

Personal Narratives of Gender Diverse Young Adults about their time in UK Schools

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by Katri Seppala

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Abstract

Background: During a time of increased media attention and complete reformation of gender clinic services for young people in the UK, there is a strong incentive for understanding the lived experiences of gender diverse young people, especially as new guidance for educational settings focusing on gender diversity is currently being drafted.

Methodology: This study used a social constructionist informed Narrative Analysis for analysing storied data by focusing on its structure, content and performative aspects. The data was collected during loosely structured interviews with eight young adults about their personal narratives of attending school in the UK as gender diverse young people.

Findings: The collective storylines in this sample indicated that young people's disclosures of their gender identity represent a crucial step, presenting with unique challenges, although not everyone feels "coming out" is necessary, beneficial or even consistent with their identity formation. These stories were often closely related to negotiating one's transition in a school setting, including name changes. Stories of bullying were prevalent, including ones where authority figures were the oppressors. Epistemic injustice featured heavily in stories of learning and researching about one's gender, which was often not facilitated by schools.

Implications: Gender diverse young people currently in UK schools require further access to educational information to support their wellbeing. Whole-school approaches can provide favourable environments not only for gender diverse young people but also for LGBT teachers, reinforcing systemic change. Mental health professionals with expertise on gender diversity and related issues can contribute through consultation and training.

Keywords: Gender Diversity, Narrative Analysis, LGBTQIA+, School

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter overview

It is widely understood that the meaning of events can only be understood in the context of their formation (Bate, 2014). This applies to different types of research and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. Thus, I begin by providing some context to this research, in terms of the local context of its construction, by introducing myself as a person, professional and researcher. Followed by outlining the sociopolitical context at the time of this research, as well as the discursive context provided by the available theoretical and empirical literature. Some extracts from my reflexive research diary will be included throughout the report, including in this chapter, and these can be identified by the writing *in italics* (further details in chapter 3).

Key terms

We will begin by an introduction to some of the key terms in this research area. The conceptualisation around gender is rapidly changing alongside the language and relevant terms. As it is often the case, some of these terms will likely soon become outdated. These definitions (Table 1) are based on my preferences and include a mixture of different website sources (including legal, medical and community organisations), reflecting both my own constructions and those of others.

Table 1

<i>Key terms used in the study</i>	
Term	Definition
Gender Identity	“Each person’s internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person’s sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person’s gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015)
Gender Diversity	“An umbrella term that is used to describe gender identities that demonstrate a diversity of expression beyond the binary framework” (A Gender Agenda, 2018)
Sex	“Refers to our biological sexual characteristics, which are the external genitals, internal reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormones. Although all these things contribute to someone’s sex, people are defined as male or female as soon as they are born, based on observation of their external genitals” (Brook, n.d)
Trans(gender)	“An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms including transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois” (TransActual, 2024)
Cis(gender)	“For most people, the sex they were assigned at birth is the same as their gender identity. This is called being ‘cisgender’, or ‘cis’. Cis (pronounced ‘siss’) is a Latin word that means ‘on this side of’” (Brook, n.d)
Gender Dysphoria	“A psychiatric diagnosis that refers to the psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one’s sex assigned at birth and one’s gender identity” (American Psychiatric Association, 2025)

Locating the research and locating self

This research came to me whilst I was working in an NHS specialist mental health service for young people. Hearing about young people’s struggles related to the social environment of schools, including invalidating experiences towards the young people and their expressions of their gender identity, saddened me. As a team, we were having

discussions surrounding gender politics in the current sociopolitical climate and the recent closure of the Tavistock clinic. Once the government draft for consultation on “Gender Questioning Children- Non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England” came out (Department for Education, 2023), I was struck by the language used in the report, including the title, which already suggested an assumption that young people overall are unlikely to have a stable sense of their identity. This brought me to question how intertwined policies and legislation in health are with the wider constructions of gender and made me curious about gender diverse young people’s own constructions of their experiences within the school context, amongst all the ongoing debates about *them* and *their* existence.

