – and this also reproduces the 'truth' of cis as the normal, healthy baseline or ideal, which does not require external validation.

Chris also provided an example in which this underlying sex essentialism created a barrier to seeing a trans student as legitimately their identified gender. He explained that he found it more challenging ("the hard part") when he had previously known and referred to a student as one gender, to then mentally re-categorise them as a different one:

> *that was difficult, because I'd known this person, for a year, as female, and then the remainder of the year, as male*

The *change* is difficult because essentialism holds that sex is immutable and fixed. The transnormative sex/gender distinction allows for the student's gender to now be male, but simultaneously retains the truth of the female sex – so Chris must actively and repeatedly overrule the latter in order to reconceptualise the student and refer to them as male.

Finally, the 'wrong body' narrative may be especially delegitimising for non-binary people, for whom there is no normatively intelligible 'correct body' to which to aspire. Indeed, Amanda appeared to demonstrate this through her positioning of non-binary identities as a new concept and as a social

choice of gender identification, in contrast to the more deep-rooted or substantial phenomena of sex, sexuality, and (to an extent) 'binary'[20] trans identity. She told me:

> *I believe that gay people have always existed, I believe that there has always been people that feel male and are female and vice versa, I think the non-binary thing has come up as a result of that because I think non-binary, there's a lot of social pressure on how you should be and feel and play, what you should play with if you're a girl, and vice versa, and I think that there are people who are now going well I don't want you to pigeon hole me into that gender, […] so they've gone, well actually, yeah I'm a heterosexual person, but I'm sick of someone saying well, because I'm a girl I must behave in this way or feel this way or play with this thing or do this career or whatever*

To Amanda, identifying as non-binary is about not wanting to be constrained by traditional gender *norms*, rather than embodied selfhood. This in fact quite effectively demonstrates the sex/gender distinction, with male and female sexes remaining fundamental and biological, and gender (identity) psychological and socially influenced. Previous research also indicates the wider influence of such a position; for instance, K.C. Johnson et al. (2020) found that non-binary adolescents experienced a unique form of minority stress, *invalidation*, meaning "the refusal to accept one's identity as real or true" (p. 222). This was conceptually distinct from the non-affirmation that affects trans boys and girls as well as non-binary youth, when they are not considered genuinely their gender; invalidation specifically occurs when their gender is perceived to not exist *at all*. Correspondingly, non-binary students have also been shown to experience specific challenges in UK schools, where the institutional structures do not recognise their gendered subjectivities as possible (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Paechter et al., 2021). As one agender participant in such research explained: "my school is very binary and I feel I can't come out at school as they wouldn't know what to do with me" (Bower-Brown et al., p. 80).

6.5. Practical influence of the sex/gender distinction

6.5.1. 'The pronoun game'

In this section, I will discuss two particular ways in which the influence of essentialism, in the form of the sex/gender distinction, manifested itself practically in participants' experiences – creating inequitable approaches to trans students, and difficulties in treating their genders as entirely legitimate. Firstly, I will explore how an underlying sex essentialism, even when co-existing with an intention to respect a 'separate' gender identity, creates difficulties in using respectful and affirming

[20] See section 2.2 for a critique of framings of trans boys/men and girls/women as the 'binary' category against which 'non-binary' is defined (Martino, 2022b).

language in reference to trans people. For instance, even when participants were aware of and wanted to use the correct pronouns for trans students, they often still struggled to do so consistently. This was beyond what might be expected of difficulties recalling more normative changes (such as names with marriage). My argument is that this is linked to the persisting 'truth' of the assigned sex category and often the associated (essentialist) physical characteristics, which require conscious work to override with the comparatively 'immaterial' gender identity.

In one example, whilst Erin said that in response to a student (hypothetically) coming out as trans or non-binary, she "would ask them what their preferred pronoun would be, would they like me to call them by the name they chose", she also struggled to instinctively land on the appropriate pronoun for a trans (male) student: "she was, he, she was, no, he was in year five". Similarly, several participants explained that remembering the right pronouns for a particular trans individual was a challenge that took intentional effort and practice – often having to override or correct themselves on the pronoun they instinctively used. Amanda, discussing her relative coming out, told me that "she announced it on social media actually and it's not something I knew before, that she is – they, that they are non-binary, um, I'm just getting used to the 'they'". Amanda's point that using 'they' pronouns requires "getting used to" shows the time element involved and also suggests that it does not easily feel 'natural' to use. Comparably, and whilst emphasising that he did not want to make mistakes, Chris described such situations with trans students as "the pronoun game", also explaining the effort that a colleague had to put in to remembering:

> *I know one teacher had to write it down on a post-it note, and would have, obviously, glanced, and next to it 'he, he, he', and you could almost see him practicing 'he, he, he'*

This notion of 'game' prompts a connection to Foucault's concept of *games of truth* – as "a set of rules by which truth is produced" (1997, p. 297). Whilst his earlier phrasing of 'regimes' of truth (e.g., 1980a) examined the fixed subjectivities constructed by institutional regimes, the later 'games' of truth reflected how his thinking had developed to allow for more dynamic subjectivity and the role of the subject in self-construction. Under this framework, teachers using correct pronouns (as Chris describes) may be playing the game of (gender) truth, but using their linguistic agency to do so in a way that opens up the possibility of an alternative to essentialism – hence, an opportunity for trans legitimacy through "playing the same game differently" (1997, p. 295).

Of course, this game can also be played in ways that actively or passively reproduce the 'truth' of gender essentialism. For instance, Phipps and Blackall (2021) describe a case in which a secondary school teacher selectively uses the wrong pronouns for a trans student in order to 'punish' him for behaviour infractions like talking in class. Whilst they may in other circumstances be using the requested pronouns, the fact that this is conditional on behaviour (and only for the trans student and not his cis peers) reinforces the idea that trans genders are not 'truth' as cis ones are. Correctly

gendering a trans person is therefore seen more as a kindness that can be granted or revoked, whereas doing so for a cis person is simply reflecting obvious fact.

6.5.2. Before and after

Another fairly common occurrence was that a participant would change the pronoun and/or name they were using for a trans student part way through the story they were telling me – generally at the point when the student was seen to come out or to (socially) transition. This framing reflects elements of both forms of 'wrong body' narrative described earlier. From the first version, there is the idea that the student is literally *changing* gender at this point. However, combined with the sex/gender division from the second, the understanding becomes that they are changing (social) gender, but their sex remains the same (at least until they change medically and physically). Demonstrating this, Michael told me:

> *there was a transfer from another school about three years ago, a girl called [old name] who came to the meeting, and we were told she was now referring to herself as [new name] and wanted to be treated as a boy, which was fine, and what we did, the difficulty was there was some kids in the school who knew her from primary school, and knew that she had changed her gender, but he now as [new name] insisted on being treated normally and wanted to change in the boys' changing rooms, and this was something that PE staff felt they were unable to support, because they were biologically female*

The essentialist framework is thereby shown in these two ways. Firstly, as suggested by "they were biologically female", regardless of gender identity the student is seen to remain their assigned sex, and it is this sex that is considered materially important in determining which gendered (or sexed) spaces they are allowed to access. Secondly, regardless of what gender they are 'now', the truth apparently remains of what the trans person was 'before'; the previously known gender is always a fact inherent to their personhood, even if they have 'changed'. Constructing a normatively intelligible transition narrative therefore requires the 'truth' of the previous name and pronouns. It is only because of the essentialist expectation that sex/gender remain fixed, and thus the salience of the change, that it is considered unclear or misleading to use a person's current gender to refer to the 'before'. Moreover, the immutability that is tied to both of these points is also implied by the suggestion that other students' knowledge of the child's trans status would prevent him from being "treated normally" as a boy; because he has – or is *known* to have – changed, it is thought that he cannot be treated as the 'normal' boy who by definition has always been such.

Additionally, some participants, although consistently correctly gendering a trans student, still framed their narrative around a name change – a particularly problematic aspect of this being that

they told me the student's previous name. This happened for instance in Georgia's statement that, "there was a boy who had, so his name on the register is still [old name], but he wanted to be called [new name]". Similarly, Laura described how, "one day an email came round saying that this child called [old name] wanted to be known as [new name], and I thought cool, a trans kid, great, I will support them, him". From a cisnormative perspective, the issue with this may not necessarily be clear, as I did not know any of these students, and all identifying information (including names) is kept confidential. However, there are two connected parts to this: the first being the often highly sensitive and personal nature of trans people's previous names, and the second being once again the delegitimising implications of reinforcing the essentialist 'truth' of the apparently distinct pre-transition personhood.

Indeed, whilst trans people have heterogenous and often complicated relationships with their previous names, it is broadly the case that in trans communities, "bringing up another's name given at birth is 'a giant faux pas'" (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023, p. 381). There is often considerable apprehension about revealing one's own previous name, and much of this is not necessarily the word itself, but the potentially delegitimising power it holds in a context where gender essentialism is dominant. Disclosing a trans person's previous name, therefore, is taking away their agency in how they are recognised – by both those who give the disclosure and those who receive it. The knowledge of the name, through an essentialist lens, can taint the perceived legitimacy of the trans person's gender; it reifies and substantiates that prior 'other' person and its authority over the genuine personhood. Hence, using a trans person's previous name is not just about the word; it has symbolic and potentially invalidating implications. It makes a legitimacy claim about that name and attempts to assert external authority over the trans person's own first-person perspective (Bettcher, 2009).

Further, such framings act to discursively split the trans student's life into two separate personhoods, the before and the after; this reproduces the 'truth' of the assigned sex by making legitimacy of the current name and gender conditional on constructing the student's present as an entirely new person. This issue has also been demonstrated in previous literature, such as in Sinclair-Palm's (2017) discussion of a trans student that appears to construct their past and present as two distinct individuals (with different names and pronouns) *interacting with each other* – for instance, "Tiffany remains a ghost in Tye's story of himself, leaving traces of herself throughout his life and asking for a new relation with him" (p. 8). Through the narrative of *her* changing into *him*, the trans student's past is effectively separated from their current self and ascribed to this separate person. From my own trans perspective, someone else using my old name to refer to my past, a name that no longer denotes 'me', is artificially disconnecting me from my own history. The same is true for pronouns; referring to my past self as 'she' is still misrecognition, and implies that the person does not see me as legitimately male, as whom I have said that I am. Instead, my whole life and self, including my past, should be attributed to and described as me, with my current name. This

is in contrast to the essentialist construction of assigned sex as an inherent subjectivity that always remains true, especially of the past self.

The cisnormative idea of gender transition could perhaps be considered more analogous to regeneration in *Doctor Who* (Letts et al., 1963-present); when a Time Lord regenerates into the next version of themselves, every cell in their body changes, they retain their memories and some core characteristics, but they are substantively an entirely new person in personality as well as appearance. This is not, of course, what happens with trans people. However, essentialism as truth discourse positions sex/gender as so fundamental to personhood – as a norm that is integral to constructing the intelligible individual (Butler, 1993/2011) – that the only way for it to 'change' is to become this completely new person.

6.6. Importance of gender and affirmation

On the other hand, and indeed as suggested by many of these examples, several participants also showed an appreciation of the material importance to trans students of gender and its affirmation. For instance, Jenny spoke about the use of gendered language:

> *if you're using the wrong language, and the wrong name, in a classroom, then the kids are gonna pick that up, which is… you know, this one person then goes from one person saying the wrong thing to 30 people saying the wrong thing, which is, you know it's not good, it's not, and that's not right, 'cause that's not the person they are any more*

Jenny highlights that using a previous name for a trans student is inappropriate because "that's not the person they are", suggesting belief in the legitimate authority of their identified sex/gender over what they were assigned. However, it is also interesting that she adds, "any more" – which may also imply that they *used to be* that (different) person. This could reflect the point, as identified in section 6.2, that it is not uncommon for individuals to simultaneously hold elements of essentialist *and* opposing ideas.

Certain participant experiences, in demonstrating positive features and uses of gender, may also be considered to support the argument for gender democratisation over its abolition (see section 3.4.7). In one example, Rachel gives an account of student responses to a trans girl coming out at the school:

> *the children were just putting their arms around her and what was lovely was that she had an older brother in year six, and the children in support, I didn't ask them to do any of this, but the children in support, painted their nails, and it was all of the boys though, that painted their nails, and tied their hair in bobbles*

In one sense, it is possible to interpret the students painting their nails and tying up their hair as relying on stereotypes associated with girls. However, these gendered norms are being cited in a different way; the boys are not following the normative impetus to distance themselves from feminine things or police each other's gender presentation. Instead, they are offering support and validation to their trans peer, unrestricted by any threat to their own masculine status. This is an example of the positive gender relations and trans affirmation that would be unavailable under a framework of gender abolition.

6.7. Chapter conclusion

The teachers that I interviewed were variously influenced by sex/gender essentialism. Whilst it was more common to challenge traditional male and female stereotypes, the 'truth' of biological binary sex categorisation was highly persistent. This is a serious barrier to trans student equity, which would require trans and cis people's genders to be considered and treated as equally legitimate. Currently, although many teachers do endeavour to support their trans students, the endurance of essentialism and especially of assigned sex as truth – including through purportedly inclusive transnormative narratives – ultimately prevents this equity.

Chapter Seven: Childhood Innocence and Developmentalism

7.1. Introduction

Addressing the third and final identified truth discourse, this chapter considers the discursive production of children and childhood in a way that predominantly serves the interests of social reproduction and the maintenance of inequitable power relations, which thereby marginalises *actual* children – including, as is my focus here, trans children. I demonstrate evidence from participant narratives of how this dominant discourse may impede teachers' adoption of trans-inclusive approaches – whilst also highlighting instances of resistance, which may hold emancipatory potential. I show examples that reflect the construction of children as inherently pre-rational pre-adults – a biological 'truth' that is used to justify direct government as apparently necessary to protect their innocence and keep them on the 'proper' developmental path towards normative (cisgender) adulthood. Yet, it is in fact a normative futurity that is being protected through this control, as *represented* by the child (see section 3.5). Accordingly, I identify in participant experiences a corresponding protectionism, through which trans and queer people and knowledges are framed as inappropriate and threatening to children – and indeed also demonstrate the associated desire for a non-trans outcome that leads to a child often only being allowed to transition, if at all, when adults conclude that alignment with 'normal' (cis) development cannot be restored. Finally, I contend that support for trans students is demonstrably primarily a negotiation between parents and the school, that also may account for the (assumed or actual) objections of other students' parents. This is in fact one instance of the broader direct government of children, which is justified by these dominant truth discourses regarding childhood, and is enacted through a balance of control between the interests of the family and the state – a balance which is consistently weighted in favour of the normative position and thus functions to discourage transness and indeed other forms of deviance.

7.2. Pre-rationality

Firstly, participants expressed different views regarding the dominant narrative of children and young people as *pre-rational*. On the one hand, Amanda for instance suggested the influence of developmentalism in her statement:

> *I think it's a teenage thing where hormones are raging, you know their responses to things aren't always moderated, so when I was asking them to do things that I believed were quite reasonable, they would be, 'this is so unfair'*

Here she cites hormones as an inherent biological reason for teenage immoderation, further contrasting these students to herself as the 'reasonable' adult. Their objection to her requests, or to her authority to make them, is framed as an irrational but natural result of their developmental stage – perhaps demonstrating a wider point about the use of this discourse to dismiss the validity of any resistance by children and young people to adult-dominated power relations. Congruently, Toshalis (2012) notes that "teenagers are often framed by a discourse of 'raging hormones' that hails them as pathologically and biologically incapable of controlling base urges, a script that lends itself to arguments for stricter measures of control over youth" (p. 4). Thus, developmentalism not only naturalises the disregarding of young people's protests about their social position, but also legitimises increased control measures to restrict this 'irrational' resistance.

Wendy also referenced a similar narrative in expressing concerns about facilitating a (hypothetical) primary school child's social transition, explaining:

> *part of me wants to say look it's respectful to the child to use the name that they want and the gender that they want to use, I've also got to respect the fact that they're little, and there's an awful lot of changing to happen and they haven't really probably even started their adolescence, although they will be beginning to at that sort of age, and hormones are all over your body and doing all sorts of strange things to you*

There are suggestions here both of age-related hormones causing 'strange things' to happen physically in a way that may affect competent decision-making, and of the anticipated changes of adolescence potentially negating any choices that a child makes in the present.

Additionally, whilst Bethany herself did not necessarily agree, she suggested that parents' understanding of their children as naturally pre-rational may underlie their rejection of a trans identity. Referencing the "legal age that you become an adult", she said:

> *if you're below that age it's very difficult, and it definitely influences I think maybe parents, because maybe they think they're not, they don't know, or their brain isn't developed enough to know what they want to be, what they want to do, which isn't always the case*

Here Bethany alludes to the socio-legal reification of biodeterministic constructs of childhood and adolescence; the undeveloped brain is thought to inherently preclude young people from having competence to take on 'adult' rights and responsibilities, and hence specific ages are enshrined in law at which they are assumed to become sufficiently biologically mature to do so.

On the other hand, some participants presented differing views, contesting the idea of childhood pre-rationality. Erin, with reference to quite young students, explained:

> *the six, seven-year-olds that I work with are very intelligent people, they know what they want, and they can completely express themselves with no problem, so if they want to identify as either female, male, non-binary or whatever they want to be it's not something that I would be like no, I'd just be like okay if you're happy*

Additionally, Tracy appeared to dispute ideas of adult knowledge and cognition being inherently superior, speaking about learning from her own children:

> *they learn so many fantastic things in the primary curriculum, and they'll come home and we'll have discussions and they talk about things, as if there's nothing you know there's no shock or anything […], they've opened my mind and possibly made me question my own views, my own morals, my own opinions a lot more*

Here Tracy does not assume that learning is uni-directional or hierarchical from adults to children. She suggests that when their opinions conflict with her own, she does not automatically dismiss them as coming from a child and therefore inferior, but rather is open to questioning her own position – demonstrating a respect for the children's capability and contributions.

7.3. Protectionism

7.3.1. 'Loss' of childhood and of adult control

Secondly, some participants' narratives appeared to reflect aspects of the protectionist discourses that are anxious about preserving childhood as a distinct sphere, away from the danger of adult experiences (see section 3.5.3). For instance, the associated idea that childhoods are worse or more difficult in current times could be recognised in some discussions; Jenny told me that "growing up these days I think is far tougher than any generation's had it before". In fact, she contrasted new threats of the present to her own childhood experience:

> *it was very different, being young when I was young, even though it wasn't that long ago, looking at the pressure that kids have these days, social media wise and you know social group wise, and then external pressures as well, I realise that the stress that I had when I was younger wasn't necessarily as stressful as what these current children have to go through*

There were also suggestions of a perceived heightened difficulty faced by adults contemporarily in protecting children. Indeed, Jenny continued by describing the struggle that teachers faced in trying to 'police' student interactions online:

> *there's different sides to bullying now, sides that I don't necessarily understand, definitely a lot of online bullying like social media, which is very very hard to police as a teacher, when it's online, it requires a lot more vigilance from everyone really, and it's hard to stop kids from messaging other kids, well you can't really, there's nothing as a teacher that you can do to stop that, whereas in school you can stop them being around each other*

This reflects wider societal concerns about a loss of adult *control* over the content and spaces that young people have access to, particularly on social media and elsewhere online (Cunningham, 2021). Indeed, DfE SRE guidance (2019b) frames online sexual content and digital media almost exclusively in terms of harm and risk (Setty & Dobson, 2023).

Additionally, the idea of the internet as hazardous specifically for young people's gender and sexuality identity development was raised by Hannah, as she discussed one student who had "been all over the place with what he identifies as". She said that the student, who at that time was identifying as trans, "was also doing a lot of looking online, which obviously was worrying, for various reasons, but that's where he was kind of finding all these terms". Hannah's use of the word "obviously" suggests that the narrative of learning this information online being concerning may be an assumed truth, and something that she was expecting me to already agree with. This idea influenced her approach to the student, even as someone who explicitly wanted to be supportive; she had stated that she and her colleagues "would make it clear to the child that it's okay if they're trans". Nonetheless, she questioned the legitimacy of the student's trans identity, telling me that she "was definitely wondering like, is this real, like I'm sure he believes this but you know, to what extent is it actually really just another sort of attention seeking thing".