As a white, cisgender, female originally from Finland, I am positioned predominantly as an outsider researcher (Rabe, 2003). Having grown up in a small town in Finland, where I attended most of my compulsory schooling, there was no representation of open gender diversity nor available information or education at the time. I am an immigrant in the UK context, although I have lived here for over 17 years. As someone who came out as LGBTQ+ myself as an adult, I see myself as an ally for all sexual and gender minorities. I am privileged to have been able to engage in a process of self-reflection relating to my own intersecting identities and actively seek this through exploratory therapy and discussions with friends and colleagues. In completing this research, I used a reflexive diary and explicitly invited discussions about identity into our research meetings with my supervisors. Together with my supervisors, we represent a diverse group of gender identities, including gender diversity, and I recognise my own role and the need to avoid causing further harm in this position. To further my understanding of the experiences of gender diverse people, I educated myself through books, films, TV shows, theatre, podcasts, museum exhibitions, online forums, social media videos and charity resources (see Appendix A & B).

As I began researching other sources of information representing the voices and stories of gender diverse people, one of my most memorable encounters was at the Museum of Transology in March 2025 and an object in particular: a jar floating with liquid and a pair of human breasts inside following a top surgery. After reading the accompanying materials, including the clinical correspondence from the hospital, I understood how much scrutiny was involved in gender diverse people making decisions about their own bodies. As someone living with a chronic health condition, I felt frustration and anger related to these decisions and interpreted the breasts as a symbol of body autonomy. Soon after my visit to the museum, puberty blockers were banned in the UK for under-18-year-olds. My reflection based on the visit, and the present debates on body autonomy for young people, made me curious to understand more about gender diverse people's perspectives on this as part of the research, and also shaped my interview topic areas.

Sociopolitical context

Gender is often referred to being socially constructed, meaning that genders (or gender identities) do not just exist within the individual, but instead in our relationships with others (Kimmel, 2000). According to symbolic interactionism, genders are shaped by our interactions with others and through active construction, including the symbols that we assign to represent them; also suggesting that genders are not fixed or immovable concepts (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Some go as far as to suggest that once we drop the acts of “doing gender”, gender does not exist at all (Butler, 1990).

Yet, when the current US President declared during his inauguration in 2025 that “there are only two genders, male and female” (Wendling & Epstein, 2025), this brought attention to a particular type of construction: one that denies the existence of gender diverse

identities altogether; referring to those identities that fall outside of the binary framework, that is currently dominant in Western cultures, including in the UK.

There are approximately 1% of gender diverse people in the UK, the majority of whom are within the younger age bracket (16-24), according to the 2021 England and Wales Census collection (Office for National Statistics, 2023), that for the first time included a voluntary question for over 16-year-olds: “Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?”. However, there are several reasons to question the validity of findings associated with large-scale compulsory data collections such as this, especially when sensitive data is involved. It is possible that this optional question, which is visible to all other members of the household (in a paper questionnaire), could also be filled in by the main householder on behalf of all members of the household, which could then result in under-reporting.

Gender diverse young people are also increasingly seeking professional help; before its closure in 2024, the Tavistock Clinic (the UK’s only gender clinic that offered specialist treatment for gender dysphoria for children and young people at the time), released data of its rate of referrals growing exponentially from only 97 referrals in 2010 to 2728 referrals in 2020.

As illustrated, we can have many different types of constructions of gender, including ones that appear to be in direct conflict with each other, creating the ideal ground for a battlefield where discourse around gender is hostile and polarised, politicised and often fueled by the media. Figures show that gender diversity features in the UK press regularly and has grown by 12400% in a period of 10 years, from 2012 until 2022 (Trans Media Watch & TransActual, 2024). Further analysis of media coverage conducted in 2019 revealed that the UK media were increasingly portraying the term “transgender” together with harmful symbolism, including associations with criminality, offensiveness and sexualization (Baker &

Mermaids Press, 2019), suggesting a pattern, even if the motivations for this cannot be confirmed.