The naturalisation of such an association of danger and inauthenticity with non-normative external influence on children also gives (unwarranted) credence in popular discourse to more overtly anti-trans allegations of 'social contagion' – which claim that children are being misled into falsely believing that they are transgender through exposure to other trans youth (Serano, 2019). One high-profile example of this is Littman's (2018) construction of 'Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria' (ROGD), based on surveys completed by non-affirming parents of trans youth. Littman presents the influence of the online domain as a significant concern, for instance through reference to parental reports "that their children exhibited an increase in social media/internet use prior to disclosure of a transgender identity", as well as the claim that "[a]cademics have raised concerns about the role of social media in the development of gender dysphoria" (p. 1). Despite extensive academic criticism of both the methodology and overall claims (Ashley, 2020; Restar, 2020), as well as the lack of evidence found for the concept when researchers worked with trans adolescents *themselves* rather than their parents (Bauer et al., 2022), the notion of ROGD continues to have significant socio-political influence (Billard, 2023). As a knowledge claim, it again follows the rules of a cissexist and developmentalist game of truth – and thus is readily accepted as legitimate. For instance, the belief

that transness must be 'rapid onset' because the parents had not previously been aware aligns with discourses of parental sovereignty. Additionally, the focus on *rapidity* itself presents such a route to identification with transness as inherently problematic and unhealthy *because* of its (apparent) speed – in contrast to the gradual and linear trajectory of 'normal' development (Pitts-Taylor, 2022). It also ties into the construction of children and young people (and their social spheres) as irrational – denying the possibility of a legitimate independent, youth-led, or agentic learning about and identification with transness – and assuming that their deviance from 'normal' development must have been 'caused' by external influence. There is an implicit claim that any domain that is not under normative adult control is inherently dangerous – a facet of dominant childhood discourses that indeed may also be recognised in Hannah and Jenny's comments.

7.3.2. Precocious knowledge

Moreover, the influence of child protectionist discourses also appeared in participants' comments about sex education and queer knowledges. Bethany, for instance, told me that "*obviously* we don't teach it, we don't teach sex education in nursery and reception" (emphasis added) – implying an assumption of a shared, taken-for-granted truth that any form of knowledge about sex would be inappropriate at that age. Additionally, Rachel suggested that honest engagement with children's curiosity on this topic would not be considered acceptable, explaining that "we'll ask children to write questions down, and we'll field the questions because some questions might not be appropriate". Setty and Dobson (2023) argue that in practices like this – specifically referencing the anonymous question boxes advocated in DfE SRE guidance (2019b) – rather than being youth-led or participatory, "adults are delivering the answers in line with pre-established facts, normative standards for good decision making and fixed ideas of development" (p. 86). As such, in Rachel's example teachers are making a judgement, informed by normative discourses, about which particular questions are too advanced for the children's developmental stage. The students are framed as in need of protection both from their own questions, and from the other children – keeping those who are still 'innocent' in this regard from being influenced by peers who may already have precocious knowledge.

Exemplifying the normative positioning of queer knowledges as *especially* problematic (see section 3.5.4), Rachel also explained that at her school:

> *we wouldn't not talk about LGBT, but it's not explicit through the whole of the sex and relationships curriculum, because it, I suppose a readiness, an age-appropriate readiness, that we need to consider as well*

Correspondingly, the DfE SRE guidance (2019b) specifically emphasises that LGBT-related teaching must be "sensitive and age appropriate" – and only introduced at "the point at which schools consider it appropriate" (p. 15). As Setty and Dobson (2023) argue, this approach suggests that LGBT

content is “to remain taboo or secret until some unspecified time, while, presumably, heterosexual relationships are safe and acceptable at any age” (p. 88).

In line with this, some participants also spoke of the production of LGBT topics as only appropriate or (more) relevant at the secondary school stage, and not primary – something which, through such a clear distinction between two in fact continuous age groups, perhaps particularly well illustrates dominant discursive constructions of linear and age-specific developmental norms. For example, Patrick told me about a training session he had attended led by Ruth Hunt, the head of Stonewall[21] at the time, about LGBT inclusion in the curriculum:

> *I was actually the only primary school teacher that went to that session, she said it’s sort of unusual ‘cause it’s seen very much more of a secondary school thing*

However, this also does not mean that queerness is considered unproblematic once children reach secondary school age. For instance, Dobson (2019) found that some secondary school teachers, preparing for the introduction of compulsory RSE in England, wanted to avoid any content that could be associated with LGBT issues, citing concerns that this was “too mature to discuss in school”. A significant aspect of the rationale for this hesitancy was “a fear that discussion of this nature would be reported, leading to complaints” (p. 55) – reflecting the dominant socio-political context in which queer content in schools regularly incites moral panic (often through intentional political strategy; K.H. Robinson, 2012) in a way that cisheterosexuality does not.

On the other hand, several participants did also provide contrasting ideas to this normative protectionism over knowledge. Tracy, for instance, criticised more generally the restriction of certain information in schools, explaining that:

> *we talk very much in education about promoting independent learning, but we promote independent learning on things we want them to learn about, we keep back information on things that don’t fit with our agendas or, might give them too much knowledge, because if they get too much knowledge they might start asking us questions we’re not comfortable with*

Additionally, Wendy explained how she had resisted the Section 28 restrictions on queer knowledges in schools, both politically (“I was signing things and writing to my MP”) and in the classroom:

[21] Stonewall is a prominent UK LGBT+ rights charity.

> *I can't say that it affected the way I said anything to any of the children, I probably went against some [school] governors' advice, […] I sometimes went beyond what I was supposed to say*

Such forms of resistance from teachers may be(come) particularly important once again in the current trans-hostile socio-political climate, given the imminent and very likely trans-exclusionary guidance for schools that has been promised by the (Conservative) prime minister (Hansford, 2023a) – and the apparent support for this expressed by the leader of the (Labour) opposition (Williamson, 2023b).

7.4. Permanence, and the desire for a non-trans outcome[22]

As indeed may be indicated by Hannah's problematisation of a student having "been all over the place with what he identifies as", several participants also related an emphasis on *permanence* in a trans child's identity as a necessary pre-requisite for affirming them or allowing them to transition. Wendy told me about one trans child who, she stressed, had "*always* identified as a little girl, always always always, at home, at nursery, at playgroup, at school". She explained how the parents had expected their child to desist, thinking "when he[23] goes to playgroup things will be different then, when he goes to nursery things will be different, when they go to school things will be different". Although she went on to describe these parents as supportive and gender-affirming, it was only once "they realised after one year at school, that things weren't going to be different, this was who the child was" that they agreed to public or 'formal' steps in transition, including at school.

Ultimately, such an approach reflects dominant constructions of children as irrational human *becomings* (Qvortrup, 2009) who must be guided towards a normative adult subjectivity; adult control (or 'protection') is justified as necessary to prevent, if at all possible, the failed socialisation represented by trans adulthood. Accordingly, trans childhood is not valued in its own right as a form of life – reflecting dominant attitudes to childhood more broadly, as Katz (2008) explains:

> *When the child is imagined as a blank slate or object of becoming – available thus to inhabitation by others – it is erased as 'bearer of experience'* (p. 7)

[22] After Sedgwick's (1991) critique of the pervasive (adult) "desire for a non-gay outcome" (p. 24) for children exhibiting non-normative gender or sexual desire.
[23] Wendy used 'he' pronouns, and sometimes 'they', to refer to the trans girl at points in the narrative prior to her social transition. This way of talking about trans people's histories, changing pronouns at the temporal point of transition, is a relatively common phenomenon that I discussed in detail in section 6.5.2.

Instead, trans *identity* in a child is framed as a deviation from normal (and hence *desirable*) development – and exploration of gender identity as something to be suppressed, lest this encourage such divergence. Further, with development understood as a linear trajectory, any non-normative behaviour is perceived not as a single act, but as a step down an abnormal and increasingly irreversible path. Thus, transition in childhood is discursively constructed as *risk* – and accordingly, narratives presenting it in terms of uncertainty or as 'experimental' dominate, despite the erroneous nature of such claims (Giordano & Holm, 2020; Riggs et al., 2021) and extensive evidence of the benefits to trans children (e.g., de Castro Peraza et al., 2023; Durwood et al., 2017). Even amongst outwardly supportive adults – as indeed in Wendy's example – it is regularly suggested that allowing a child to (even socially) transition should only be done if one can be confident (often on the basis of extensive pseudo-medical assessment) that they are unquestionably and *permanently* trans, and cannot reasonably be realigned with cisgender development.

Prior research also demonstrates this point; Horton (2022b) highlights how even amongst families who (eventually) supported their young trans children, the vast majority of parents had delayed affirmation. Indeed, several interviewed parents described an "initial[…] desire for certainty, wanting to be confident both in a child's current identity, and in the future stability and consistency of that identity" (p. 193). These parents commonly had to let go of this prioritisation of the future (perhaps, *reproductive futurism*) as a prerequisite for supporting their child, relating for example:

> *If this turns out to not be who she is, the worst-case scenario is that she grows up knowing she's loved and supported for who she is, regardless.* (p. 194)

Ultimately, parents had to come to this conclusion on their own – concerningly (if unsurprisingly) *against* the advice of medical professionals, including frequently from NHS gender services. In hindsight, parents recognised that delaying affirmation had caused their child harm and distress, and often regretted having done so. The rationale for refusing affirmation, as advocated by these professionals, is predicated on a desire for a non-trans outcome – an assumption that transness and transition is so clearly negative that it is worth causing severe and prolonged distress to the child if this might avert their succumbing to it. This is in fact an example of how investment in reproductive futurism demands, as Fontenot (2006) contends, "an ethics of endless deferral that is capable of untold brutality, rationalizing any sacrifice, no matter how violently antilife" (p. 254).

In contrast, what the parent quoted above appears to have recognised is that not only does trans childhood have inherent value and legitimacy outside of teleology and what it might mean for adulthood, but also that prioritising the child's present self – and allowing them to deviate from a normative developmental path – is *not* in fact harmful to the adult they will become, even if that adult is cis. This idea poses a significant threat to developmentalist discourses that rely on the claim of serving the child's future best interests (and this as taking precedence over their present

irrational desires) as justification for normalising interventions – which in actuality are in service of *control* over social reproduction (see section 3.5.2).

However, this underlying normative claim has also been adopted into certain forms of argument made by adults advocating for support of (LGB+ and) trans children – using what Cloud (2018) refers to as 'low-agency' rhetoric to contend that queer people should be granted rights and affirmation because they have not *chosen* to be queer, but it is just how they were born and cannot change. Support under this narrative therefore relies on the assignation of a specific and *stable* identity label to the individual young person (Dyer, 2017), and hence reinforces a problematic focus on permanence and does not complicate the normative condition for acceptance that a child be judged as 'genuinely' trans (by adults).

This is in fact potentially the frame of understanding through which Rachel came to be supportive of a student transitioning at her primary school. Whilst she did not necessarily (explicitly) position transness as a negative outcome, her confidence in an affirming approach *was* reliant on an assurance that the child's gender identity was permanent. She told me that, initially,

> *I did feel that she was quite young really, […] I think that was my only concern that, she might change her mind but obviously, knowing what I know now about gender dysphoria, I know that's not going to happen*

In contrast, however, some participants contested such an emphasis on permanence. Amanda, stating that she would want to correctly gender a trans student regardless of parental disagreement, explained:

> *we're not endangering their child, by referring to them as a boy or a girl, if that's what they want […] they're probably doing more harm in that respect, by not allowing their daughter or son to have their wishes met, even if it is just a short term thing […] it isn't for me to decide when they are gonna change their mind, if they do change their mind, I shouldn't be the one who says, well you can't change your mind*

In a similar way, Laura prioritised the child's present regardless of its role in producing any particular future. Explaining her disagreement with an institutional decision to follow a parent's request not to use their trans child's chosen name, she suggested that the reasoning of the school leadership was:

> *probably that thing of thinking they don't know yet and, it's just a phase and that sort of thing, which like even if it is a phase, so what? They're trying to explore who they are, just let them*

Laura's explanation exemplifies the association between the construction of children as teleological pre-adults, and as pre-rational ("they don't know yet"). A child is denied the autonomy to take steps

in social transition, because they are considered to lack the rationality to make such a decision – one that apparently threatens to change who they are to become as an adult, and at a wider level threatens the *societal* future that they represent. They must therefore be 'protected' from the possibility of their irrationality leading them to unnecessarily, and potentially irreversibly, deviate from the (desirable) path of normative development.

Notably, this link is also evident in (ostensibly academic) arguments that children are inherently incapable of consenting to treatment with puberty blockers. Latham (2022), for example, makes two connected points, firstly that:

> *[w]ithout medication, most will desist from the dysphoria in time. Yet over 90% of those treated with puberty blockers progress to cross-sex hormones and often surgery, with irreversible consequences* (p. 268)

and secondly that:

> *[t]he young brain is biologically and socially immature, tends towards short-term risk taking, does not possess the ability to comprehend long term consequences and is highly influenced by peers* (p. 288)

In strongly developmentalist language (and latterly alluding to aforementioned 'social contagion' claims) Latham positions puberty-delaying medication as effectively *causative* of a trans future that otherwise both can and *should* be avoided. What the child themselves thinks or wants is entirely irrelevant because, in addition to being pre-rational – and returning to the point made at the beginning of this section – they are not so much a legitimate "bearer of experience" (Katz, 2008, p. 7) as they are a malleable placeholder for the future adult. The importance of the (inaccurate) desistance myths that Latham references is to reinforce that this future adult most likely is, or can be recuperated as, *cisgender*; hence, puberty blockers are not an acceptable medical decision, but rather a threat to the normal development, and the normal future, that can otherwise be restored.

Yet, the real threat – of concern in opposition to both social and medical transition – is the danger posed to developmentalism and to normative social reproduction by the notion that impermanence, of exploring and changing identity multiple times, is simply unproblematic. As some of Horton's (2022b) parent participants recognised, their initial concern about their children potentially changing their minds had been rooted in the anticipated societal reaction to such a situation, and their associated embarrassment; there is no *inherent* harm to changing or transitioning more than once. In fact, Ashley (2019) contends that it is often *through* transition that gender exploration can best be facilitated, questioning the ethicality of the dominant medical paradigm which requires the completion of such exploration and a fixed identity prior to allowing transition.

However, the implication of accepting this, for those invested in normative and developmentalist discourses, would be that it opens up fluidity and affirmation in gender exploration to *all* children – relinquishing the control over normative futurity that manifests in strict restriction and isolation of non-conformity within a minimal number of identified individuals, and the corresponding reification of the normative *cis* developmental trajectory. This latter and existing system exemplifies how normalisation works as a biopolitical technique of governmentality – of *population* management – which accepts that transness (as with other unfavourable or deviant qualities) cannot be eliminated entirely, and therefore works in probabilistic terms to maintain cases at a 'normal' (low) level within the population (Foucault, 1978, 2009). This underlies the social contagion narratives discussed in the preceding section (7.3.1), with increasing numbers of trans children strategically constructed in socio-political discourse as a concerning trend, for which a 'reason' must be found and addressed (e.g., in Gentleman, 2022; Milton, 2022a). State representatives are contemporarily taking actions aimed at reducing (or 'normalising') these numbers because (or to the extent that) the benefits of doing so – of maintaining the dominant power relations that are threatened by increased acceptability and presentation of transness – outweigh the potential costs, such as lost support or resistance from trans people and allies.

Following this, in the remainder of this chapter I identify in participants' experiences evidence that decisions on whether a child is allowed to socially transition at school are predominantly a negotiation between parents and the institution. I position this as a specific manifestation of the broader approach by which government is enacted over children, which is primarily in direct forms that are justified through developmentalism, using strategies aimed at normalising levels of transness and other forms of deviance, with the goal of ensuring social reproduction (see section 3.5.5).

7.5. Age(ncy) and government

7.5.1. Parental authority as responsibilisation

Firstly, participants evidenced the responsibilisation of families for the proper (cisgender) socialisation of their children (section 3.5.5) – with some expressing empathy for an assumed difficulty for parents in accepting deviation from their own ideas and expectations of development. Wendy for instance explained her response to one student's supportive family:

> *I thought wow what great parents, that they're letting their [child transition], it must be difficult you know if you think you've got a little boy, and you've got sort of an idea of your child as this little boy, it must be hard to get your head round actually now, this same child is a little girl*

Correspondingly, Horton (2023d) found that even parents who were confident that their gender-affirming approach was the right choice often still expressed anxiety and fear about the "loss of parental control" that this represented. As "a step into the unknown" (p. 237), facilitating their child's transition could be contrasted with the security of a normative (cis) pathway that is assumed to be predictable and safe, and which they are reluctant to give up.

In line with this, Amanda also suggested that in "instances where parents maybe haven't been as supportive" of their trans child, this may be reflective of the fact that these parents:

> *must be going through something as well, because they've probably never imagined that this situation would arise, and yet it has, and they probably are questioning things that they've done, and not done, and why it is that they [the child] might feel that way*

There is an implication here that parents may be questioning whether their own actions, or lack of action, have contributed to their child being trans – which could reflect the *responsibility* that parents are given for actively ensuring normative child development, and consequently their perceived 'failure' to do so in this case. The naturalisation and moralisation of both 'normal' development and parental authority constructs deviation as a problem that must have been *caused*, either by the parents themselves or by something that they allowed to happen.

7.5.2. Extra-parental agency judged on normative rationality

Secondly, Michael demonstrated the point of children's constrained agency (see section 3.5.6), highlighting that whilst ostensibly their opinions are considered, ultimately they must rely on (adult) professionals' authority to allow them to make decisions outside of the control of their parents. He referenced *Gillick competence* (see e.g., Wheeler, 2006) – a legal concept that in the UK dictates criteria for doctors determining a child's capability to make medical decisions without parental consent – when asked how he thought schools should approach conflict between a trans child and unsupportive parents. He described it as a question of "is the kid able to make that decision or are they morally and emotionally old enough and stable enough to make that decision, in which case you'd do what the kid wants to do". In practice, this relies on an adult judgement of rationality – and is often based on the alignment of the child's proposed decision with social norms, because in many ways these are effectively the very definition of what is considered a 'rational' choice. Hence, a non-normative choice may be taken to itself constitute evidence of the child's inherent irrationality, reifying the necessity of parental sovereignty in 'protecting' them from their own agency – and thereby averting a potential threat to the social reproduction which relies on the future normal adult.

Interestingly, Michael also recalled a situation in which he and his school colleagues' judgement about a student's right to bodily autonomy conflicted with the opinion of medical professionals, explaining that a year nine student:

> *wanted to have a termination of a pregnancy, […] wanted the school staff to change the school register and mark her as present for the afternoon so she could go to a clinic, and we as a school refused to do that […] a judgement made was to contact the parent to say this is what your daughter has come to us in a level of distress, and this is what she's planning to do, we were very heavily criticised by the health professionals who said that was none of their business, if she was year nine and wanted to terminate a pregnancy, that was her call*

In the case of trans students, the desire to transition is predominantly considered an *especially* irrational (non-normative) choice. Consequently, there is a high level of concern from adults about allowing it, and about the child's capability to make it. This may in fact be reflected, in terms of a particularly high bar being applied, in Michael's positioning of *social* transition as requiring a child to meet a *medical* consent standard, in order to be allowed to decide without parental agreement.

Indeed, this distinct treatment of transness can be identified more broadly. For instance, and although the judgement was later overturned by the Court of Appeal, the UK High Court in 2020 ruled to restrict the application of Gillick competence and require court approval specifically and only for trans children accessing puberty blockers, on the basis of their assumed inability to legitimately consent (Moscati, 2022). In this case, transition is considered such a non-normative choice – or such a threat to normative futurity – that the trans child is framed as especially irrational in making it, and hence must be 'protected' to an extent that does not apply to any other medical decision.

7.5.3. Social transition: A negotiation between school and parents

As such, adults – including school staff – are often particularly hesitant to allow children to make their own decisions about even social aspects of transition, or to have privacy from their parents regarding gender. Correspondingly, trans identity is treated in contemporary socio-political discourse as something that parents should have a particular right to know about. Several US states have passed or are considering legislation that mandates schools to inform parents if their child is or might be trans (Schoenbaum & Murphy, 2023). In the UK, the prime minister is one of several government ministers (see also Kelleher, 2022b) who have expressed comparable positions, recently stating that he is "very concerned" about reports that not all schools automatically inform parents if a student starts to question their gender, and reasserting past promises to publish trans guidance for schools with an updated timeline of this upcoming summer term (Hansford, 2023a).