One way to think about the increased transphobia is from a more evolutionary perspective, drawing on Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al., 1986), which suggests that individuals and groups are more likely to be suspicious or even hostile towards diversity and difference during times of uncertainty, because unconsciously they see it as a threat to their own survival. This may cause people to seek symbolic immortality through actions such as attending to their legacy.

Gender diversity in schools

Educational institutions also reflect the values and traditions of their nation, including related symbolism. For example, the mandate of a school uniform can be traced back to 13th-century England (BBC, 2023). English-speaking countries are also known for gender-segregated schools, together with countries where Islam is the majority religion, as opposed to many European countries where gender-segregation is either uncommon or inexistent (Wiseman, 2008). These have religious roots and stem back as early as the 7th century, where education was male-dominated (Gillard, n.d). Nowadays, they represent a smaller minority of educational institutions in the UK (Independent Schools Council, 2025).

In 2017, Stonewall published a report of the school experiences of LGBT youth in the UK (Bradlow et al., 2017), which highlighted the still relevant influence of Section 28, which was a law across the UK that openly banned “promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material” (Iglikowski-Broad, n.d). The Stonewall report stated that although some progress had been made in the following 14 years since Section 28 was repealed in 2003, LGBT youth continued to face significant challenges in UK schools, including bullying and

severe mental health problems. For example, 64% of gender diverse young people reported being bullied.

Around the same time, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommended responding to homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools on a policy level, as well as incorporating different classroom practices that are inclusive, critical and founded in collaborative research (UNESCO, 2016).

Mental health implications

Since then, there has been an overwhelming amount of evidence to suggest that gender diverse young people's experiences are linked to poor mental health outcomes (Day & Brömdal, 2024; Mann et al., 2019; Tyni et al., 2024). A comparison of gender diverse young people who are accessing specialist mental health services in the UK (CAMHS) with their cis counterparts, suggested that gender diverse young people engage in higher rates of self-harm and have greater difficulties with their peers, as well as less pro-social behaviours (measured by self-report questionnaires), interfering with classroom learning, friendships and activities (Whittle et al., 2024).

From a preventative approach, those gender diverse youth who are also autistic have been identified as a separate group that may require specialist support due to the complexity of their needs (Manley et al., 2024). However, others have noted a narrative suggesting that the underlying mental health difficulties are synonymous with gender non-conformity, reflecting a problematic bias, potentially making it more difficult for gender diverse young people to seek help, especially those who are autistic, due to fear of being double-pathologised (The Autistic Advocate, 2025).

Moving away from more individual-focused explanations to gender diverse young people's mental health struggles, more explanatory models, such as Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), recognise school as well as the related sociopolitical context as important influences on a child's overall wellbeing, as part of their micro-, exo-, and macrosystems (Antony, 2022). Additionally, the Gender Minority Stress Model (Hendricks & Testa, 2012), which is an extension of the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), suggests that the different types of social stressors -including internalized transphobia and overt discrimination that gender diverse young people are subjected to because of their minority status - are directly related to the mental health problems that they experience. Empirical evidence related to this is compelling (Chavanduka et al., 2021; Chodzen et al., 2019; Hunter et al., 2021).

Adolescence is also thought to be a key stage of identity development (Erikson, 1950). Because how we imagine others to view us is also important for our own self-perception, at least according to Cooley's looking-glass theory (Cooley, 1902), which suggests that we use the imagined reactions of others as mirrors to reflect on our own sense of self, this raises difficult questions about how gender diverse young people's self-concept might be affected by the circulating negative messages and symbolism during this crucial stage in life.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), people universally have a set of needs, and having our basic needs met (such as safety, security and rest), enables us to meet more complex needs (such as self-actualisation: achieving one's full potential). In applying this theory to gender diverse young people's contexts, it enables reflection on the multiple needs of this population and whether these needs are met in the UK educational context.

Constructions and lived experiences of gender diverse young people

This study utilises the idea of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), where the stories of people who are marginalised are privileged over dominant and politically motivated stories, including those presented by the media. Instead, our focus is on the stories of gender diverse people, told by themselves. Through collaborative action, these stories can be used to challenge and expose inequalities towards gender diverse young people, promoting social justice and change.

Recent research by Bower-Brown et al. (2023) looked at large survey data exploring school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth (11-19 year olds) living in England, Scotland and Wales, and identified themes in how a subsample of trans, non-binary and gender questioning young people separately experienced the school environment. This research tried to directly address the potential dilemma of ‘exclusion by gender’ when focusing solely on the experiences of trans-binary youth, which has been the case for some of the existing research. Although gender diverse people are often “lumped together” either as a collective group or jointly with other LGBT youth, it can also be problematic to assign categories to something that can also be seen as uncategorizable, which the authors also acknowledge. Across all groups of gender diverse young people, high levels of discrimination in the school environment were noted alongside different strategies to attempt to maintain one’s wellbeing in the hostile environment, including negotiating disclosure, using cognitive strategies, seeking allies and engaging in activism (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

Despite a recognition of gender minority stress in the school environment, alternative perspectives suggest how schools can also offer hope for some children and young people. Leonard (2022) interviewed three gender diverse young people in a qualitative research project to understand their experiences of school, which included positive experiences such as teachers who stood up to others who were misgendering the young people and offered

support through acceptance and facilitating positive change. This research suggested that young people are eager to share their stories, but the importance of the audience was also highlighted as one of the challenges of the research. Clinical Psychology has not been the only field to address gender diverse young people's journeys through the education system, as unsurprisingly, much of the research, such as this one, has been conducted in the Education sector. It may also be that young gender diverse students feel more comfortable talking to certain professionals over others.

Although there is increasingly more research on gender diverse young people and their experiences of the UK education settings, much of the research seems to be relying heavily on either collected data from surveys or using thematic analysis as the analysis. Therefore, the next step in this study was to conduct an extensive Systematic Literature Review to investigate further what research is already available about the school experiences of gender diverse young people in the UK and understand the existing data better, including the potential impact of different research contexts and methodologies.

Chapter 2: A Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review

Chapter introduction

This chapter is focused on existing research outside of the current study. It will outline the steps involved in completing a Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review (MMSLR) to identify and summarise relevant literature, including a synthesis of available data. The chapter will be concluded with recommendations for future research as well as a rationale for the current study.

Review introduction

Interest in gender diverse people's lives, including school experiences, has gained rapid momentum in recent years. For example, a popular UK political party made a pledge against young people's social transitioning in schools (including the use of preferred pronouns) in their recent campaign (Reform UK, 2024). It is suggested that public opinion overall towards gender diverse people's rights is becoming increasingly unfavourable (Smith, 2025). Yet as a research area, gender diverse people's school experiences remain relatively novel, especially in the UK context. The objective of this review is to provide an overview of this existing research. By seeking a large overview of all existing literature, it aims to include studies with quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods designs. Thus, by nature, the epistemological approach related to the review is one of multiplicity (Pluye & Hong, 2014).

Before conducting the review, preliminary searches were conducted on Google Scholar and Cochrane Library to scope the existing literature and to help guide the more comprehensive review and the related research questions. Existing reviews on the topic included mainly articles focusing on Western populations (i.e. USA, Australia and the UK) (Etxebarria-Perez-de-Nanclares et al., 2023; McBride, 2021). Another closely related review

underway was found on Prospero by Cooper et al. (2024). To differentiate from this other review, the objective was to focus solely on the UK context, especially considering the recent anti-trans sentiment and changes in the complete renewal of children and young people's gender services provided by the NHS (NHS England, 2024). It also included studies with mixed methodologies, which allowed for further contextualization of complex research topics (Stern et al., 2020). Additionally, other methodological considerations related to the UK-based studies were more closely investigated, e.g. how most samples were recruited, what designs had already been employed, etc. A further objective of this review was to inspect these methodological aspects of existing research.