In line with this – and acknowledging that the interviews took place prior to this current round of explicit and prominent political opposition to trans inclusion in schools – an issue that arose with several participants was a concern about needing parental consent to in any way facilitate a child's transition at school. Even among participants who expressed a desire to follow a child's wishes, there was often a worry about whether this was the right thing to do, and also whether this would be allowed by the school. Ultimately, the decision is a negotiation between the school and the parents; again, the child's views may be considered, but they do not have the overriding authority and – at least in terms of staff and institutional recognition of their gender – are contingent on adult agreement.

Accordingly, in some cases the extent to which a school facilitated a child's transition was restricted by the opinion of the parents. For instance, whilst she personally disagreed with this stance, Laura described how her school leadership had instructed teachers to continue using a trans student's previous name, on the request of his mother:

> *one day an email came round saying that this child called [old name] wanted to be known as [new name], and I thought cool, a trans kid, great, I will support them, him, yep great, and then the email went on to say that mum did not want child to be referred to as [new name], could we continue to say [old name]? And I thought, oh. That's not okay.*

Michael also gave an example in which the negotiation was clearly between the school and the parents, with the child consulted but their opinion being ultimately unimportant to the outcome. He explained that the student, a trans boy, "wanted to change in the boys' changing room", but "the school just said no that's not going to be happening". However, such situations were considered to have acceptable or even positive outcomes; they:

> *were not dealbreakers where a parent felt the school was being really obstructive and difficult, they tended to understand it, kids maybe sometimes, that boy in particular, didn't particularly accept that the school did the right thing, but the parents were okay about it*

This is justified as a successful outcome, regardless of the student's 'irrational' opposition ("wanting to make an issue out of something that didn't need to be an issue"), *because* the parent (the rational adult) agrees (on the child's behalf).

However, in other cases participants suggested that they would affirm trans students despite parental disagreement. Indeed, Erin expressed such a position, basing this on a respect for the individual personhood of the child. Although this was hypothetical, having not actually experienced such a scenario in practice, she explained that she and her colleagues:

> *would use what the child would request, because what we like to think especially with the chat that I've had with headteachers and stuff about it is that the child is their own person, they are an individual whatever they like to be, what they want to be, is what we should respect*

Also speaking hypothetically, Sarah expressed the common opinion that such situations of parent-child conflict were "very very difficult". Whilst she spoke of the parents' opinion being important, "particularly in primary school", she also prioritised the child being "happy in school", and on this basis would aim to "come to some kind of compromise with the parent". Sarah said that she would "try and be a bit of an advocate for the child as well", also suggesting that "it might be that we can bring in somebody from outside who can help that parent" to cope with the "fear and anxiety" that may be a barrier to their support.

Additionally, Amanda made the point that in school, staff act as a child's "in loco parent, in some ways" – and so "it is our job to do what we think is best for them". She explained that whilst, if parents "come into school and start throwing around demands", they may "acquiesce a little bit in terms of accepting that as their parent, they might feel like they know what's best", it would be different when it came to interactions with the child themselves:

> *in front of the student and with the student by themselves, I wouldn't see a problem in treating the student as they wanted to be tret – and the parent might have an issue with that, but then at the same time we're teaching their child, […] and whatever they think is best for their child, in some ways when they're in school that has to come second*

Notably, in framing school staff as the "in loco parent" doing "what we think is best" for the child, Amanda's narrative may suggest a perspective that – whilst not deferring to parental authority – retains an implicit assumption of *adult* authority, that in the school domain is attributed to teachers. This appears to contrast in some ways with Erin's position, which emphasised respecting the child's desires and self-knowledge, not because she as a teacher has judged the validity of the choice, but because the child has a right to *make* that choice about their own personhood.

On the other hand, Georgia had actually experienced a situation in which her school had advocated for a trans student whose parents were "really against" him transitioning. Whilst the school may not have been completely supportive of the child's wishes – for instance his name had not been changed on the register – Georgia told me that "the school was fighting a lot, for this child, and they were really working with social services, to try to make this change happen as smoothly as possible". This is a positive example in that the school prioritised and defended the child's self-determination over his parents' authority, but equally it also demonstrates the limited autonomy of the child in his own right – through the necessity for the institution and (adult) professionals to intervene on his behalf.

Moreover, it can also be the case that a school resists allowing a student to transition, and affirming parents advocate for their child. This scenario was not discussed explicitly in these interviews, conceivably because it was teachers participating, and I therefore did not directly hear the perspective of the students and parents involved. However, it has been found in previous research that does focus on these perspectives that parental advocacy is often highly important in challenging school-based discrimination, and in convincing schools to accommodate trans children – for instance "with families describing regular school interaction to safeguard their child's rights" (Horton, 2023c, p. 200).

In some ways, supportive parents may act as a proxy for teachers resisting dominant childhood and developmentalist discourses, as in such cases teachers who might otherwise deny social transition on the basis of the child's irrationality may perceive this as a more legitimate request when it comes from the parents, as other adults and as adults with familial authority over the child.

7.5.4. Externally imposed normativity undermining adult support

However – and reflecting the point that the balance of parental and institutional authority is consistently weighted towards the normative (section 3.5.5) – it must also be highlighted that simply being supportive as parents is not necessarily sufficient to ensure that a school will agree to meet a trans child's needs (e.g., Neary, 2021). In fact, Horton (2023a, 2023c) found that parents who were middle-class and had other forms of capital that they could leverage in discussions with schools had significantly more success in negotiating support and challenging discriminatory practices than those without such resources. Support from other professionals was also effective – something that is also suggested by one parent's experience reported by McBride and Schubotz (2017), who explains that the secondary school only accommodated their son so well "because we have been through a court process and the court ordered that Jack be treated as a boy" (pp. 300-301). Therefore, whilst parents are indeed one of the (adult) parties with a say in negotiations over the treatment of their child, the weight of their influence again strongly corresponds with the extent to which their position aligns with social norms.

In a similar way, the resistance of some teachers to developmentalism also may not be entirely sufficient to facilitate affirmative school environments for trans youth. For instance, Llewellyn (2022b) interviewed LGBTQ+ teachers who conduct LGBTQ+ inclusion work, and found that these teachers regularly consider their students not in terms of innocence and protection, but "as socially aware, active agents" (p. 8). However, the investment of colleagues and society more broadly in protectionist discourses still works to restrict their LGBTQ+ inclusion work, for instance with senior colleagues attempting to censor 'inappropriate' content. Further, constraints are also often created through concern about parental objection to LGBTQ+ work (B. Johnson, 2023b).

The authority of both affirming parents and supportive teachers may also be challenged by claims of *other* parents' rights to protect their own children from exposure to trans inclusion and information, as in the aforementioned Rowe family case (Nash & Browne, 2021; sections 3.5.3 and 3.5.5). This position is also discussed by Herriot et al. (2018) regarding public consultations held about schools' trans inclusion policy in Canada, at which a large number of parents of non-(openly)-queer students voiced opposition; the authors argue that these parents objected to their children witnessing positive treatment of trans people, which is in conflict with what they themselves teach their children and believe is the 'neutral' and natural position that schools should take. The cisnormative and developmentalist regime of truth allows the opinions of these other parents – who rationally can be considered only tangentially connected to the trans students involved – to be granted a disproportionate level of influence on the treatment of these students, even in the very fact that *public* consultations are perceived to be an appropriate forum for such decisions – because their opinions follow the dominant rules for what counts as truth.

7.6. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how dominant discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism may act as a barrier to teachers responding to trans students equitably. These normative discourses of childhood construct young people as inherently pre-rational, unfinished versions of their future adult selves, who must be protected from precocious knowledge and deviation from 'normal' development – including from queerness and transition, except perhaps as last resort. Further, developmentalism is used as justification for control in the name of protection – yet, it is the child's hypothetical adult self who is being safeguarded, and moreover the normative *future* that they represent. Correspondingly, direct government is enacted over children to ensure this social reproduction, through a balance of state and familial adult authority that is weighted towards the normative. Decisions about children's lives – including whether and to what extent trans students are allowed to transition at school – are determined based on this balance of adult interests. Thus, dominant childhood discourses can both impede teacher support of trans students, and also constrain trans young people's own agency in resistance and resilience, as adultist power relations naturalise school systems in which students require adult *permission* to, for instance, use certain gendered bathrooms or wear a particular uniform.

Accordingly, challenging these discourses – as, in different ways and to varying extents, some participants appeared to do – is crucial to creating school environments that are more equitable not only for trans students, but for *all* children. Following this, it is important to treat children as whole people in the *present*, rather than primarily as the means to produce a particular kind of future adult, to whom their desires and wellbeing are deferred. Moreover, trans children are not being

treated equitably so long as those entrusted with their care – including at school – continue to position transness as an inferior outcome to being cis; whilst this may not always be stated explicitly, it is inherent in practices that are more hesitant to treat students as a different gender compared to that which they were assigned, justifying harm in the present on the chance that a cis subjectivity might be restored.

As this chapter has discussed the last of the three themes produced through thematic analysis, the following chapter (Eight) moves on to outline the results of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis conducted to model the conjunctural causal salience of these themes, with regards to producing or preventing a trans-emancipatory outcome.

Chapter Eight: Qualitative Comparative Analysis Results

8.1. Defining set membership: Outcome and conditions

As explained in Chapter Four (section 4.6.4), each participant in the questionnaire stage of the research was assigned a set membership value for the outcome and each of the three conditions (themes) based on their answers to relevant items. The following sections in this chapter outline which questions were applicable to each set; the detailed operationalisation process is given in Appendix E. Subsequently, I report and discuss the results of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis conducted using this data.

8.1.1. Outcome

Following the previous findings, and using the nomenclature of Horton and Carlile's (2022) staged model of trans inclusion in schools (see section 5.5.1), I defined a positive outcome as a trans-emancipatory approach, which involves challenging cisnormativity. Accordingly, some questions were included that assessed approaches at a level beyond assimilation or accommodation of particular trans students. However, this was admittedly limited by the choice of questions available from the questionnaire, which was by necessity written at a research stage prior to final definition of the outcome – I expand on this point in section 10.3. The questions were as follows:

> *38. It is important to me that my school is inclusive and encourages pupils to express themselves how they choose.*
>
> *65. If I were to mention trans identities in my teaching, it would only ever be in Sex and Relationships Education.*
>
> *66. It is understandable and reasonable for people to feel uncomfortable about trans people.*
>
> *71. It is safer not to do or change anything, than to risk agreeing to use a different gender for a pupil who says they are trans, before getting expert advice.*
>
> *76. Changing the name or pronouns used for a pupil at school is a highly significant decision, and should not be done lightly.*
>
> *88. If a pupil told me they were trans, I would be happy to use the name and pronouns for them that they wanted, even if their parents didn't agree.*

89. If a pupil who had been previously known to the school as a boy, said that they were a transgender girl, it would be okay for them to use the girls' bathrooms.

94. I intentionally use inclusive language when speaking to pupils (e.g. referring to 'families' rather than 'mums and dads').

8.1.2. Neoliberalism

16. Some pupils bring more value to the school than others.

25. It is not a young person's fault if they struggle to cope with school and daily life.

28. If I was told by an authority to teach something that I thought would be harmful to my pupils, I would tend to teach it anyway.

30. The successes I have achieved in my life are primarily down to my own hard work and abilities, and I would still have been able to achieve them under different external circumstances.

41. Treating everyone exactly the same is the best way to approach equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools.

45. My role as a teacher is primarily academic; it is not my responsibility to provide things like emotional support.

51. Pupils deserve recognition for the effort they've put into their work, even if they don't get a very good grade.

55. A school only needs to make changes that may include more people (e.g., having a ramp for wheelchair users) if and when someone with that need actually comes to the school.

8.1.3. Sex/gender essentialism

7. If a boy in my class was playing with dolls or dresses, I would want to encourage him to choose different toys instead.

8. If a girl in my class wanted to play rugby or football, I would want to encourage her to instead choose an activity more suited to her gender.

10. If someone transitions gender from male to female, I would expect them to seek romantic relationships with men only.

73. I would see someone as more serious about really being transgender if they had made medical changes (e.g. hormones, surgery).

74. I would see someone as more serious about really being transgender if their appearance matched what I expect of the gender that they identify as (e.g. short hair and no make-up for boys).

82. Even if someone has sex reassignment surgery, they are still the biological sex they were born as.

83. Humanity is only male or female; there is nothing in between.

87. Transgender men are legitimately men.

Note: Questions 82 and 83 are taken from the 'sex/gender beliefs' factor of the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS; Kanamori et al., 2017).

8.1.4. Childhood innocence and developmentalism

33. Children and young people are capable of making choices about how they want to present and express themselves.

36. In a disagreement between a pupil and their parent, I would tend to encourage the parent to understand their child's point of view.

37. It is not my place as a teacher to openly disagree with a pupil's parent about their child.

43. There are topics that my pupils know more about than me, and I am happy to learn from them.

64. Learning about LGBT+ people is not appropriate for younger children.

72. Younger children are not old enough to know that they are transgender.

75. I would want to be sure that a pupil's decision to change gender was permanent, before being okay with them using a new name, pronouns, or uniform at school.

8.2. Results of analysis

8.2.1. Solutions and notation

As discussed in section 4.6.4, I intended to interpret parsimonious solutions, whilst also reporting intermediate and conservative solutions for transparency. However, because my data did not have the issue of limited diversity, all three versions produced equivalent results, and so I will only give a single solution for each analysis.

Solutions are reported using Boolean algebra notation:

* means AND

+ means OR

~ means NOT, i.e., the absence of that condition.

8.2.2. Analysis for the presence of a trans-emancipatory outcome

In this analysis, I used a truth table consistency threshold of 0.75. This was chosen as it is the minimum recommended value (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009), and additionally there were no rows (configurations of conditions) with a consistency above 0.8 – as shown in Figure 4. There was also an appropriate breaking point in the obtained consistency values at this point (Pappas & Woodside, 2021).

Figure 4

Truth Table for the Presence of the Outcome

Neoliberalism	Essentialism	Childhood	number	Outcome	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	1	22 (25%)	0	0.392208	0.0392962	0.0400718
1	0	0	18 (45%)	1	0.764752	0.456188	0.470205
0	0	0	14 (61%)	1	0.756796	0.425459	0.460298
1	0	1	14 (77%)	0	0.710249	0.258438	0.258438
0	0	1	8 (86%)	1	0.799296	0.456403	0.456403
0	1	1	6 (93%)	0	0.535963	0.0521327	0.0521327
0	1	0	3 (96%)	0	0.654167	0.16792	0.16792
1	1	0	3 (100%)	0	0.642189	0.167504	0.167504

Model: Outcome = f(Neoliberalism, Essentialism, Childhood)

Frequency cut-off: 3; Consistency cut-off: 0.756796. There were no logical remainders. Intermediate solution assumptions were in practice irrelevant but would have been the absence of all three conditions.

Parsimonious = Intermediate = Complex solution:

	Raw coverage	*Unique coverage*	*Consistency*
~Essentialism * ~Childhood	0.706096	0.233242	0.7275
+ ~Neoliberalism * ~Essentialism	0.584471	0.111617	0.732978

Solution coverage: **0.817713**; Solution consistency: **0.715309**.

8.2.3. Analysis for the absence of a trans-emancipatory outcome

The truth table consistency threshold chosen here was 0.899 (or 0.9 when rounded; see row 4 in Figure 5). This was the clearest breaking point in the consistency values.

Figure 5

Truth Table for the Absence of the Outcome

Neoliberalism	Essentialism	Childhood	number	~Outcome	raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	1	22 (25%)	1	0.962894	0.941349	0.959928
1	0	0	18 (45%)	0	0.789762	0.514002	0.529795
0	0	0	14 (61%)	0	0.787864	0.498853	0.539702
1	0	1	14 (77%)	1	0.89902	0.741562	0.741562
0	0	1	8 (86%)	0	0.831489	0.543597	0.543597
0	1	1	6 (93%)	1	0.974478	0.947867	0.947867
0	1	0	3 (96%)	1	0.930208	0.83208	0.83208
1	1	0	3 (100%)	1	0.928006	0.832496	0.832496

Model: ~Outcome = f(Neoliberalism, Essentialism, Childhood)

Frequency cut-off: 3; Consistency cut-off: 0.89902. There were no logical remainders. Intermediate solution assumptions were in practice irrelevant but would have been the presence of all three conditions.

Parsimonious = Intermediate = Complex solution:

	Raw coverage	*Unique coverage*	*Consistency*
Essentialism	0.581319	0.109758	0.914261
+ Neoliberalism * Childhood	0.695257	0.223696	0.905134

Solution coverage: **0.805016**; Solution consistency: **0.880541**.

8.3. Model analytics

To evaluate the models produced from my analysis, and the degree of certainty with which their conclusions can be interpreted, there are two *parameters of fit* that must be considered: *consistency* and *coverage*. These values give information about how well the model in question fits the data as a whole.

8.3.1. Consistency

The meaning of the term here is conceptually the same as with truth table consistency; it "quantifies the strength of a set relationship" (Kahwati & Kane, 2020, p. 137). In the truth table rows, it gave the consistency with which cases with those conditions also exhibited the outcome. Here, it is the consistency with which cases represented by the solution exhibit the outcome. Hence, it is the strength of the sufficiency relationship between solution and outcome. It is given for the solution as a whole, and also shown separately for each solution term (each possible path to the outcome). As before, a value of 0.8 is generally considered a strong sufficiency relationship.

8.3.2. Coverage

This parameter quantifies the proportion of (cases exhibiting) the outcome that is explained by a solution. Kahwati and Kane (2020) describe this as the "empirical relevance" of a solution (or solution term), further stating that "[a] solution with high consistency and high coverage is a robust set theoretic finding that a researcher can interpret with high confidence" (p. 141). However, the actual rationale for the importance of the coverage parameter differs somewhat from their

explanation of it, for two reasons. The first rests on the argument that *redundancy-free* solutions are required for causal explanation (Thiem & Baumgartner, 2016), and thus sufficiency and necessity should not be analysed separately; rather, causally interpretable solutions must incorporate both. Following this, *it is the coverage parameter that indicates necessity*. This is because perfect (1) coverage would be given for a solution if, for every case that exhibits the outcome, at least one of the sufficient solution terms is also present. In such a situation, "the disjunction of the sufficient configurations in [the solution] is strictly necessary for [the outcome]" (Baumgartner & Thiem, 2017, p. 959).

The second reason relates more to the coverage parameter for individual solution terms. The argument that coverage shows 'empirical relevance' implies that if a solution term has a relatively low coverage, it is not practically very useful in the interpretation of results and their application to explaining other cases (generalisability). However, this goes against underlying methodological assumptions of QCA, that "each case matters" (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009). In contrast to statistical methods which rely on probability for causal reasoning, QCA considers diverse pathways to an outcome (equifinality). Further, given non-probability sampling and an approach to generalisability that does not rest on direct inferences to a wider population, the solutions do not imply the *quantity* of cases (teachers) outside of the data set that may follow any particular pathway to a trans-positive outcome. However, every possible path is a useful finding.

8.3.3. Analysis for the presence of a trans-emancipatory outcome

As shown by the high (>0.8) coverage value for this model, a large proportion of participants exhibiting a trans-positive approach also demonstrated at least one of the solution terms: resistance to sex/gender essentialism *and* resistance to neoliberalism; or resistance to sex/gender essentialism *and* resistance to childhood innocence and developmentalism. Notably, the presence of ~Essentialism in *both* solution terms implies that resistance to sex/gender essentialism is on its own *necessary* for this positive outcome.

On the other hand, whilst it is not unreasonably low, the consistency score of 0.715 suggests that the *sufficiency* relationship was less strong. Thus, to reach an anti-cisnormative position, there may be other conditions that are also required. This parameter may also have been affected by the relatively small number of cases in the data (6/88) that had full membership in the set of the trans-positive outcome – which reflects the rarity of trans-emancipatory approaches reported in previous literature findings (Horton & Carlile, 2022).