Systematic Literature Reviews overall are characterized by their systematic and explicit methods to identify all relevant published research (Higgins et al., 2024), therefore making the review process both transparent and replicable (Siddaway et al., 2019). The type of review best fit to describe this review is somewhere between an Experiential Qualitative Review and a Methodological Systematic Review (Munn et al., 2018). Previous examples exist of reviews with a similar focus on methodology (Campbell et al., 2017; France et al., 2014).

In conducting this review, relevant guidelines were consulted and utilized such as the JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis on MMSRs (Lizarondo et al., 2020b), the ENTREQ (Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research, Tong et al. (2012)) and the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021). An example of another published MMSR: Holley et al. (2017), also helped guide the write-up.

Review questions

The aim of the review is to answer the following research questions:

- What does the empirical literature tell us about how gender diverse children and young people experience school in the UK?
- What are the relevant methodologies of these studies, and what can we learn from them?

Inclusion criteria

To help guide the initial decision-making, mind maps were used to help brainstorm content and the focus of the review questions in consultation with the research supervisors and the Information Manager of the University of Hertfordshire library. The SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was then used as a search tool and to help guide the final review questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

The SPIDER tool applied to the review questions

Sample	Phenomenon of interest	Study Design	Evaluation	Research type
Gender diverse children and young people / Adults recounting past experiences	School experiences	Published research	Experiences, stories, memories, questionnaires, surveys	Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods peer reviewed research

The review only considered studies that were published in peer-reviewed journals. Grey literature was not included due to the scope of the study and because there was sufficient literature for a comprehensive review without it.

Methods

The review followed a convergent integrated mixed methods systematic literature review process (Lizarondo et al., 2020b), which meant that the qualitative and quantitative

components of the included data were brought together to collectively answer the review questions, as opposed to a segregated approach where the qualitative and quantitative data would be complimentary and used each in their own right to address separate aspects of the research questions. This was based on widely available guidance by JBI Collaboration, which has been specifically tailored for reviews that include studies with mixed methodologies.

Search strategy

The UH Online library search tool was used to identify Subject Toolkits and relevant databases. The search terms were decided based on preliminary searches and team discussions. Although many research studies now use the term Trans+ or Trans* to refer to various gender identities outside of the cis-norm, its use as a search term was challenging, as the database search engines were found to bring up many irrelevant results, such as Transfat, Transformation, etc. The decision was made not to use these search terms. An otherwise comprehensive list of search terms was finalised (found in Table 3), and the search terms were the same across all databases.

Table 3

Search terms for Systematic Literature Review

Key search	Search terms
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Gender diverse	<i>"gender divers*" OR gender-divers* OR "gender minorit*" OR gender-minorit* OR transgender* OR non-binary OR "non binary" OR "gender identit*" OR gender-identit* OR "gender dysphoria" OR gender-dysphoria OR "gender non-conform*" OR gender-non-conform* OR gendervariant OR gender-variant OR "gender expansive" OR gender-expansive OR "gender questioning" OR gender-questioning OR lgbt* OR "gender queer" OR gender-queer OR intersex</i>
Young people	<i>Child* OR "young people" OR "young person" OR youth OR teen* OR adolescen*</i>
School	<i>School OR education OR "sixth form" OR college OR pupil OR student</i>

In addition to database searches, known researchers in the field and relevant journals (such as The International Journal of LGBT Youth, The International Journal of Transgender Health, Transgender Studies Quarterly and The Journal of LGBTQ Issues in Counseling) were also hand-searched alongside targeted citation searches of key papers. All searches were conducted on 09/05/2025.

Information sources

The following databases were searched: Scopus, PubMed, CINAHL Plus, Education Research Complete and PsycArticles. The search filters were slightly modified for each database. On Scopus, the search results were filtered for UK-based studies. On PubMed, the searches were conducted based on Title and Abstract and filtered to English language and studies with humans. On CINAHL Plus, the searches were conducted based on Title and Abstract and filtered to the English language. On Education Research Complete searches were based on Abstract and filtered to the English language, and on PsycArticles searches were only based on Abstract.