However, it was theoretically important to define the outcome in this way as anti-cisnormative, rather than perhaps accommodative or assimilationist (which may have produced a more normal distribution). This was based on my findings from the interview stage and from previous literature,

that these latter two approaches may be associated with supportive intent but are not equitable and still demonstrably harm trans students.

8.3.4. Analysis for the absence of a trans-emancipatory outcome

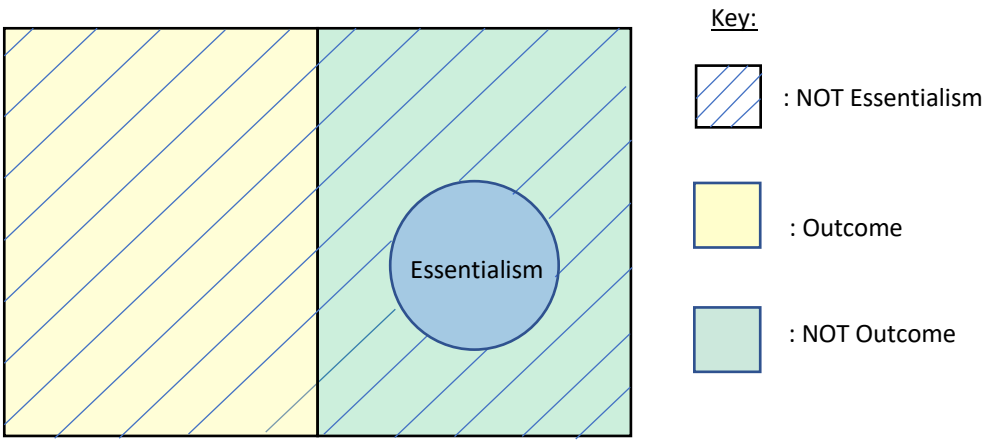
For this model, both consistency and coverage parameters are ≥ 0.8, which suggests strong evidence for both sufficiency and necessity. Overall, this is therefore a stronger model than that for the presence of the outcome.

According to this model, a teacher may reach a position fully outside of the set of an anti-cisnormative approach through either (or both) of the solution terms: investment in sex/gender essentialism; or investment in *both* neoliberalism and childhood innocence.

The finding that investment in sex/gender essentialism is *sufficient* for ~Outcome aligns appropriately with the corresponding finding in the previous analysis that resistance to sex/gender essentialism (~Essentialism) is *necessary* for the *presence* of the trans-emancipatory outcome. This set theoretic relationship is demonstrated for clarity in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Outcome and Essentialism Set-theoretic Relationship



Note. Essentialism (blue circle) is a subset of ~Outcome (green); ~Essentialism (stripes) is a superset of Outcome (yellow).

8.3.5. Retrodiction and generalisability

As discussed in section 4.1.2, these results may be considered cautiously generalisable to other cases of the same kind, namely other teachers working in the UK, and to some extent potentially those in similar national contexts. This is because my analysis, through conducting *systematic comparison* of many cases of this kind (near neighbours) rather than solely taking an idiographic approach to retroductive inquiry within individual cases, thereby facilitates *retrodiction* (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012). Accordingly, the causal models produced here may be used to inform interventions that could be applied to other teachers, with the objective of influencing their case trajectories towards the desired state of a trans-emancipatory and anti-cisnormative approach.

8.4. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has outlined the results of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis conducted using the data obtained from the questionnaire in stage two of the research. The analysis produced causal models for both the presence and the absence of a trans-emancipatory outcome regarding a teacher's approach to students; the latter of these two models was particularly strongly evidenced. In the following chapter, I consider in combination all of the findings discussed throughout this thesis thus far, proposing theoretical arguments which primarily address the question underlying the second QCA model – that is, what the impediments are to the adoption of trans-emancipatory approaches in teachers' practices.

Chapter Nine: Theorising Complex Causation

9.1. Introduction: A combined analysis

In Part Two of this thesis thus far, I have presented the results of my multi-stage research and analysis on the question:

How do teachers come to have particular approaches towards trans students?

In this chapter, I bring all of these results together to focus on what has emerged as the most salient and strongly evidenced aspect of this question, namely the *barriers* to teachers adopting trans-emancipatory approaches. I theorise potential generative mechanisms underlying, in particular, the second causal model produced in Chapter Eight, for the *absence* of this trans-positive outcome. As established in section 4.2.2, I draw on additional theoretical resources (particularly recognition theory) to progress my analysis and theorisation – considering how the three identified truth discourses, their conjunction, and their influence on teachers' approaches affect trans students at an experiential and material level, specifically through creating *misrecognition*. In doing so, I elucidate the known issue of divergence between the perspectives of (predominantly cisgender) teachers and those of trans students, regarding whether their school environments are in fact trans-inclusive.

9.2. Normative care as misrecognition

9.2.1. Explaining divergent perspectives

As highlighted in Chapter Two, previous research has identified that teachers' caring *intentions* within persistently cisnormative contexts are insufficient to provide equitable school environments for trans students (R.A. Marx et al., 2017). Indeed, as found in other work (Martino, Omercajic et al., 2022), many participants in this research articulated a desire to support trans students and a belief that their schools appropriately did so, despite describing practices that appeared to conflict with this. Wider literature similarly evidences that educators generally resist suggestions that schools may not be inclusive of trans students (Martino, Kassen et al., 2022), but also that trans students themselves frequently experience schooling as marginalising and exclusionary (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; McBride, 2021). This discrepancy has also been demonstrated within the same institution; for instance, Harris et al. (2021) found that in six UK secondary schools, there was "a disconnect between teacher and student viewpoints regarding both school climate and school culture around LGBT+ matters" (p. 368).

The argument that I put forward in this chapter is that the three identified discourses act as barriers to the adoption of trans-emancipatory approaches even among those who *intend* to be inclusive because, as naturalised 'truths', they underlie or inform the modalities of caring practices that teachers understand as supportive and as appropriate to provide. Yet, whilst teachers therefore often believe that they are acting inclusively, these normative forms of care *fail to recognise trans students as they are*. Consequently, trans young people are unable to experience this as care, and are denied a sense of school belonging by practices that delegitimise their subjectivity. This latter point is particularly pertinent given that this school belonging (or connectedness) has consistently been positively associated with both wellbeing and academic outcomes (Sime et al., 2021), including specifically for trans students (Ullman, 2022).

Moreover, this belief held by teachers that they are already responding supportively, combined with the manifestation of normative caring practices in the construction of only explicit and individualised bullying as equating to anti-trans harm, leads these educators to perceive trans students who raise any other issues with the cisnormative school environment as unreasonable and overly demanding (see section 5.7). Following this, I argue that trans students are thereby misrecognised in terms of *threat*, rather than as legitimate subjects of care.

9.2.2. The material importance of recognition

To advance these arguments, I am drawing on a political theory of recognition, and positioning the denial of this to trans youth as a matter of social injustice. This concept describes how certain kinds of subject are recognised as worthy of social existence, and others are misrecognised and thus not treated as properly human. As explained by translator Joel Anderson at the start of Axel Honneth's (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition*, in the original German the word recognition (Anerkennung) is not simply to acknowledge someone, but "to ascribe to them some *positive* status" (p. viii, emphasis in original).

For Honneth (1995, 2007), one of the most influential writers on the topic, recognition is psychologically essential for a person's positive self-concept – in the three spheres of love, rights, and solidarity. Because self-formation can only occur intersubjectively, "the normative self-image of each and every individual human being […] is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others"; to be denied recognition is to experience disrespect (Mißachtung), which "carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse" (1995, pp. 131-132).

An illustrative application of Honneth's recognition theory to the experiences of school students is given by Sime et al. (2021), finding that children in their final year at a Scottish primary school highly valued recognition and belonging – within "a community of peers and adults who seemed to care about them and their personhoods" (p. 300). Correspondingly, the "self-confidence built through

positive experiences of oneself as a respected and morally responsible agent and valued contributor to a community is foundational to a positive educational experience and positive identity" (p. 306). However, the authors also highlight that recognition is not equally accessible for all students; whilst they do not consider trans youth specifically, they identify that misrecognition is disproportionately experienced by minoritised and non-conforming children – and that this "misrecognition of one's personal attributes and needs and the struggle for recognition have a direct impact on individuals' self-esteem and well-being" (p. 301).

Notably, other theorists such as Nancy Fraser critique Honneth's model as overly phenomenological. Fraser argues that justice should attend to structural power relations that confer inequitable status and resource *regardless* of individuals' experiential sense of disrespect: "a society whose institutionalized norms impede parity of participation is morally indefensible *whether or not they distort the subjectivity of the oppressed*" (in Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 32, emphasis in original). Whilst I agree with this latter point, it remains useful to consider the experiential aspect in articulating how trans students are unable to register misrecognising school practices as caring or inclusive, with the consequent impact on their sense of school belonging.

Positioning recognition alongside my existing Foucauldian theoretical framework, it is (cisnormative) power/knowledge (1978, 1980a) that underlies the societal norms delimiting intelligible or 'true' subjectivity. As Butler contends in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), "the regime of truth offers a framework for the scene of recognition, delineating who will qualify as a subject of recognition and offering available norms for the act of recognition" (p. 22). However, neither this 'scene' of possible recognition nor individual subject formation are entirely deterministic in their (re)production. As Foucault clarifies in his later work (e.g., 1990), individuals have a degree of agency in constructing themselves as ethical subjects. Whilst there can be no self-making (poiesis) outside of the social context and norms, it can be done in a way that exposes the onto-epistemological limits, and hence as part of *critique* (Butler, 2005). It is therefore possible for teachers to exercise this agency to resist normative power relations and to *cite gendered norms differently* (see section 3.4.6) – hence, the opportunity to provide trans students with the authentic recognition necessary for them to thrive.

However, the naturalisation of dominant truth discourses (as detailed in the thematic chapters, Five to Seven) is a significant barrier to this recognition, and hence to justice and equity. In the following sections, I use further evidence from participants' experiences to demonstrate how these discourses manifest in school practices that inherently misrecognise trans students, who must therefore "focus on simple *survival* rather than on *success and fulfilment in* school" (s.j. Miller, 2016, p. 6, emphasis in original).

9.2.3. Neoliberalism

Firstly, the demands of neoliberal education naturalise the reconstruction of caring practices in schools in performative (or instrumental) terms; care for students becomes primarily understood as supporting their success in human capital development – obtaining good academic results and skills for university and careers (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020). This form of care could indeed be identified in some participants' narratives. For example, Rachel highlighted one aspect of teaching she enjoyed:

> *in more deprived areas it's teaching the children the basic skills, because they need to have those skills when they progress into the workplace, so giving those children the best life chances possible*

Hannah similarly explained that her school's focus on encouraging and developing particular behaviours was done because it was felt to be in the students' best interests, and necessary for their future (university) success:

> *telling the kids off or correcting their behaviour or whatever, because they're doing something wrong, we talk about the fact that the reason we're doing this is because it's better for them, because they need to know, it's not about us, it's not about making our lives easier, we're doing it because actually, they have to develop self-discipline, in terms of organising their own learning, or whatever, if they're going to be successful at university*

Whilst, as indeed Rachel and Hannah's comments suggest, it is regularly enacted by teachers with good intentions, performative care is inherently inequitable because it affords recognition to the neoliberal responsibilised subject, hence advantaging those students "who possess the social, cultural and economic resources" to adopt this subjectivity (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020, p. 148). Such students, "who embody the norms and values of the institution" (2019, p. 388) are provided with "the necessary permissions to develop a *sense of belonging* to the mainstream school" (Dadvand, 2022, p. 1243, emphasis added). In contrast, those who do not fit this subject position, as Dadvand and Cuervo explain regarding socio-economically disadvantaged young people, suffer a "'misrecognition injustice', whereby the needs of these students are equated to 'deficits' and their differences are treated as 'deviance'" (2019, p. 387). The two students interviewed in this latter study were "[u]nable to reciprocate and respond to the caring practices of the school" (p. 389), thus had a "weak sense of school belonging" (p. 384), and both dropped out before completing Year 9.

As discussed in section 5.6, schools often address transness in this same way – as a 'deficit' that requires accommodation at an individual level, maintaining and naturalising the cisnormative school culture. Such approaches to trans student support, however, do not necessarily enable them to feel that they belong, because the possibility of recognition is *conditional* on their assimilation, and emulation of the dominant cisgender student subjectivity. They are not recognised or valued for

who they actually are. As Dadvand (2022) contends – in the context of similar assimilative requirements for an autistic student in Australia – "approaches that focus on eliminating student differences, rather than acknowledging and working with those differences, is the rejection of other forms of subjectivity, of being and of learning in schools" (p. 1253). Correspondingly, in a persistently cisnormative school environment, trans students are implicitly taught that they are not worthy of the same authentic recognition granted to cisgender peers. S.j. Miller (2015) argues that cisnormative macroaggressions, such as gendered spaces and an epistemically unjust curriculum, "day after day, year after year, scream to students that *they don't matter*" (p. 40, emphasis added).

9.2.4. Sex/gender essentialism

Further, even non-instrumental (or humanistic) forms of care are regularly based on normative discourses that misrecognise trans students. School practices that reproduce sex/gender essentialism inherently disrespect trans students, because in defining gendered subjectivity immutably by assigned sex, they make a truth claim that delegitimises students' own experience and personal authority. Therefore, well-intentioned offers of care on this basis cannot be received as such, because – just as performative care recognises only the neoliberal student subject – they recognise an imagined person of the assigned sex, rather than the actual personhood that the trans student embodies.

For instance, schools and teachers may believe that preventing a trans student from using gendered bathrooms in line with their identity, and offering them a special arrangement like the use of disabled or staff facilities, is caring and an appropriately supportive response. This position is generally based on the retained importance of the student's assigned sex, that it is presumed would put them and/or their peers at risk if their preference were allowed. This was suggested in the aforementioned example (section 6.5.2) of a trans male student given by Michael, in which the justification for refusing use of male changing rooms was "because they were biologically female". The student was considered unjustified in claiming that this was problematic for him: "he wanted to make an issue of it and kind of force an issue where previously there hadn't been one because he was changing in a separate room". The naturalisation of sex/gender essentialism prevents Michael from appreciating that this arrangement could not be experienced by the student as care, because it misrecognises him (the student) and effectively suggests that he is not worthy of the same school facilities as his peers – and that his gendered self-concept is less legitimate – simply because he is trans.

Accordingly, previous literature has demonstrated how this separate provision may in fact be experienced negatively by trans children. For example, Phipps and Blackall (2021) relate how one trans boy, required by his UK secondary school to use facilities designed for disability access, was teased "about not being able to get changed in the normal changing rooms", by peers who "would

think I'm a bit weird or strange for that" (p. 12). Horton (2023a) also describes trans students being "segregated" (p. 78) in separate residential and changing facilities, singling them out and in some cases resulting in their self-exclusion from subsequent activities to avoid re-experiencing such treatment.

On the other hand, Daniel told me that a trans student had specifically approached him for support because she was aware of his own trans identity. She may potentially have thought that he was therefore less likely (than cisgender teachers) to be invested in the 'truth' of sex/gender essentialism and its associated obligations – and indeed more likely to have the requisite knowledge to support her with a developing rather than fully established identity. Accordingly, she might be more likely to receive genuine (and mutual) recognition. As Daniel explained:

> *I was the first teacher she spoke to about it and she was questioning her gender and she was like, I have no idea what's going on, help, and she was like, I knew I could talk to you because I knew you were trans, because you talked about your experiences in class, […] the fact that I was trans then made her more comfortable to come and talk to me about her experiences with questioning her gender*

The student's comfort talking with Daniel about questioning her gender may reflect the point that "students readily recognise as care the practices that are driven by positive recognition and treatment of their differences" (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2019, p. 388); this is in clear contrast to students' responses to misrecognising practices.

9.2.5. Childhood innocence and developmentalism

On this third theme, one potential conflict between teacher and trans student perspectives emerged in Jenny's narrative. She firstly told me that regarding LGBT matters, her school was "very supportive, […] accepting, it's a really lovely environment when we're talking about being different". However, it also emerged that this same (secondary) school would have been unlikely to allow a trans student's social transition without parental approval: "I don't think that we, the school, would have gone through with it, if it was the child's choice and not had the parents' backing". In this case, the influence of discourses of childhood pre-rationality and parental authority may have been a barrier to Jenny perceiving a conflict between the school being LGBT-supportive, and denying a trans child's autonomy regarding their name and pronouns.

Yet, trans children are unlikely to experience such a denial as caring, as it misrecognises them as more their parents' property than full people in their own right. Indeed, Horton (2023a) found that "[m]isgendering from adults was perceived [by trans children] as particularly threatening, seen as delegitimizing and leaving a trans child vulnerable to wider abuse from across the school community" (p. 82). For those without familial support, such treatment is legitimised by adultist

power relations that prioritise the parental desire for a non-trans outcome over the child's actual self and needs.

In fact, parental support for such misgendering and non-affirmation, far from ameliorating the corresponding harm, in fact only leaves a trans child in greater need of recognition in the school environment since they are denied it at home. Honneth (1995) identifies the child's first and foundational experience of recognition in the form of love, a reciprocal relationship with the parent which notably requires both an acceptance that the other is *independent*, and a trust that their care and concern will continue even so. When parents refuse a trans child's identity, they are thereby denying such recognitive love, because they are asserting their own control rather than recognising the child as an independent or individual person. This leaves the child particularly vulnerable – especially when they are unable to access it elsewhere – because this love not only underlies the development of basic positive self-concept, but is also (therefore) necessary for access to all other forms of recognition; as Honneth explains:

> *because this [love] relationship of recognition prepares the ground for a type of relation-to-self in which subjects mutually acquire basic confidence in themselves, it is both conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition. This fundamental level of emotional confidence – not only in the experience of needs and feelings, but also in their expression – which the intersubjective experience of love helps to bring about, constitutes the psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect.* (p. 107)

Of course, many if not most such parents insist that they *do* love their child, which may indeed be true in an emotional sense – yet, this cannot be understood as love in the *recognitive* sense, because it is conditional on the child relinquishing an independent personhood and identity.

Furthermore, when schools require parental consent for social transition, trans children may further feel disrespected by the associated adult assertion that they are too young to know themselves or to make rational, competent decisions. Indeed, many queer young people contest the teacher/student dichotomy in schools, perceiving themselves as agentic and as *more* knowledgeable than teachers on (for instance) LGBT+ issues (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018; Slovin, 2023). Accordingly, such school practices that enforce this adult/child hierarchy even over matters of the child's own personal identity misrecognise trans students, denying them "the sense of self-respect that comes from a right to human autonomy and dignity" (Sime et al., 2021, p. 303).

An additional point, as discussed in section 3.5.2, is that the dominant, teleological construction of children as pre-adults also creates resistance to gender affirmation for trans youth, on the basis that they might otherwise be dissuaded from this deviation from the normative developmental path to (cisgender) adulthood. Hence, common approaches require the reassurance of *permanence* in a

child's trans identity as a precondition for support and affirmation (section 7.4) – confidence that they could not be returned to a cis subjectivity. The influence of this narrative encourages teachers to believe that it is *caring* to (for instance) "take a more cautious approach to social transition" (ASCL et al., 2022, p. 28) – because it is 'protecting' the child from themselves, from making a decision to transition that they may come to regret.

However, such a requirement for a permanent, fixed identity refuses the possibility of ongoing (queer) identity development (Airton, 2013; Dyer, 2017), and hence presents a barrier to genuine recognition. As Butler (2005) argues, we are always partially opaque to ourselves; "one is, at every turn, not quite the same as how one presents oneself in the available discourse" (pp. 41-42). Since a person can never be fully captured by any declared identity, it is unethical to then treat their demand for recognition as resolved. Further, "the desire to be, the desire to persist in one's own being […] is fulfilled only through the desire *to be recognized*" (p. 43, emphasis in original). Hence, offering recognition on terms that "seek to fix and capture us […] run the risk of arresting desire, and of putting an end to life" (p. 44). Thus, Butler argues, "recognition as an ethical project [must] see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable"; in asking who a person is, and specifically here regarding their gender, "[b]y not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we *let the other live*, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it" (p. 43, emphasis added). In sum, for trans students to experience schools and teachers as caring, recognition must be offered in a way that is flexible and open to change – a way that facilitates exploration and that values trans childhood as an inherently worthwhile form of subjectivity and experience.

9.2.6. Barriers to acknowledging harm

Overall, in being accepted as naturalised 'truths', these three discourses produce largely well-intentioned caring practices that nevertheless misrecognise trans students – who are therefore unable to respond to this as care. Nel Noddings' influential ethic of care asserts that this *response* of the cared for is in fact crucial in judging the ethical act; "[w]ithout it, there is no caring relation – no matter how hard the carer has tried to care" (2012, p. 773; see also 1988). However, teachers may face difficulty in perceiving trans students' rejection of this care as reasonable or legitimate, given a normative discursive context that constructs only violence – and only that which meets the threshold of 'bullying' – as potentially transphobic, unsupportive, or creating a trans-hostile school environment. Other injurious practices – microaggressions and macroaggressions – are framed as explicitly 'fair' and non-harmful (see section 5.8). Yet, in maintaining a culture in which transness is implicitly denigrated, this context refuses trans students the solidarity form of recognition – which involves "not just passive tolerance but *felt concern for what is individual and particular* about the other person" (Honneth, 1995, p. 129, emphasis added).

Indeed, exemplifying the issue of only explicit violence being considered problematic or worth challenging, Chris told me about the content of regular staff training:

> *I think we do more now about recognising things like female genital mutilation, and sexual slavery, and exploitation of children, obviously, as you should… I think gender issues, and things like that, not so much, because I don't think organisations – I'm not saying this one – but organisations, think it's something that needs an awful lot of time to be addressed, if I'm being honest, it's the other stuff, the stuff that really affects the safeguarding of kids, more credence is given, because from my perspective I think those kinds of issues, until they move over into safeguarding issues, aren't really seen as issues, if you see what I mean*

Whilst the notion of "gender issues" not being "seen as issues" could be interpreted as a positive lack of problematisation of transness, the lack of perceived need to train staff on this topic also implies an institutional failure to apprehend that the existing cisnormative school culture is inherently inequitable for trans students, and thus causes problems beyond what is considered 'safeguarding'. Laura also suggested that a similar position was taken by her institution, at least in regard to sexuality; when asked about school support for non-heterosexual students, she said, "I don't think anything's really come up, apart from, mainly this kid who's got these safeguarding issues". Again, it is only in terms of (individual) safeguarding that there is a perceived problem or need to intervene or change anything. However, Chris did begin to question the sufficiency of such approaches, asking:

> *is it just a question of just, making sure that people are not being discriminated against, and that you're accepting, whatever identity or whatever gender or whatever sexuality they have chosen – is that okay, is that good enough? Is that alright?*

These questions may indicate a potential opening for disruption of normative and individualistic narratives of support in schools, theoretically supporting the utility of interventions that might seek to answer these queries and provide opportunities for discussing and addressing systemic barriers to trans and queer equity.

9.2.7. Intention and the 'perpetrator perspective'

However, outside of such questioning, many participants struggled to validate the harmful nature of cisnormative and cissexist practices, as distinguished from intentional violence and prejudice. For instance, Hannah differentiated between teachers expressing active intolerance, which she was confident would not be acceptable, and them simply lacking knowledge, which was positioned as understandable and less problematic. As she explained:

> *if children report teachers that aren't very supportive, that's definitely different to teachers who are actively uncomfortable with gay pupils or like, […] refusing to use the pronouns that a child chose – […] a teacher choosing to make that choice and saying, I'm calling you 'he' because I believe that you can't change your gender, is obviously significantly more aggressive and in my view inappropriate, than a teacher not supporting a child because they don't know what to do*

Hannah further outlined the relatively benign nature of the uninformed position with reference to research, specifically the Stonewall School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017), which suggests a significant proportion of trans students do not feel well supported at school:

> *I hope that Stonewall's data can be explained by teachers being ignorant, like me, and sometimes a bit hopeless, and doing their best, and you know with the best intentions, but not having the training maybe to say exactly the right thing all the time*

She therefore highlights the 'choice', the *intention* behind the teacher's action, as the salient factor determining its appropriateness. This is also where the line tends to be drawn (e.g., in McBride, 2021) distinguishing the deliberate nature of transphobic violence from cisnormative microaggressions and macroaggressions. Whilst, as identified in Chapter Two, there is not actually such a clean division (the latter two do also involve aspects of choice), the *perception* of intent tends to be applied only to explicit violence and prejudice.

Hannah is not necessarily incorrect in stating that a teacher actively expressing prejudice is a different situation to a more passive lack of support – as indeed is acknowledged by Honneth (1995), the disrespect of misrecognition does occur in varying degrees. However, attributing harm *only* to deliberate prejudice fails to appreciate that the misrecognition inherent in cisnormative caring practices is still detrimental to trans students – even when teachers have positive intentions. Indeed, the practical outcome of both ('active') transphobia and ('passive') cisnormativity is often the same (e.g., Kennedy, 2013). Harris et al. (2022), for instance, found that despite the good intentions of staff at six English secondary schools, the institutions "unwittingly increase LGBT+ students' sense of isolation" (p. 155).

It is therefore crucial to counter neoliberal narratives of individualisation, and instead consider the *impact* of actions taken within cisnormative systems, over personal intent. If, for harm or injustice to be acknowledged and addressed, it must be attributable to "aberrant individuals with overtly biased intentions", then the existing context of societal inequalities "remain[s] untouchable and affirmed as non-discriminatory or even fair" (Spade, 2015, p. 43). This *perpetrator perspective*, which Spade describes in the context of anti-discrimination law, is useful in understanding why teachers may assess cisnormative school environments positively, due to a lack of specific culprits of transphobic violence (and a belief that individual bullies would be appropriately punished). It is also a barrier to

teachers acknowledging the problematic nature of institutional cisnormativity and how they are themselves embedded within this; to do so, from such a perspective that conflates harm with intent, would label them a 'perpetrator' and imply blame. The neoliberal context of external accountability and individual precarity also exacerbates this issue, because to take on such 'blame' risks personal consequences to reputation and employment. Thus, schools and teachers are effectively disincentivised from acknowledging problems, which therefore go unaddressed (Gannon, 2007).

In a similar vein, Chris explained that regarding his school's provision for LGBT students, "I wouldn't say we get bespoke training on it nor do we get sort of, sessions on it, but I think you just develop your own attitude towards it I think as a teacher". What he emphasises here is the personal attitudes of teachers, with the implication that these individually developed positions are all that is required. If positive attitudes are sufficient to create a supportive school environment, that may also suggest that *unsupportive* practices must be due to negative attitudes and intentions. It can therefore be challenging for teachers to accept that their own actions have been complicit in cisheteronormative inequity. The suggestion of unsupportive or discriminatory intentions may create fears of negative judgment from others, and additionally may conflict with their *self*-perception as a good and caring teacher – in line with "an everyday sense of *caring* that concentrates on the conduct or character of the teacher, not the relation" (Noddings, 2012, p. 773, emphasis in original). A significant problem with this concept of care (as defined by intention rather than impact) is that it constructs a student's stated experience of insufficient care or support, or their rejection of care, as a threat to the teacher's *character*, to their self-concept and identity.

Correspondingly, Frohard-Dourlent (2016) describes educators' "identificatory investment" (p. 221) in the construction of themselves as open-minded and accepting. This investment "discursively distance[s] individuals from the tarnish of prejudice" (p. 222) based solely on believing themselves to have the right intention; the right *attitude* is considered sufficient, regardless of relevant knowledge or tangible actions, and without necessitating acceptance from the trans student(s) who constitute the other half of the caring *relation*.

One participant who appeared to strongly value such an identity as a supportive and caring teacher was Jenny, telling me for instance that:

> *I can't abide bullying, I don't stand for it at all, and the kids that I do teach, and my tutor group, they all know that I'm there as a person that can help if I can or I will find someone who can help, but also I'm an ear for them, if they need someone to listen to them […] it's* known *in my classroom as well, that I'm always here, I just try and create a safe and nice environment* (emphasis present in speech)

However, Jenny was *not* in fact confident that this attitude was enough to enable her to appropriately support a trans student; she was "really really nervous of getting it wrong". Jenny felt

that she and her colleagues "would have benefited from some training", and that "there could have been definitely more done about it at the time" by school leadership – without this institutional support, "we were all just sort of thrown into it".

Whilst the majority of participants similarly expressed a desire for (more) trans-related training, such knowledge was not always considered necessary for appropriately responding to trans students. Laura was critical of this latter perspective when describing a recent interaction with a more senior colleague:

> *[the] head of year said that she and a deputy head had had a meeting with the [trans] kid's mum, like after school I think the day before, and then went on to say that she wasn't like, neither of them were very clued up on like trans stuff, and I was like… why couldn't you do a bit of reading or, like ask someone for some advice or something beforehand?*

Perhaps similarly to Hannah (earlier in this section), Laura's colleagues seemed to consider ignorance on "trans stuff" to be a benign or even neutral position, and certainly not in conflict with their professional role in discussing a trans student with that student's parent. This situation again demonstrates the point that relying on a broadly 'inclusive' attitude alone contributes to the maintenance of normative inequity (see section 5.5.2). In the cisnormative school culture, transness is not anticipated, and staff knowledge about it is not expected or considered important. Hence, this 'care' is unlikely to be *received* as such, because its inherent cisnormativity means that it fails to recognise trans students and value their particular differences and needs. However, this problem is not appreciated, with one reason potentially being that this would appear incompatible with teachers' good intentions.

Caring for students is normatively expected of the 'good teacher' subjectivity – but it is a form of care that is de-politicised and (cis)normative, reinforcing as opposed to accounting for systemic inequalities (Smith, 2015). In investing in this identity, it is "[t]he *action* of caring [that] marks one's practice as above reproach" (Toshalis, 2012, p. 20, emphasis added) – and not necessarily the receipt of it. Perhaps tied to this is an explanation of some participants' surprise that other teachers might not support trans students, or their belief that this would not be professionally acceptable – it is a distinction in what *constitutes* care or support. For instance, Chris said that it was "disgusting" and "astonishing" that certain teachers did not intervene in homophobic harassment. However, he then qualified this by stating that "maybe that blind eye that they're turning, is them not understanding what, why that person is being prejudiced against, not understanding like you were saying, trans". Chris denounces the lack of protection of students' safety, the failure to provide the apolitical care required of the good teacher. He then presents the possible justification, the preservation of the 'caring' character of the teacher in question, through a lack of hostile intent. However, as I have attempted to establish, this *normative* care – regardless of intent – *misrecognises*

trans (and otherwise marginalised) students, and hence they experience disrespect instead of solidarity or a caring relation, as their particular subjectivity is devalued.

Ultimately, a significant obstacle to teachers identifying existing dominant practices as unjust is that the normative discourses facilitating such approaches are *built in* to the 'good teacher' identity and its corresponding intention-focused care. Actions that resist structures of marginalisation, such as those aligned with trans-emancipatory approaches – which dominant narratives may in fact position as harmful to students – may therefore go *against* this identity, posing personal and professional challenges. For example, the discourse of childhood innocence and developmentalism can be recognised in Wendy's understanding of her professional responsibilities; in reference to social transition at school, she explained that "it would be a *derelict of my duty* to go with what the children wanted without consulting the parents" (emphasis added). From this perspective, the 'caring' action is to obtain parental consent, and to protect the child from their pre-rational decisions. She would be irresponsible – not a good teacher – to allow the child autonomy over their own name and pronouns. Further, the child would be considered unreasonable to expect her to do so, or to perceive her not doing so as unsupportive.

9.3. Trans as threat

This positioning, within the normative discourses that inform caring practices, of trans needs and equity-promoting actions as inappropriate or dangerous also leads to trans student subjectivity being primarily perceived (or *misrecognised*) in terms of threat, rather than as a legitimate recipient of teacher care. Accordingly, in this section I will outline three aspects of this notion of threat, namely: to the trans child themselves; to (cis) peers and 'vulnerable' others; and to teachers.

9.3.1. Threat to the (trans) child

The first of these is in fact evident in the example I have just given from Wendy, in which trans identity is framed as a potential threat to the child in question; they must therefore be protected from themselves through deference to parental authority. Moreover, and whilst this is not necessarily Wendy's particular position, such normative care correspondingly facilitates the legitimisation of what Elster (2022) terms *insidious concerns*: "couch[ing] criticism of trans medicine, pediatrics, and activism in terms of 'care' or 'concern' for trans people and youth in particular" (p. 407). Insidious concerns advocate enacting harm on trans youth – Elster primarily focuses on this as the denial of healthcare – whilst simultaneously claiming that this is caring for and protecting them. This builds on the idea that the child, as pre-rational, does not have the capacity to know that they are trans, and can (and should) be moulded back onto the normative developmental path towards cisgender adulthood. They would thereby be protected from the threat of transness – which is

framed as an inherently negative outcome, for instance, as "enlisting them in a lifetime of hormone dependency and disfiguring surgeries" (Shrier, 2020, p. xxiv).

Presently, such concerns are being used to advocate against social transition in schools, claiming that this is especially 'dangerous' by framing even a change in gender presentation as a medical intervention – and one that makes ('further') medical transition more likely. For instance, Suella Braverman (2022) asserted in her then official capacity as attorney general that "any decision to accept and reinforce a child's declared transgender status should only be taken after all safeguarding processes have been followed, medical advice obtained and a full risk assessment conducted, including taking into account the impact on other children". For a school to do otherwise, she claims, risks breaching their *duty of care*.

Despite the rhetoric of care however, the wellbeing of actual (trans) children is not really the point; "[c]hildren are doubly rendered as a population-level symbol for a mode of heterosexual reproduction and ignored as individuals in need of particular forms of care" (Elster, 2022, pp. 415-416). As pre-adults, children as the locus of concern stand in for a white, cisgender and heterosexual futurity, and hence a *trans* child threatens the certainty of normative social reproduction.

Concurrently, the truth discourse of sex/gender essentialism denies the genuine existence of trans people, giving rise to 'gender critical' rhetoric claiming that every person who transitions is both "a person who's been damaged" and "a huge problem to a sane world" (Joyce, as quoted in Kelleher, 2022a; see section 3.4.2). From this perspective then, "a call to reduce the number of trans people by limiting access to care is a *moral position*" (Elster, 2022, p. 413, emphasis added) – apparently protecting both the individual and the 'world' as a whole.

9.3.2. Threat to (cis) peers and 'vulnerable' others

Trans children are also framed as a threat to their peers and especially to 'vulnerable' others, as implied in Braverman's (above; 2022) claim that schools must also consider "the impact on other children" before agreeing to affirm a trans student. This apparent risk to cisgender children is particularly associated with access to gender segregated spaces, and also simply with exposure to transness as 'inappropriate' or 'adult' knowledge (Shannon & Smith, 2015). However, it is in fact a *construction* of the homogenous 'innocent' child, unsullied by adult experience, that must be protected from the danger of transness (see section 3.5.3). This narrative is emotively invoked in such newspaper headlines as, "Children sacrificed to appease trans lobby" (J. Turner, 2017). Transness and childhood are discursively situated as mutually exclusive – again refusing the possibility of actual trans youth existence.

Correspondingly, some participants' narratives positioned even the (visible or acknowledged) *presence* of a trans child as potentially threatening to their (cisgender) peers – whose parents would

object to this *precocious knowledge* (sections 3.5.4 and 7.3.2). It is implicitly also assumed, particularly in primary school, that the other students will not already know about transness; it is not 'age-appropriate'. For instance, Rachel pointed out that when a student transitioned, the school "did get a couple of parents who said, I think my child's a bit young to be learning about transgender issues". Smith and Payne (2016) also relate a perhaps stronger manifestation of this perspective, describing how certain educators interpreted trans children "as hypersexual and potentially damaging to the innocence of other children who deserve to pass through childhood without being corrupted by sexual knowledge" (p. 42).

Here, the trans child's needs are not primary in something that is specifically about *them* – they are seen less as their own person and more as a representation of a form of knowledge. This facilitates their treatment as public rather than personal, as something that others have the right to legitimate input on. It is also reflective of a wider dehumanising public discourse that frequently discusses the "transgender issue" (Faye, 2021) or "trans debate" (Montiel-McCann, 2022, p. 14), rather than trans *people*. Hence, it becomes normatively acceptable to discuss the 'issue' of transness, as if it were separable to its human embodiment, and to advocate its removal (practically, through prohibiting its expression) as a threat to children – which is an apparently discrete category.

Moreover, narratives of threat are often centred around restricting trans students' use of gendered toilets and other facilities, as apparently *necessary* to safeguarding their (cisgender) peers. As noted in section 9.2.4, this idea is rooted in the discourse of sex/gender essentialism. Amanda, for instance, explained that:

> *we have a lot of students under 16, and vulnerable here, so it's difficult to say that one student's request to use male facilities as still a female physically gendered person, wouldn't throw up other difficulties for the other thousand students that attend here*

The other students being under 16 is highlighted as a concern, positioning their age as a reason that sharing space with a trans peer could cause 'difficulties'. They need protection *as children*, despite any trans students also by definition being of school age. Transness can implicitly disqualify the latter from being 'innocent' children, as they are subject to *adultification bias* (J. Davis, 2022) – particularly in the case of trans girls, who are perceived as sexually predatory (A.L. Stone, 2018). This latter point is also demonstrated by Horton (2023a), finding that "[o]ne primary school head teacher denied an 8-year-old trans girl access to girls' toilets, reportedly stating, 'I'm worried what she would do in the girls' toilets'" (p. 79).

Further, trans students are assumed to lack the same automatic right to occupy this space that their cisgender peers are granted by virtue of their birth assignment. This is explicitly claimed by Suella Braverman (2022), for example, arguing that for a school "to allow a biologically and legally male child, who identifies as a trans-girl, [to use] the girls' toilets" would breach their legal "duty to

provide separate single sex toilets", and further even "might be unlawful indirect discrimination against the female children". Thus, cisgender students have exclusive ownership of 'their' toilets; trans children are intruders. At best, trans youth may be 'guests', extended a conditional invitation if cisgender gatekeepers can be sufficiently reassured of the comfort of those (cisgender people) who truly belong there.

Accordingly, Amanda suggests that the threat comes from the visible presence of a trans student within gendered facilities (see section 5.7), and the idea that they may share physical characteristics with perpetrators of abuse, regardless of their own actual actions:

> *if you've got a vulnerable student who has possibly been abused by a male, or a female student that's been abused by another male or vice versa, I think that there is issues there surrounding how they feel about the physical appearance of some students*

The issue is therefore about the gendered presentation and appearance of a trans person who visibly disrupts cis norms – with the corresponding cisgender *discomfort* prioritised (Payne & Smith, 2022). These physical characteristics are framed as a legitimate reason to exclude trans students, but even if this were a reasonable premise, the argument is inconsistently applied; for one thing, it is also true that a female student could have been abused by a cisgender woman, but this would not be considered a legitimate reason to exclude all cisgender women. Ultimately, trans students are not recognised as worthy of equal access to facilities, or to the same dignity in meeting basic bodily needs.

Whilst giving a further example of concerns regarding the "very very vulnerable children here", Tracy additionally included the point that:

> *my risk assessment would include the question of, what if person A comes in today and wants to be a woman, and then comes in in three weeks' time and wants to be a man, and they've been in the women's toilets or the men's toilets, there's a lot I have to take into account there*

Gender fluidity – or impermanence – is framed here as inherent risk. The notion that a person could alternately occupy male and female subjectivities, and that this could be institutionally legitimised through access to 'both' gendered toilets, would threaten the sex/gender essentialism that naturalises two binary genders (and implicitly, their corresponding segregated spaces) as mutually exclusive opposites. Moreover, it is threatening in terms of normative childhood discourses; accepting fluidity and multiplicity in transitions would undermine the strict requirements for permanence that constitute a biopolitical technique of governmentality (Foucault, 1978, 2009), of managing cases of transness in the population at a tolerable level such that control over normative futurity is maintained (see section 7.4). Accordingly, such dominant constructions of transness in

terms of threat work to constrain possibilities for gender exploration and experimentation. Previous literature has also demonstrated this issue, with for instance Bower-Brown et al.'s (2023) work in UK schools finding "a lack of metaphorical and physical space for uncertainty in the [school] environment, which gender-questioning participants felt to be particularly restrictive" (p. 81).

Furthermore, whilst the 'vulnerability' of cisgender students is repeatedly emphasised (and as implicitly threatened by trans people), what is not accounted for is the reality of violence that is enacted *due to gender policing and surveillance* of toilets – which makes these spaces dangerous for trans people, but also targets gender non-conforming cisgender people (C. Jones & Slater, 2020). In contrast, concerns that trans-inclusive policies would facilitate violence do not hold up against the evidence. For instance, research on the impact of trans-inclusive bathroom laws in America found that "fears of increased safety and privacy violations as a result of nondiscrimination laws are not empirically grounded" (Hasenbush et al., 2019, p. 70). Hence, the actual threat – including to cisgender students – is misattributed. Correspondingly, C. Jones and Slater contend that ('gender critical') arguments against trans toilet access rely on an unevidenced "portrayal of trans women and others who experience transmisogyny as dangerous sexual predators", yet the true concern is that visible transness and gender non-conformity threatens the stability of a cisnormative and essentialist gender order. I would suggest that the ubiquitous assumptions of threat and risk, made even by teachers intending to be trans-inclusive, reflect a naturalised discourse of sex/gender essentialism that creates epistemological conditions, or indeed dictates the rules of a game of truth, under which such 'gender-critical' narratives appear reasonable – although in reality they "prioritise the demonisation and exclusion of trans people, even when this comes at the expense of improving toilets for all" (p. 847).

On the other hand, Patrick provided an alternative perspective, explaining his school's decision for all toilets to be gender neutral, with individual cubicles and a shared sink area. This choice was not trans-related, but rather about student safety and behaviour management. Not only was it framed as uncontroversial, but actually as a selling point for the school:

> *whenever we're showing prospective new students and new families around, we're always quite big to point out that these are open, and it stops things like bullying, you know, they can be seen and supervised by teachers* [in the sink area]

This suggests that in practice, non-gendered facilities are not inherently dangerous; it is therefore specifically when considering *trans* students that their apparent difference becomes a perceived threat or safeguarding risk.

Accordingly, the perception of threat is primarily attributable to adults – in defence of the normative social order – rather than the children they purport to protect. Burman (2018) argues (in the context of racism and Brexit) that the 'innocent' child is constructed as "the repository for socially

sanctioned myths or delusions" (p. 137), securing adults' false beliefs whilst they simultaneously disavow them. To illustrate the applicability of this idea to transphobia and cisnormativity, I will consider the example, described by Llewellyn (2022b), of non-binary primary school teacher Dylan. Staff at their first placement school asked them to change their clothing to align with normative gendered expectations, citing that the children "might be confused". Dylan points out that this has not been the case with any of their students, and their colleague concedes that "it's a bit uncomfortable for the adults as well" (p. 10). The other staff member here, at least initially, claims that their request is motivated by the needs and expectations of the children – without any evidence that students are actually affected – rather than explicitly aligning it with their own desire to enforce gendered norms. This corresponds with A. Meyer's (2007) aforementioned argument about the power of childhood rhetoric in effectively justifying opinions without requiring explanation (see section 3.5.3); the adult (as for Burman) is able to circumvent logical evidence through simple recourse to the innocent child.

Arguably, such claims to the protection of children are themselves a form of 'care' that *misrecognise* the recipient. Indeed, such reasoning is often invoked to justify practices that in fact harm *actual* children – cis and trans alike. For instance, a child protection narrative is frequently cited in opposition not only to LGBT-inclusive RSE, but to *any* sexuality education (K.H. Robinson et al., 2017; J.D. Thompson, 2019) – despite the evidence that comprehensive teaching on this subject is beneficial for young people and reduces harm (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

In concluding this section, I will use one particular scenario described by Wendy to connect this misrecognising use of the child to other forms of 'vulnerability' that are rhetorically weaponised against trans inclusion, and in defence of a normative order. Notably, the aforementioned appeal to protecting women and girls in exclusionary bathroom policies also shares this same principle, effectively defending a patriarchal ideal of womanhood rather than the real needs of women as a heterogeneous group facing multiple axes of oppression. In fact, Wendy's conversation with her friend 'Joan' demonstrates these two constructs further interacting with that of disability in the discursive legitimisation of concerns about trans women using gendered facilities. Wendy recalled Joan's explanation that her granddaughter ('Emily'), who "has quite severe learning difficulties" and "hasn't got those natural reserves and a knowledge of etiquette",

> *would really struggle going to the swimming baths if there were trans women in there getting changed […] she would find that situation very very difficult, and [Joan] would find it very difficult as [Emily's] carer*

Emily's disability is cited as justification for the necessity to protect her from sharing space with trans women, but it is a 'protection' that constructs her only in terms of disempowerment and dependence. As Burman (2018) suggested, the (disabled) child is used to secure a false belief that

truly belongs to the adult. Emily's voice is not heard, but rather it is her grandmother's assumptions about her capability and anticipated response to a disruption in social expectations. At the same time, Joan herself is – as Wendy emphasised – "a feminist, and she's a socialist, and she's lovely"; she claims not to object to trans women's presence on her *own* behalf, but that she unfortunately must do so on behalf of her vulnerable granddaughter.

As in A. Meyer's (2007) *moral rhetoric*, Emily's vulnerability as a child with "severe learning difficulties" is cited as sufficient justification for this argument, bypassing the need for evidence or to critically examine the situation. In rationally assessing the claim, one might conclude that (possible) discomfort with a person's (assumed) physical appearance is not a fair reason to exclude them – and further, there is no suggestion that women with other physical 'differences' should be barred from female facilities on this same basis. What is also obscured is the fact that Joan's position, as well as failing to logically justify trans exclusion, is also unlikely to be in the best interests of the very granddaughter she wishes to protect. Emily is constructed in terms that deny her own autonomy and attribute to her a mandatory 'innocence' that would be threatened by knowledge of trans embodiment. There is also again here a discursive separation of transness from the ('vulnerable') category in question – refusing the existence of trans people with various disabilities, and indeed that it might be possible for Emily ever to be trans. This misrepresentation of (marginalised) groups as discrete and internally homogenous also corresponds with the neoliberal notion of rights claims requiring a basis in a singular, wronged identity, and therefore logically 'conflicting' with others (see section 5.5.6).

Thus, whilst groups of course have their own cultural particularities – and the figure of the child has specific valence as representative of futurity – versions of this rhetorical technique are used not only to weaponise marginalised groups against each other[24], but also – as I have argued is true of trans children – to weaponise them *against themselves* – to defend the normative order, including through the claim that they must be protected from their own agency.

9.3.3. Threat to teachers

Finally, trans students are also perceived as a threat to teachers themselves, primarily in terms of professional reputation and employment. This manifested in participants' narratives in two main ways. First, as explained in Chapter Five, trans-inclusive practices often risk external backlash and may be penalised by performative accountability measures. However, some teachers also perceived the threat to come from the opposite direction of not being trans-inclusive *enough* – specifically, from unduly offended, oversensitive, or unreasonable trans students and the consequent liability,

[24] See also: erroneous claims that trans young people are in reality cis and gay, but influenced towards identifying as trans 'instead' by homophobic adults (Perry, 2023); and official validation of assumed religious objections against queerness, for instance in RSE guidance (Glazzard & Stones, 2021).

about which Tracy expressed concern, for teachers to "get into masses of trouble" if they accidentally made small mistakes such as "using the wrong pronoun". Both of these threats – although the latter is not necessarily well-founded – are strongly associated with the *precarity* that teachers experience in a neoliberal marketised education system. Such concerns are indeed also reflected in wider literature, for instance in Lewis and Pearce's (2022) quotation from one English sixth form student:

> *In my experience teachers rarely talk about anything that could be sensitive and it generally seems like this is because they're afraid of a student or parent complaining about a teacher attempting to influence them . . . I think it also makes teachers more tense because they're constantly thinking that they could say something wrong and get in trouble.* (p. 275)

With the caveat that an "urgent review" has recently been confirmed by the Department for Education, intended to "provide clarity on what is appropriate to be taught in schools" (quoted in Williamson, 2023a) – the sense of threat to teachers is particularly exacerbated by the *ambiguous* nature of how trans-relevant curriculum guidance from the UK government is written, which "allows for both [cis]heteronormative and transgressive interpretation" (Morgan & Taylor, 2019, p. 19). Such a "lack of specificity", as Ezer (2019) likewise identifies in the wording of Australian sexuality education curricula, is "politically convenient" and an "(intentionally) missed opportunity for clarity" (p. 564). Indeed, and in keeping with the neoliberal delegation of 'autonomy' to schools, this means that the *risk* of implementing any trans-related education falls on individual institutions and (head)teachers – who on multiple occasions have faced public backlash and vilification by national media outlets. For instance, Morgan and Taylor highlight the *Sun* headline, "Fuming parents blast headteacher for organising 'transgender day' which will help kids 'explore' sexuality" (p. 20).

This issue also applies to the DfE (2019b) statutory guidance for RSE, which theoretically mandates LGBT-inclusive content, but in practice can "be interpreted in ways which effectively permit schools to opt out of delivering this content, particularly to younger children" (Glazzard & Stones, 2021, p. 3). For instance, primary schools can avoid LGBT teaching as long as they have consulted with parents about this, which "permits parental beliefs (and parental prejudice) to determine curriculum content" (p. 4). Indeed, Wilder's (2022) work with primary school staff found that, even at the participating institution most committed to progressive and high quality RSE, "[d]ue to parental objections, the school had to compromise on their efforts to uphold equalities legislation, in particular the protected characteristics of gender and sexual identity" (p. 13). Safety – informed by a previous incident of backlash and staff victimisation – was a significant reason for ultimately adopting a "more mediocre" (p. 16) but *local authority approved* commercial curriculum package.

On the other hand, Carlile (2020) found that in primary schools serving religious communities, "[l]egislative and policy frameworks gave teachers the courage to deliver the [LGBT-inclusive]

materials, particularly the Equality Act 2010" (p. 625). However, the Equality Act is also sufficiently vague that it is variously cited in different guidance documents (ASCL et al., 2022; Scottish Government, 2021) as supporting contradictory positions on trans in/exclusion in schools (see section 2.6). For instance, the provision that trans people may lawfully be excluded if this is "a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim" is broadly open to interpretation regarding what constitutes 'proportionate' or 'legitimate'.

Furthermore, whilst the 2019 RSE guidelines may have improved possibilities for including LGBT content, the government has also failed to explicitly distance these from the homophobic principles of Section 28, retaining for instance narratives of age (in)appropriateness. Demonstratively, "the DfE have been at pains to stress that the new guidance does not sanction the teaching about homosexual acts but simply that 'teaching should reflect the law...as it applies to relationships'" (C. Lee, 2023, p. 107). Accordingly, some teachers continue to express concerns and fears in the language of this legislation, two decades after its repeal – as Cumper et al. (2023) heard from their participants:

> *I know some people who are in homosexual marriages but how do I, without **promoting** it … put it across … without saying, oh it's a great thing. Because you're not supposed to be saying that.*
>
> *We've got an LGBT+ society which is run by key stage five students, which is a really vibrant and active social platform for them, which is fantastic. However, I don't feel at liberty to advice [sic] younger students to go, because then I fear that I'm at risk of **encouraging** behaviour, which parents then may complain about* (p. 10, emphasis added)

As suggested in the latter quote, the threat of personal accountability extends beyond curricular content to any form of (LGB and) trans inclusive actions, including responses to specific students. Goldstein-Schultz (2022) likewise highlights, for example, Connecticut middle and high school teachers' "fear and uncertainty of administrative reaction to trans bathroom rights and locker room choice" (p. 166), as well as their concern that LGBT-inclusive provision could lead them to lose their employment. Also in America, Payne and Smith (2014) similarly found that "fear and anxiety are common educator responses to the presence of a transgender child" (p. 399) – who is "positioned as a threat to the order of the school" (p. 415). Educators' concerns were primarily focused on other parents' potential objections, the fear of which led schools to take a strategy of keeping the child's transness secret and "hoping the community would never find out" (p. 414).

Overall, it is therefore highly important that teachers are provided with institutional reassurance that they are supported in taking trans-inclusive approaches and that their professional position is secure. Where they are instead fearful of negative repercussions, "these emotions are limiting the possibilities for schools to affirm transgender identity" (Payne & Smith, 2014, p. 399). It is therefore

also particularly concerning that several governments and education authorities are actively taking the opposite position – with trans-exclusionary guidance for schools in England anticipated imminently (Williamson, 2023a).

Queer and trans teachers

As identified in section 5.4.3, queer and trans teachers not only disproportionately take on responsibility for (LGB and) trans equality work, but also tend to face a heightened professional threat in doing so. This latter point is tied to the neoliberal technicalisation and standardisation of the teacher's role, which constructs a model of 'professionalism' that requires educators to "present an *identity-neutral* subjectivity" (Iskander, 2021, p. 200, emphasis added) – a 'neutrality' that is in fact represented by the unmarked categories that are rendered invisible by their discursive normalisation. Thus, cisgender heterosexuality is considered both professional and objective – a norm against which queerness stands out as uniquely political and potentially unprofessional. This places queer teachers in an already precarious position that is more vulnerable to the 'risk' of undertaking (LGB and) trans-related work, a professional threat that cis straight teachers are *somewhat* protected against, by virtue of their assumed neutrality. Accordingly, "[h]eterosexual [and cisgender] educators arguably have greater opportunities to advocate for LGBTQ students because they do not face the risk of being sanctioned specifically because of their sexual or gender identities" (Smith, 2015, p. 225).

Correspondingly, queer teachers may associate (LGB and) trans equality work with a risk of drawing unwanted attention to their own identities, and the unpredictable responses of parents and students. Neary (2017) found that this inhibited many LGB teachers in their approach to such work, as they feared "being perceived as promoting LGBT-Q identification" (p. 67) or of having a "personal crusade" (p. 68). Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2019) similarly relate how Kate, a lesbian teacher, explained that she must "be 'really careful' about being perceived as 'pushing an agenda'" (p. 143) when teaching about gender and sexuality. Queerness is constructed as a source of bias in relation to these topics, but cis straight people's own partiality is obscured by their naturalised subjectivity. Indeed, B. Johnson's (2023b) work with UK primary school teachers found that straight participants:

> *imagine their (hetero)sexuality facilitates LGBTQ+ inclusivity work as their motivations are 'purer' around wanting 'everyone to get on'. Whereas the unstated assumption here is that when this work is enacted by an LGBTQ+ teacher there are more subversive aims at play* (pp. 10-11)

In Bancroft and Greenspan's (2022) case study, non-binary teacher Seb is automatically assumed to be liable to this kind of 'personal crusade'. The headteacher appears not to trust that Seb would respond in a reasonable way to students mistakenly calling them 'miss', as she seeks to pre-empt such a situation and directs them to "talk about things in an age-appropriate manner"; Seb

comments that “she was worried that I would launch into some big thing about gender or something” and that they had to reassure her that “I’m not going to kick off” (p. 6). Seb makes various concessions in attempting to present themselves as non-threatening and non-disruptive to the normative school culture. In this instance, they tell the headteacher that they would frame their explanation to the student as a dislike of being called ‘miss’ and a *preference* for ‘Seb’ – avoiding reference to non-binary identity, the mere mention of which risks accusations of inappropriateness and unprofessionalism.

Trans and gender diverse teachers may be particularly vulnerable to such risks; they are often the most ‘visible’ as queer (Ullman, 2020), with a gendered embodiment that is automatically perceived as non-neutral and as raising the ‘issue’ of gender simply by being present. Whilst this visibility is of course not the case for *all* trans teachers, for many disclosure is not a matter of choice – as Seffner and Reidel (2015) state regarding trans women teachers in Brazil, it “has no way to be disguised” (p. 2381). Correspondingly, Iskander (2021) writes of their non-binary teacher participants, “*[b]ecause of them*, gender keeps coming up in a way that is received as a disruption or threat” (p. 212, emphasis added).

Transness is commonly positioned as in tension or even entirely incompatible with being a teacher – “the monstrous other that education cannot bear to know” (Wells, 2018, p. 1578). This compromises trans teachers’ ability to gain and keep employment, and is further reflected in a high prevalence of workplace discrimination (Iskander, 2022). Thus, even without mentioning or doing any LGBT-related work in school, a trans teacher is perceived as an active and problematic intervention in the classroom, an impediment to learning. Ullman (2020) highlights how the parents of one trans teacher’s students “felt empowered to cite [the teacher] Alison’s gender diversity as a bothersome distraction to learning and the impetus for their child’s classroom misbehaviour” (p. 77). The neoliberal education system puts a teacher’s position at risk when they are less ‘marketable’ because parents, as consumers, find their transness undesirable. As such, teachers are answerable for their personal and non-pedagogical attributes; they may “feel accountable not only for the course papers and lesson plans they must ‘produce’ but also for their capacity to enact ‘teacher’ – to express through their body that they belong at the front of the class” (Iskander, 2021, p. 206). In the UK, this was exemplified by the treatment of Lucy Meadows, a teacher who simply by transitioning in role drew the attention and ridicule of national media, and shortly after died by suicide (Pink News, 2013). The headline, “He’s [sic] not only in the wrong body… he’s in the wrong job” (Richard Littlejohn; as reported by Pidd, 2013) demonstrates how Lucy’s transness was constructed as inherently and obviously incompatible with a professional teacher subjectivity (*‘in the wrong job’*).

Furthermore, the cisnormativity implicit in the conceptualisation of teacher professionalism (Iskander 2021) means that even though transness may not be explicitly mentioned in teacher education, the way that professionalism is presented to trainees often effectively places trans

embodiment outside the bounds of professional subjectivity – through messaging about, for instance, acceptable clothing in public and 'inappropriate' social media content (Airton & Martin, 2022).

Their potentially precarious position creates a heightened pressure on trans teachers to protect themselves through minimising the extent to which their queerness is noticeable or seen as disruptive. Whilst many are committed, regardless, to engaging in LGBT-related work and activism in schools, this can be challenging in a context where "strict adherence to a dimorphic heteronormative model of gender is requisite if transgender teachers wish to be seen as 'good teachers' or, perhaps more telling, if they wish to remain teachers at all" (Wells, 2018, p. 1547). Thus, whilst Bancroft and Greenspan's (2022) participant Seb was 'out' and also expressed a desire to support trans students, they also "felt the need to 'hide a lot of it' (their non-binary presentation)" (p. 7).

Hence, queer teachers' engagement with (LGB and) trans youth is often marred by the threat that their identity could be leveraged against their professional position – in a cisheteronormative context in which any such intergenerational queer relationships tend to be viewed with suspicion, unduly sexualised, and risk accusations of inappropriate 'influence' or 'recruitment' (Neary, 2013, 2017). Correspondingly, in Platero and Drager (2015), trans elementary school teacher Em (Drager) explains how they are restricted by the fear of anti-queer external perceptions:

> *I find myself being hyperalert to how students express affection with me, while also always trying to avoid situations that other teachers could potentially consider problematic, such as being in the student restroom or being alone in the classroom with only one student* (p. 453)

Ultimately, it is to the detriment of trans students as well as teachers when the latter are problematised in this way. Indeed, it is a further barrier to genuine recognition and to feeling that they belong in the school environment when, implicitly or explicitly, it is demonstrated to trans students that their particular subjectivity would not be valued in the teaching profession. Further, as s.j. Miller (2015) contends (in the context of curricular representation), it is important for students "to be provided opportunities to see themselves reflected back in a positive manner" (p. 40). Accordingly, recognition and equity for trans and queer students and teachers are not entirely separable considerations, but rather are mutually reinforcing and necessary objectives in creating trans-emancipatory school environments.

Fear of 'getting it wrong'

In addition to pressure from trans-hostile external accountability, some participants expressed concern that their professional position could be threatened by their struggle to keep up with the 'correct' language and information around transness – particularly with "*all* the changes that have

occurred, so quickly" (Amanda). Tracy appeared to be especially anxious about facing personal consequences for effectively unavoidable mistakes. As she explained:

> *I'm terrified of you know certain things, when we talk about certain things like transgender issues and things, I'm always terrified about what I say, am I going to say the wrong thing here, is this something that I can get into trouble for, you know trying to keep educated myself is really really difficult, when I'm so busy*

I suggest that there are two main issues underlying this significant fear that Tracy expresses. The first may be tied to the lack of training and support that leaves teachers lacking confidence in knowing what is the 'right' thing to do in response to a trans student, and nevertheless being held personally responsible for doing so within a neoliberal system. This therefore could be linked to the anxiety about "getting it wrong" expressed both by Jenny, and by teachers interviewed by Dobson (2019) in a study on implementing the RSE curriculum in England. Dobson reports teachers' fear of "'using the wrong label', potentially upsetting pupils in the classroom who may be transitioning" (p. 55), and similarly Jenny explained:

> *thinking about how hard things must have been for them […], and then for one teacher just to use the wrong pronoun or to call them the wrong name, you know, I was so nervous that was gonna be me, that I was gonna end up hurting them, further to how nervous they already feel*

Whilst the anticipated consequences were somewhat different – as harming students rather than 'getting in trouble' – there is a shared worry about the likelihood of making mistakes, and perhaps stress associated with a threat to their professional competence in this area or feeling that they had not been appropriately prepared. Accordingly, Dobson points out that "[t]eachers frequently described feeling ill-equipped to disseminate accurate information" (p. 55).

However, the difference – and Tracy's "fear about if you say the wrong thing will you lose your job?" – may be associated with a second underlying issue. Namely, that trans people are primarily represented in media and public discourse as "unreasonable and aggressive" – as found by Paul Baker (2019) in a corpus linguistics study of the British press. Baker explains that "trans people are constructed as newsworthy because they are difficult, angry, easily offended (and often unreasonably so)". In this context, coverage of (the small number of) cases in which a teacher is said to have been fired for misgendering a trans student are primarily sympathetic to the teacher's position and legitimise their claims of unfair treatment. For instance, the *Daily Mail* (a right-wing tabloid) reported the "[f]ury at 'witch-hunt' sacking" of Kevin Lister, referencing his "unblemished 18-year teaching career" and support from a Tory MP (Manning, 2022). Whilst this article foregrounds Lister's claims that he was unfairly punished for refusing "to use a teenage pupil's preferred pronouns without obtaining parental permission first", this narrative is undermined by the

fact that a disciplinary hearing, as reported by *Pink News*, upheld gross misconduct complaints against him, including that he "'subjected [a] gender-transitioning student' to 'transphobic discrimination' [and] 'harassment'" (Billson, 2022a). Whilst Tracy's concern appeared to be around *accidental* mistakes, mainstream media discourses also present as unjust any professional consequences faced by teachers who intentionally refuse to correctly gender trans students and explicitly *oppose* doing so – whether framed as a religious objection (e.g., Joshua Sutcliffe, Enoch Burke; Billson, 2022b), or (as with Kevin Lister) adopting the increasingly popular 'insidious concerns' (Elster, 2022; see section 9.3.1).

Such apparent threats to teachers are further claimed to be associated with the undue influence of the 'transgender lobby' that P. Baker (2019) found was contradictorily described as both unimportant and "*miniscule*", but also "*powerful*, *hegemonic* and *influential* (with the implication that it should not be those things)" (emphasis in original). Correspondingly, maths teacher Joshua Sutcliffe blamed his dismissal from one school on the 'LGBT+ mafia' and from a second on the 'Islamic mafia' – asserting that "[b]oth camps used bully tactics and they are getting people sacked all around the country […] teachers are scared stiff of these bullies" (Kelleher, 2020). This constructs a narrative of a widespread threat to teachers from powerful 'bullies' who can easily destroy careers without legitimate justification. However, Sutcliffe's initial claim, that he was fired from the first school because of a single incident of misgendering and despite apologising, is disputed by the parents of the trans student in question – who explained that they would not have lodged a complaint if that were the case, citing multiple concerns including "that Sutcliffe was picking on their son [and] had given a disproportionate number of detentions to the boy", and also about him "inappropriately raising religious issues in his maths lessons" (McCormick, 2017).

Tracy's fears could be understood as a combination of such dominant narratives of threat, and also her acknowledged difficulty and lack of institutional clarity in accessing accurate resources ("I'm really not sure though if it's always the right information that I'm getting"). Accordingly, one particular comment stood out to me as critical both to her narrative, and potentially to supporting teachers more generally in their work with trans students: "I'm looking for *reassurance* in what I'm doing" (emphasis added). A sentiment also shared by several other participants, particularly in their expressed desire for (more) trans-related training, Tracy *wanted* to feel confident and secure in her work with trans students – acknowledging that this was not currently the case. Perhaps symptomatic of the pressure of neoliberal *individualised* responsibilisation, she wanted external confirmation of safety:

> *it's someone to take the fear away as well I suppose, you know to tell me that actually it's alright to make a mistake, as long as you sit down and hold your hands up and say I'm really sorry, I've said the wrong thing*

Correspondingly, she highlighted a positive experience of training from the charity *Show Racism the Red Card*, explaining that:

> *they really help reassure you as a staffing team that actually you know, you're not gonna get into masses of trouble if you don't know how to deal with something, but what you need to do is you do need to pick up on it, you need to deal with it, you can't just pretend it's not happening, and you can't just let it go*

This comment suggests that it was important for the idea of responding to racism to be framed in non-threatening terms. If teachers associate intervention with the risk of mistakes and blame, non-action may feel like the safer approach. However for Tracy, once the perceived risk was defused, she appears to have been more open to appreciating that such non-action is itself harmful, and also to the importance of acknowledging and challenging racism. Such intervention *recognises* students of colour, and their particular needs, as worthy of equitable co-existence in the school environment; it demonstrates social esteem for them through explicitly opposing the potential threat to their dignity that is racist denigration. Thus, they are provided with recognition in the form of solidarity (Honneth, 1995).

However, the reassurance provided by the training appeared only to be effective in an issue-specific manner, rather than being interpreted as applicable also to other axes of marginalisation like transphobia and transness; Tracy continued to associate the latter with fear and threat, which likely acts as a barrier to trans solidarity. Accordingly, there seemed to be a suggestion that she needed such reassurance *specifically* about transness (and queer sexuality), or perhaps specifically from an 'authority' on this issue, which she had not been able to obtain:

> *I have never ever seen any training and, I've never even had anyone who was willing to come in and do training […] I've never had anybody do anything on LGBT*

Instead, drawing a contrast to her positive experience of anti-racism training, she indicated that her perception was influenced by the type of messaging she did receive about trans inclusion:

> *I don't think the messages that come through are positive at all, it's always about 'have you done this' or 'you must do this', and it puts that negative spin on it straight away doesn't it, which isn't good*

These points may inform relevant work with teachers in a few different ways, including firstly in providing support for the utility of challenging the discrete separation of minoritised groups (and approaches to their inclusion) that is associated with a neoliberal definition of 'equality' (see section 5.5). Further, they indicate the importance of attending to the tone of messaging and training – and considering, as I have previously argued regarding attitudes to trans people more broadly (Armitage,

2020), the *emotional* as well as knowledge-based factors involved in teachers' perceptions of and responses to trans students.

Contrasting perspectives

Finally, it is worth highlighting the more positive terms in which some participants framed their experiences with trans youth; such perspectives are perhaps more conducive to a perception of these students as legitimate subjects in the school environment rather than a threat to it, and indeed may be indicative of the potential for overcoming certain emotional barriers to this. For instance, Rachel suggested that having a trans peer could in fact be beneficial to the other students, explaining:

> *when the child transitioned all of the staff were on message saying that, the children will learn so much from each other, and it's just one more thing that they learned from each other*

Other participants challenged the idea that trans students were necessarily threatening or a problem for teachers themselves. Chris reflected:

> *I think, you know, working with kids who are transitioning, you know in terms of gender, is a challenge, but it's only a challenge as much as you make it a challenge, if you just, accept it… it isn't really anything, you know what I mean it's… it's what you make it, really*

In fact, other research has also associated a more positive framing with school staff taking a supportive approach to trans students. Mangin (2020), for example, found that "supportive principals […] characterized their experience as professionally and personally beneficial" (p. 255).

9.4. Chapter conclusion

Overall, equity for trans students in schools requires practices that are premised on their authentic recognition, such that they may be affirmed as legitimate subjects of care and enabled to develop a sense of internal safety (s.j. Miller, 2015) and the school belonging that is demonstrably important to wellbeing and academic outcomes (Ullman, 2022). However, predominant approaches to teacher care, informed by normative truth discourses, misrecognise trans students; their particular subjectivity is not positively valued, and instead is often responded to as if it were a threat, as the absence of trans recognition "condones an anxiety that emerges from the unknown" (s.j. Miller, 2016, p. 12). Correspondingly, in contrast to the cis care needs that are assumed to automatically be part of the teacher's role, trans student needs are positioned as 'additional' and often as unreasonable to expect; accordingly, trans children may be considered unjustified in complaining

when these needs are not met. Ultimately, whilst some teachers do indeed disrupt cisnormative practices – examples of which I have given throughout my analysis – truly trans-emancipatory approaches remain rare (Horton & Carlile, 2022). The work contained in this thesis aims to provide insights into how this situation may be improved, through supporting teachers and schools to feel confident in both *how* to provide more equitably for trans students, and *why* such practices are necessary for both individual-level wellbeing and structural-level justice.

Chapter Ten: Concluding Remarks

10.1. Thesis summary and substantial contribution

This thesis set out to address the research question:

How do teachers come to have particular approaches towards trans students?

In investigating this issue, I have identified that investments in three dominant discourses – neoliberalism, sex/gender essentialism, and childhood innocence and developmentalism – act as barriers to teachers adopting trans-emancipatory and anti-cisnormative approaches. Further, the construction of these ideas as taken-for-granted 'truth' encourages teachers to understand the practices that such discourses inform as appropriately caring and supportive of trans students. Teachers therefore often struggle to appreciate that these approaches are in fact unjust and cannot be experienced as care by trans students, who are *misrecognised* by school environments and practices that do not value their particular subjectivity. Accordingly, trans student needs and complaints of cisnormative harm are considered unreasonable – and ultimately trans youth are regularly perceived primarily in terms of threat, rather than as legitimate subjects of teacher care.

I have thereby produced an original contribution to the research literature addressing teachers' responses to trans students, both through identifying and evidencing contributory factors to particular approaches, and through developing a theoretical explanation for the established disparities between many teachers' supportive intentions and trans students' marginalising experiences. Additionally, this thesis also makes a methodological contribution firstly through the research design combining thematic analysis and QCA (which I believe is novel within this research area), and secondly through theoretical work on the compatibility of Foucauldian and critical realist onto-epistemological paradigms.

10.2. Implications

Against a context of uncertainty and apprehension as common responses to trans student provision (Bartholomaeus et al., 2017; Payne & Smith, 2014; Ullman, 2018), this thesis – through de-constructing the dominant truth discourses that spuriously position transness as threat – offers teachers a justification for professional *confidence* that they are 'getting it right' in adopting trans-emancipatory approaches. Correspondingly, it is also a call for educators to interrogate how essentialism, neoliberalism, and constructions of childhood manifest in current practices, and to consider how they can resist these discourses and thereby work towards creating truly equitable school environments.

Through the framework of (mis)recognition, I have also attempted to provide a means for (predominantly cis) teachers to become attuned to how normatively 'caring' practices, in addition to explicit transphobia, enact on trans students "a hammering, a constant chipping away" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 22; section 2.8) of their personhood and self-esteem. Both in terms of individual student wellbeing and of wider-level justice, this warrants significantly raised expectations for trans-inclusive school provision (Horton, 2020). An equitable education that truly recognises all students must, at an institutional as well as interpersonal level, make clear that trans youth belong – it must demonstrably value *their transness*, as just as worthy and desirable an outcome or form of life as being cis, and their genders as equally legitimate.

Of particular note for both school leaders and policy makers, this research has also highlighted the importance of institutional support in enabling teachers to carry out trans inclusion work confidently and without fear of negative professional consequences. Correspondingly, there may be particular utility in developing and providing training for school leaders, who have the ability to direct the policy and overall approach that their institutions take towards trans students and towards challenging (or reproducing) cisnormativity. It is an institutional-level approach that is necessary in creating trans-inclusive school cultures that are sustainable over time, and that do not rely only on the work of particular teachers (who are disproportionately trans and queer themselves).

Regarding policy makers specifically, there are currently diverging positions being taken across different local and national contexts. For those who are attempting to produce trans-*inclusive* policy, as appears to be the case in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (section 2.10), this thesis adds to the evidence supporting this as the most appropriate and ethical approach. It also specifically identifies common barriers to ensuring that practices are truly equitable and anti-cisnormative, rather than assimilationist or accommodative – which should be addressed in developing policies and in improving existing ones.

On the other hand, for those who are currently advocating explicitly trans-exclusionary policy – including the UK government with regard to policy for schools in England (Williamson, 2023a) – this research contributes to the extensive existing evidence that such approaches are harmful and unjust. The arguments that I have made deconstructing the normative 'truths' that are used to justify these approaches may be useful in activism seeking to challenge such policies, and may potentially offer routes to future redress.

Additionally, the findings of this research also have implications for teacher educators, concerning the content and development of effective training that promotes trans equity. Following previous research in arguing that such training must include more than just dictated information or 'trans 101' (Keenan, 2017), this thesis suggests the necessity of working with teachers on deeply held 'truth' beliefs and investments in dominant discourses. I have specifically identified three such

discourses that regularly prevent trans-emancipatory approaches even with teachers who intend to be supportive, and have elaborated their various manifestations; this is knowledge that could be usefully applied in designing training. It may also be appropriate to consider more personal approaches to this training – by which I mean identifying which *particular* discourses and barriers are salient to each individual, indicating a focus on addressing these. Further, the (mis)recognition framework could be introduced as a conceptual resource to facilitate teacher understanding of trans student needs and the impact of different practices. Overall, this research supports and may help to inform the kinds of anti-cisnormative teacher education that are advocated by, for instance, Martino (2022b), that foreground learning from the work of trans scholars as well as trans lived experience and histories, and involve:

> *a trans pedagogical commitment to gender and racial justice that goes beyond a mere politics of visibility and representation in creating a space of sustained learning for educators that fosters a critical reflexivity about cissexism, trans erasure, and racial justice* (p. 37)

Notably, Martino highlights the importance of attending to how trans experiences are intertwined with racialised and other forms of oppression and liberatory struggle. This in fact may also be a means of challenging truth claims of 'conflicting rights' (section 5.5.6) that currently facilitate the construction of trans people as threatening to other groups (section 9.3.2).

10.3. Limitations and directions for further research

One notable limitation of this study is associated with the two-stage design, and particularly that the three themes and the outcome that would be tested in the QCA had not been fully developed at the point of creating the questionnaire. This was intentional as it allowed me to continue developing the themes throughout the entire process, informed by both sets of results. However, this also potentially limited the accuracy of the operationalisation of the themes and outcome within the QCA, which was done using selected questions from the questionnaire.

Accordingly, having now established the factors, further research could assess teachers' alignment with these using methods that no longer require many of the compromises involved in either stage of my approach given here. New data gathered could then be re-tested using QCA. I would suggest that interviews would be an effective method for this, as since the specific points to be addressed have already been identified, they could be much shorter than those I conducted originally, and thus a larger sample could be obtained. Hence, the sample size benefit of the questionnaire method would not be required. This would remove the limitations associated with this latter method,

including errors in participant responses and also potential ambiguity or uncertainty, which to a much greater extent could be clarified during an interpersonal conversation.

Additionally, given that teachers who take truly trans-emancipatory approaches have rarely been identified in this or previous research, it would be a useful objective of further work to identify where they do exist – and to investigate how they came to this position. It may be particularly informative to work with those who have *changed* their approach to become inclusive, and to consider whether any factors involved in generating this change could be applied to others. Conversely, teachers with strongly trans-exclusionary positions could also be of interest. Finally, further research might also consider taking a similar comparative case and QCA approach at a school or institutional level, rather than the individual teacher level addressed in this thesis.

10.4. Conclusion

As I conclude this thesis, I remain troubled by the climate of trans-hostility pervading socio-political discourse, with its pernicious attempts to convince school staff as well as the public at large that trans-oppressive practices are the fair and necessary educational approach. However, I am also aware that there are numerous teachers who are personally and pedagogically committed to supporting trans students – as indeed was illustrated by many participants in this research. Whilst, as I have demonstrated, current well-intentioned practices are frequently still cisnormative and thus inequitable, I also hope that through the employment of research such as this, teachers' existing desires to learn and to educate inclusively can be built upon effectively in promoting their development as genuine trans allies. Finally, I simply wish to emphasise that – contrary to dominant political narratives – being trans is not a negative outcome or any less legitimate a relation to gender than being cis. Recognition, affirmation, and belonging in school must be offered to all children as they are at the time, and not withheld at the behest of others or held hostage to the possibility of a future re-normalised subjectivity.

Appendices

List of appendices

Appendix A: Stage one ethical approval

Ethical Approval: EDU-2018-12-23T17:48:34-dqwr58

Ethics <no-reply@sharepointonline.com>
Fri 01/03/2019 10:45
To: ARMITAGE, LUKE F.N. <lucas.armitage@durham.ac.uk>
Cc: ED-ETHICS E.D. <ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk>;LLEWELLYN, ANNA E. <a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk>

Please do not reply to this email.

Dear Luke,

The following project has received ethical approval:

Project Title: *What factors determine school teachers' attitudes towards trans pupils?;*
Start Date: *01 March 2019*;
End Date: *31 August 2019;*
Reference: *EDU-2018-12-23T17:48:34-dqwr58*
Date of ethical approval: *01 March 2019*.

The plan for a large sample from school teachers is very good.

Please be aware that if you make any significant changes to the design, duration or delivery of your project, you should contact ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk for advice, as further consideration and approval may then be required.

If you have any queries regarding this approval or need anything further, please contact ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk

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If you have any queries relating to the ethical review process, please contact your supervisor (where applicable) or departmental ethics representative in the first instance. If you have any queries relating to the online system, please contact research.policy@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix B: Stage two ethical approval

Ethical Approval: EDU-2020-09-07T17:13:36-dqwr58

Ethics <no-reply@sharepointonline.com>
Fri 25/09/2020 17:37
To: ARMITAGE, LUKE F.N. <lucas.armitage@durham.ac.uk>
Cc: ED-ETHICS E.D. <ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk>;LLEWELLYN, ANNA E. <a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk>

Please do not reply to this email.

Dear Luke,

The following project has received ethical approval:

Project Title: *What factors determine school teachers' attitudes towards trans pupils?;*
Start Date: *01 October 2020*;
End Date: *01 January 2021;*
Reference: *EDU-2020-09-07T17:13:36-dqwr58*
Date of ethical approval: *25 September 2020*.

Please be aware that if you make any significant changes to the design, duration or delivery of your project, you should contact your department ethics representative for advice, as further consideration and approval may then be required.

If you have any queries regarding this approval or need anything further, please contact ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk

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If you have any queries relating to the ethical review process, please contact your supervisor (where applicable) or departmental ethics representative in the first instance. If you have any queries relating to the online system, please contact research.policy@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix C: Interview questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about you as a teacher: the type of school you work at, any previous schools, how long you've been teaching, what you teach?
2. What led you to become a teacher?
3. Do you like being a teacher? What do you like/ not like?
4. Could you tell me about your background – I'd be interested in hearing about where you grew up, what your family was like, etc.?
5. What was your school experience like?
6. Did you have any particularly influential teachers? (good or bad)
7. Did you experience any bullying at school, in any capacity?
8. Do you have children (or guardian/carer of children in any other capacity, e.g., relatives)?
    a. Do you think your experience of being a parent has affected your teaching in any way?
9. Would you consider yourself to be part of any marginalised or minority groups, for example on the basis of race, religion, sexuality, gender, disability, or anything else?
    a. How has this affected you(r life)?
    b. Do you think this has affected your approach to teaching in any way?
10. Do you have any experience with LGB+ people (meaning people who are diverse in terms of sexuality, i.e., not heterosexual – I'm not referring to gender identity in this question), e.g., yourself, family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.?
    a. How do you feel about LGB+ people/ identities? Have you ever changed your opinion on this?
11. Have you had any students who were LGB+?
    a. What did (or would) you think about this/ their identities/sexualities?
    b. How do you think this should be responded to by schools?
12. Do you have any experiences with trans/ non-binary people (meaning people who identify with a gender that is different to the one assigned to them at birth), e.g., yourself, family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.?
    a. How do you feel about trans/ non-binary people/identities? Have you ever changed your opinion on this?
13. Have you had any students who identified as trans/ non-binary/ a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth?
    a. How did you respond to this? (Would you change anything in hindsight?)
    b. What do you think about children and young people having these identities, and why?
    c. How do you think schools should respond to this?
    d. Do you think that parental beliefs/attitudes should affect this? Does it depend on the age of the child/young person?
    e. (Are there any specific cases or stories you could tell me about?)
14. Did your teacher training cover anything about LGBT+ people and issues? (and/or general diversity content)
15. Is there any other information that we haven't covered that you would like to mention, either about you as a teacher, and/or how you feel regarding trans people/students?

School teachers' attitudes to equality, diversity, and inclusion

Page 1: Information and consent

Project title: School teachers' attitudes to equality, diversity, and inclusion

Researcher(s): Luke Armitage

Department: School of Education, Durham University

Contact details: lucas.armitage@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr. Anna Llewellyn

Supervisor contact details: a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University.

This study has received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter': https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to find out why different teachers have particular perspectives on certain aspects of equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools. It forms part of my PhD

research project, which is due to be completed by 2022.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are currently, or have previously been, a practicing teacher in a primary and/or secondary school in the UK.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without reason or negative consequence.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. Most of the questions are multiple choice, and you can omit any questions that you do not wish to answer. This should take about 20 minutes. You can complete the questionnaire in your own time and in a place of your choosing.

Are there any potential risks involved?

There are no anticipated risks associated with taking part. However, the questions cover potentially sensitive topics, including childhood experiences and opinions about minority groups. It is possible that some topics may make you feel uncomfortable. Should this occur, you can choose to not answer any particular question, or to exit the questionnaire at any point you wish to.

Are there any benefits to taking part?

There is no expected benefit to you as an individual participant.

Will my data be kept confidential?

Your responses will be submitted anonymously, and no identifiable personal data will be stored.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The results will be used as part of my PhD thesis, due for submission in 2022. Project results and anonymised data may also be used in other research outputs, such as academic conferences or publications.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project, as is standard under Durham University's data

management policy.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study? If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

1. The following questions are being asked so that you can confirm you understand the purposes of the project and what is involved, and that you are happy to take part. By ticking the boxes provided next to each statement, you are indicating your agreement and consent.

	* *Required*
	Yes
I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided for the above project.	○
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and (if applicable) I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	○
I understand that my responses will be anonymous, and that I cannot be identified from them.	○
I understand that I may be asked about potentially sensitive information, including politics and minority group experiences.	○
I understand that my responses may anonymously form part of a data set that is used in publications, reports, and other research outputs.	○

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, as long as this is prior to submitting my responses on the final page. After this point, I understand that because my submission is anonymous, it will not be able to be identified or withdrawn from the data.	○
I agree to take part in the above project.	○

Page 2: About you

2. What is your age?

Please enter a whole number (integer).

3. What is your gender?

4. Did you do one or more university degree(s), and if so, in what subject(s)?

5. What kind of teaching roles have you held? (For example, type of school, leadership roles)

6. How long have you been a school teacher?

Page 3: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

7. If a boy in my class was playing with dolls or dresses, I would want to encourage him to choose different toys instead.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

8. If a girl in my class wanted to play rugby or football, I would want to encourage her to instead choose an activity more suited to her gender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

9. If a boy likes to wear make-up or has long hair, he is more likely to be gay when he grows up.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

10. If someone transitions gender from male to female, I would expect them to seek romantic relationships with men only.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

11. Minority groups (e.g. disabled or LGBT+ people) need to be patient when asking for new rights- and understand that it takes time for society to change.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

12. Rights for minority groups (e.g. anti-discrimination laws or equal marriage) are unlikely to be removed once they have been achieved.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

13. Teachers should be informed if a pupil is known to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

14. If a pupil wants to transition gender at school, the other parents have a right to know about this.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

15. I would be happy to discuss a pupil's sexuality or trans identity if it was brought up in a casual staffroom conversation.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

16. Some pupils bring more value to the school than others.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

17. I would feel comfortable stating that a person was physically attractive, even if they were not of a gender that I identify as being attracted to. (For example, if I am a heterosexual man, I feel comfortable stating that I think another man is physically attractive.)

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 4: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

18. I feel pressure to be seen by others as 'man enough' or 'masculine enough' (if I am a man), or 'feminine enough' or the 'right' sort of woman (if I am a woman).

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

19. I tend to trust what I see in mainstream news and media.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

20. Please give a few examples of the main places you tend to access news and media content (e.g.names of newspapers you read, websites, TV channels).

21. I have worked in school(s) in communities that are very different from my own experience growing up.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

22. I think there must be more life difficulties and negative things about being gay than there are positive aspects.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

23. I think there must be more life difficulties and negative things about being transgender than there are positive aspects.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

24. I enjoy seeing popular online videos of disabled people overcoming challenges (e.g. a wheelchair user walking across the stage at graduation), and often find them inspiring.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

25. It is not a young person's fault if they struggle to cope with school and daily life.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

26. Everyone has problems; what's important is your attitude in how you respond to them.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

27. I tend to expect that my pupil's parents always have their child's best interests at heart.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

28. If I was told by an authority to teach something that I thought would be harmful to my pupils, I would tend to teach it anyway.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 5: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

29. I would be openly supportive of a minority group, even if this made me unpopular with my colleagues.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

30. The successes I have achieved in my life are primarily down to my own hard work and abilities, and I would still have been able to achieve them under different external circumstances.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

31. Being aware of differences between my own and my pupils' life experiences is important to effective teaching.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

32. I feel uncomfortable if someone mentions that I experience privilege in certain aspects of my life.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

33. Children and young people are capable of making choices about how they want to present and express themselves.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

34. To fully learn about and understand the lives and experiences of minority groups, it is important to seek information from people within those groups.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

35. It is important to include socially important issues and values in my teaching.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

36. In a disagreement between a pupil and their parent, I would tend to encourage the parent to understand their child's point of view.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

37. It is not my place as a teacher to openly disagree with a pupil's parent about their child.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree

Completely agree

38. It is important to me that my school is inclusive and encourages pupils to express themselves how they choose.

Not at all | Somewhat agree | Largely agree | Completely agree

Page 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

39. It is my professional responsibility to support a pupil in their LGBT+ identity, regardless of my own personal view.

Not at all | Somewhat agree | Largely agree | Completely agree

40. One of my motivations for being a teacher is improving the lives of others, especially those who are disadvantaged.

Not at all | Somewhat agree | Largely agree | Completely agree

41. Treating everyone exactly the same is the best way to approach equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools.

Not at all | Somewhat agree | Largely agree | Completely agree

42. I am emotionally invested in challenging bullying and discrimination.

Not at all | Somewhat agree | Largely agree | Completely agree

43. There are topics that my pupils know more about than me, and I am happy to learn from them.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

44. I am comfortable acknowledging when I have been wrong in the past.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

45. My role as a teacher is primarily academic; it is not my responsibility to provide things like emotional support.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

46. I had to get through difficulties when I was at school, and I don't see why it should be any different for pupils now.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

47. I remember having a teacher who really believed in me, and was really important to where I've ended up in life.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree

- Completely agree

48. It is important to be aware of my influential position as a teacher, and in my teaching decisions I consider the impact what I say may have on pupils.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 7: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

49. I am often affected emotionally by things that happen in my pupils' lives.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

50. I care a lot about what happens to my pupils in their lives after they leave the school.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

51. Pupils deserve recognition for the effort they've put into their work, even if they don't get a very good grade.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

52. Having good relationships with my pupils is very important to me and to my teaching.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

53. I use my own experiences to guide me in how I choose to respond to and support pupils.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

54. I choose to get involved in extra activities outside of what I am strictly required to do in my job role (e.g. attending relevant conferences, starting new clubs for pupils).

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

55. A school only needs to make changes that may include more people (e.g. having a ramp for wheelchair users) if and when someone with that need actually comes to the school.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

56. If a child was being bullied about something like their hairstyle or their weight, I would encourage the child to change that aspect of themselves.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

57. LGBT+ people have now got at least everything needed in terms of rights and equality.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 8: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

58. The majority of children and young people who say they are transgender actually are transgender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

59. Many trans people will make too big a deal out of it if someone uses a pronoun (e.g. he, she) for them that they don't like.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

60. It is genuinely important to a trans person's wellbeing, that other people believe their stated gender identity is legitimate.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

61. A trans pupil would be more likely to cause safeguarding concerns than a non-trans pupil.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

62. Having a trans pupil as a classmate would most likely be a positive thing for the other pupils.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

63. The potential for complaints from, for example, other parents, would make me hesitant to allow a pupil to transition gender at school.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

64. Learning about LGBT+ people is not appropriate for younger children.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

65. If I were to mention trans identities in my teaching, it would only ever be in Sex and Relationships Education.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 9: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

66. It is understandable and reasonable for people to feel uncomfortable about trans people.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

67. Trans identities are mostly a new, modern thing, and are more relevant now than they were in the past.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

68. A lot has changed very quickly with information about LGBT+ people, and it is sometimes too hard to keep up with.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

69. Trans people and identities are a particularly complicated and difficult issue.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

70. I worry that I could get in trouble if I accidentally referred to a pupil with gendered language that they disagreed with.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

71. It is safer not to do or change anything, than to risk agreeing to use a different gender for a pupil who says they are trans, before getting expert advice.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

72. Younger children are not old enough to know that they are transgender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

73. I would see someone as more serious about really being transgender if they had made medical changes (e.g. hormones, surgery).

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

74. I would see someone as more serious about really being transgender if their appearance matched what I expect of the gender that they identify as (e.g. short hair and no make-up for boys).

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

75. I would want to be sure that a pupil's decision to change gender was **permanent**, before being okay with them using a new name, pronouns, or uniform at school.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 10: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

76. Changing the name or pronouns used for a pupil at school is a highly significant decision, and should not be done lightly.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

77. Whether or not a person identifies as a gender different to what they were born as is generally a choice.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

78. I find it interesting to discuss and debate trans identities, but I'm not really interested in getting to know individual trans people.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

79. I would be upset if someone I'd known for a long time revealed that they used to be another gender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

80. If I found out my doctor was transgender, I would want to seek another doctor.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

81. If my child brought home a transgender friend, I would be comfortable having that person into my home.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

82. Even if someone has sex reassignment surgery, they are still the biological sex they were born as.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

83. Humanity is only male or female; there is nothing in between.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

84. Transgender individuals are valuable human beings who should be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of how I feel about transgenderism.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 11: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

85. I would find it highly objectionable to see a transgender person being teased or mistreated.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

86. Transgender individuals should have the same access to services like housing and healthcare as any other person.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

87. Transgender men are legitimately men.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

88. If a pupil told me they were trans, I would be happy to use the name and pronouns for them that they wanted, even if their parents didn't agree.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

89. If a pupil who had been previously known to the school as a boy, said that they were a transgender girl, it would be okay for them to use the girls' bathrooms.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

90. Schools have a responsibility to teach pupils that it is okay to be LGBT+.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

91. If a friend said something that I felt was unfairly negative about transgender people, I would challenge them on it.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

92. I would encourage colleagues to be supportive of LGBT+ pupils, or to attend LGBT+ related training.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

93. If I have a child, I would prefer for them not to be transgender.

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

94. I intentionally use inclusive language when speaking to pupils (e.g. referring to 'families' rather than 'mums and dads').

- Not at all
- Somewhat agree
- Largely agree
- Completely agree

Page 12: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people

95. Which of these statements are true for you with regard to your knowledge and experience of LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) people? Select all that apply.

- ☐ I am a member of this group.
- ☐ I have never or rarely met anyone from this group.
- ☐ I have acquaintances who are from this group.
- ☐ I have good friend(s) and/or family members who are from this group.
- ☐ There are people I have personal respect for who are part of, or advocate for, this group.
- ☐ Other

95.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

95.b. Please give examples of a few of these relationships/ experiences.

95.c. When did you first learn about people from this group? *(e.g. childhood, early adulthood, in the last few years)*

Page 13: Transgender people

96. Which of these statements are true for you with regard to your knowledge and experience of transgender people? Select all that apply.

- ☐ I am a member of this group.
- ☐ I have never or rarely met anyone from this group.
- ☐ I have acquaintances who are from this group.
- ☐ I have good friend(s) and/or family members who are from this group.
- ☐ There are people I have personal respect for who are part of, or advocate for, this group.
- ☐ Other

96.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

96.b. Please give examples of a few of these relationships/ experiences.

96.c. When did you first learn about people from this group? *(e.g. childhood, early adulthood, in the last few years)*

Page 14: Other minority groups

97. Which of these statements are true for you with regard to your knowledge and experience of at least one other minority or marginalised group (*excluding* LGBT+; for example, regarding race, religion, disability, class). Select all that apply.

- ☐ I am a member of at least one of these groups.
- ☐ I have never or rarely met anyone from these groups (e.g. a minority race, disabled, working class).
- ☐ I have acquaintances who are from these groups.
- ☐ I have good friend(s) and/or family members who are from these groups.
- ☐ There are people I have personal respect for who are part of, or advocate for, these groups.
- ☐ Other

97.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

97.b. Please give examples of a few of these relationships/ experiences.

97.c. When did you first learn about people from these groups? *(e.g. childhood, early adulthood, in the last few years)*

Page 15: Final page

Project title: School teachers' attitudes to equality, diversity, and inclusion

Thank you for taking part in this study. What I want to find out from this research is why teachers have different opinions about equality, diversity, and inclusion in schools. I am interested in what experiences in your life have contributed towards the particular feelings and information you have now about minority and marginalised groups.

The responses that you have given are anonymous and cannot be traced back to your identity. This means that they cannot be withdrawn from the whole data set once submitted.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know what my findings are once all the data have been collected and analysed, then please contact me at lucas.armitage@durham.ac.uk. I cannot however provide you with your individual results.

Appendix E: Coding set membership for QCA

Because questions were used that coded in opposite directions, for consistency in explaining coding rules I use a colour system. For instance, the following two questions were both included in determining the outcome value, but were conversely scored:

> 38. It is important to me that my school is inclusive and encourages pupils to express themselves how they choose.
>
> 66. It is understandable and reasonable for people to feel uncomfortable about trans people.

For question 38, a score of 1 would contribute to a positive outcome (1). However, for question 66, a score of 1 would contribute to a negative outcome (0).

Accordingly, in coding *Outcome*, participant scores for each contributory question were highlighted as follows:

- Fully positive scores (0 or 1) were left unhighlighted.
- Partially positive scores (0.33 or 0.67) were highlighted yellow.
- Partially negative scores (0.67 or 0.33) were highlighted orange.
- Fully negative scores (1 or 0) were highlighted red.

For the three conditions (Neoliberalism, Essentialism, Childhood), participant scores for contributory questions were also highlighted in this way. However, this was done with the distinction that scoring 1 – meaning full membership in the set of agreement with the corresponding discourse – was considered 'negative' rather than 'positive' (as with *Outcome*). This is because these conditions were identified, in the first research stage, as *barriers* to a positive outcome.

Participants were assigned a single score corresponding to their degree of membership in each of the condition and outcome sets. As explained in Chapter Three (Methodology), there were four possible scores: 0; 0.33; 0.67; and 1. The coding rules for each set were developed through extensive testing of various possibilities, which also enabled me to ensure that my final results were reasonably robust to analytic choices and possible respondent error. The final rules are as follows:

<u>*Outcome*</u>

For a score of 1:	No highlighted questions.
For a score of 0.67:	Yellow responses, or if an orange response is the *only* highlighted question.
For a score of 0.33:	Orange responses (accounting for previous exception), or if a red response is the *only* highlighted question.
For a score of 0:	Red responses (accounting for previous exception), or 4 or more orange responses.

Neoliberalism (N)

For a score of 0: No highlighted questions.

For a score of 0.33: Yellow responses.

For a score of 0.67: Orange responses, or if a red response is the *only* highlighted question.

For a score of 1: Red responses (accounting for previous exception), or 4 or more orange responses.

Essentialism (E)

For a score of 0: No highlighted questions.

For a score of 0.33: Yellow responses.

For a score of 0.67: Orange responses; if a red response is the *only* highlighted question; if both questions 82 and 87 are highlighted yellow; or if a case would otherwise be scored 1, but both questions 82 and 87 are unhighlighted.

For a score of 1: Red responses (accounting for previous exceptions), or 4 or more orange responses.

The specified questions are as follows:

> 82. Even if someone has sex reassignment surgery, they are still the biological sex they were born as.
>
> 87. Transgender men are legitimately men.

These two questions were deemed to have particular salience in determining a participant's alignment with the sex/gender essentialism condition.

Childhood (C)

For a score of 0: No highlighted questions.

For a score of 0.33: Yellow responses.

For a score of 0.67: Orange responses, or if a red response is the *only* highlighted question.

For a score of 1: Red responses (accounting for previous exception), or 3 or more orange responses.

Appendix F: Analysis done by hand to test for model ambiguity

As in Appendix E, Neoliberalism is denoted by 'N', Sex/gender essentialism by 'E', and Childhood innocence and developmentalism by 'C'.

Presence of outcome

3 primitive expressions (truth table rows) were sufficient for the outcome:

1. $N^1 E^0 C^0$
2. $N^0 E^0 C^0$
3. $N^0 E^0 C^1$

Of which there are 3 possible pairs:

1. [1 and 2]: can be minimised to $E^0 C^0$
2. [1 and 3]: cannot be minimised as they differ on two conditions
3. [2 and 3]: can be minimised to $N^0 E^0$

All primitive expressions have been minimised (within at least one pair).

$E^0 C^0$ and $N^0 E^0$ cannot be further minimised.

Prime implicants chart:

	$N^1 E^0 C^0$	$N^0 E^0 C^0$	$N^0 E^0 C^1$
$E^0 C^0$	x	x	
$N^0 E^0$		x	x

Both prime implicants are required to wholly imply the original list of primitive expressions.

Therefore, the final solution is:

$E^0 C^0 + N^0 E^0$

This is the same solution produced by the fs/QCA software, with no model ambiguity.

Absence of outcome

5 primitive expressions were sufficient:

1. $N^1 E^1 C^1$
2. $N^1 E^0 C^1$
3. $N^0 E^1 C^1$
4. $N^0 E^1 C^0$
5. $N^1 E^1 C^0$

Of which there are 10 possible pairs:

1. [1 and 2]: can be minimised to $N^1 C^1$
2. [1 and 3]: can be minimised to $E^1 C^1$
3. [1 and 4]: cannot be minimised
4. [1 and 5]: can be minimised to $N^1 E^1$
5. [2 and 3]: cannot be minimised
6. [2 and 4]: cannot be minimised
7. [2 and 5]: cannot be minimised
8. [3 and 4]: can be minimised to $N^0 E^1$
9. [3 and 5]: cannot be minimised
10. [4 and 5]: can be minimised to $E^1 C^0$

All primitive expressions have been minimised (within at least one pair).

Second stage minimisation:

At this point there are 5 expressions:

1. $N^1 C^1$
2. $E^1 C^1$
3. $N^1 E^1$
4. $N^0 E^1$
5. $E^1 C^0$

For a pair of these expressions to be possibly minimised, they would have to contain the same two conditions. There are only 2 possible pairs where this is the case:

1. [2 and 5]: can be minimised to E^1
2. [3 and 4]: can be minimised to E^1

The only expression that has not be minimised at this second stage is [1]: $N^1 C^1$.

E^1 and $N^1 C^1$ cannot be further minimised.

Prime implicants chart:

	$N^1 E^1 C^1$	$N^1 E^0 C^1$	$N^0 E^1 C^1$	$N^0 E^1 C^0$	$N^1 E^1 C^0$
E^1	x		x	x	x
$N^1 C^1$	x	x			

Both prime implicants are required to wholly imply the original list of primitive expressions.

Therefore, the final solution is:

$E^1 + N^1 C^1$

This is the same solution produced by the fs/QCA software, with no model ambiguity.

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