Study selection

Following the search, all identified references were uploaded onto Covidence. Most duplicates were automatically removed by the program, and the remaining few were hand-removed. A 2-step screening process was employed. At Step 1, references were screened

based on title and abstract and against the pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 4). The inclusion and exclusion criteria were decided based on the availability of relevant research, whilst trying to stay as close as possible to the original research question. For example, research looking at the school experiences of LGBT youth as a wider group is more available, but for the purposes of this review, it was necessary for direct quotes of gender diverse people to be identifiable and distinguished from cisgender sexual minority youth. Further criteria were also set against studies that may refer to a gender identity where is unclear if this is expressed by the participant themselves, as identity attributed by a third party might not provide reliable information about their lived experience.

At step 2, further screening was done based on the available full-text articles against the same inclusion and exclusion criteria. A second reviewer from the research team contributed by screening 100% of the available full-text studies alongside the main researcher. There were no disagreements between the reviewers relating to study eligibility. Reasons for exclusion of the full-text studies are provided in the PRISMA flow-chart (see Table 5).

Table 4

Selection Criteria for Systematic Literature Review

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Qualitative research studies, Quantitative research studies, as well as Mixed Methods research studies	Grey literature, not peer-reviewed

Any form of self-identified gender diverse samples, including LGBTQ+ samples where gender diversity is represented, and the data is extractable	Cisgender samples or assumed gender (i.e. not self-described)
Focuses on school experiences including primary school, secondary school, sixth form, college, special provision schools, boarding schools, faith schools etc.	Focuses on experiences not relevant to formal education (e.g. youth clubs, family functioning, mental health services etc.)
Describes experiences of children and/or young people (up to age 18) and told at any age	Describes experiences only of over 18-year-olds (e.g. University setting)
UK samples	International samples
English language	No English language version available
Published any year	

Assessment of methodological quality

Eligible studies were assessed by using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), which included separate screening questions to appraise qualitative studies, mixed methods studies and quantitative descriptive studies. Two additional questions were borrowed from the CASP checklist for qualitative studies (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme UK, 2024): “Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?” and “Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?” The second question was only used to appraise the studies with qualitative components, as this was deemed to have a direct effect on the analysis and interpretation of the research findings.

Studies can be excluded from reviews based on poor quality, but some also suggest that findings from such studies can either be included or partly included (Jensen & Allen, 1996). Because of the relative novelty of the research topic in academia, the decision was made to include all resulting studies and instead to comment on areas of suggested improvement.

Data extraction

Data were extracted from the eligible studies by uploading the published documents onto NVIVO 15 software. For all studies, only data available and reported in the Results section were included for synthesis. For qualitative data, only first-order data were used, i.e. direct quotes from participants (Malpass et al., 2009), that were clearly identified as gender diverse if the sample included other participants. For quantitative data, all relevant quantitative data that were gathered from gender diverse people were included if it was relevant to describe their school experiences.

One of the studies (Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024) was claimed as a convergent mixed methods study by the authors. However, as the different components of the study were both qualitative, it was handled accordingly. One of the mixed methods studies (Harris et al., 2021) only included a quantitative component focused on teachers and school staff and not gender diverse students; therefore, only the qualitative part was included.

Data transformation

Following the JBI guidance for MMSRs (Lizarondo et al., 2020b), a convergent integrated approach was taken, whereby quantitative data is “qualitized” (Lizarondo et al., 2020a, Data Transformation section, para. 3) or converted into textual descriptions and combined with the existing qualitative data. This took place in the order of first transforming the data before assimilation and synthesis. Although most of the quantitative data was made available in tables but also in in-depth descriptions; therefore, there was no need for additional qualifying. For example, Witcomb et al. (2019) report: “Of the participants who reported being bullied (n = 237), the majority (n = 185, 78.1%) stated that they told someone”, which is already sufficiently qualified.

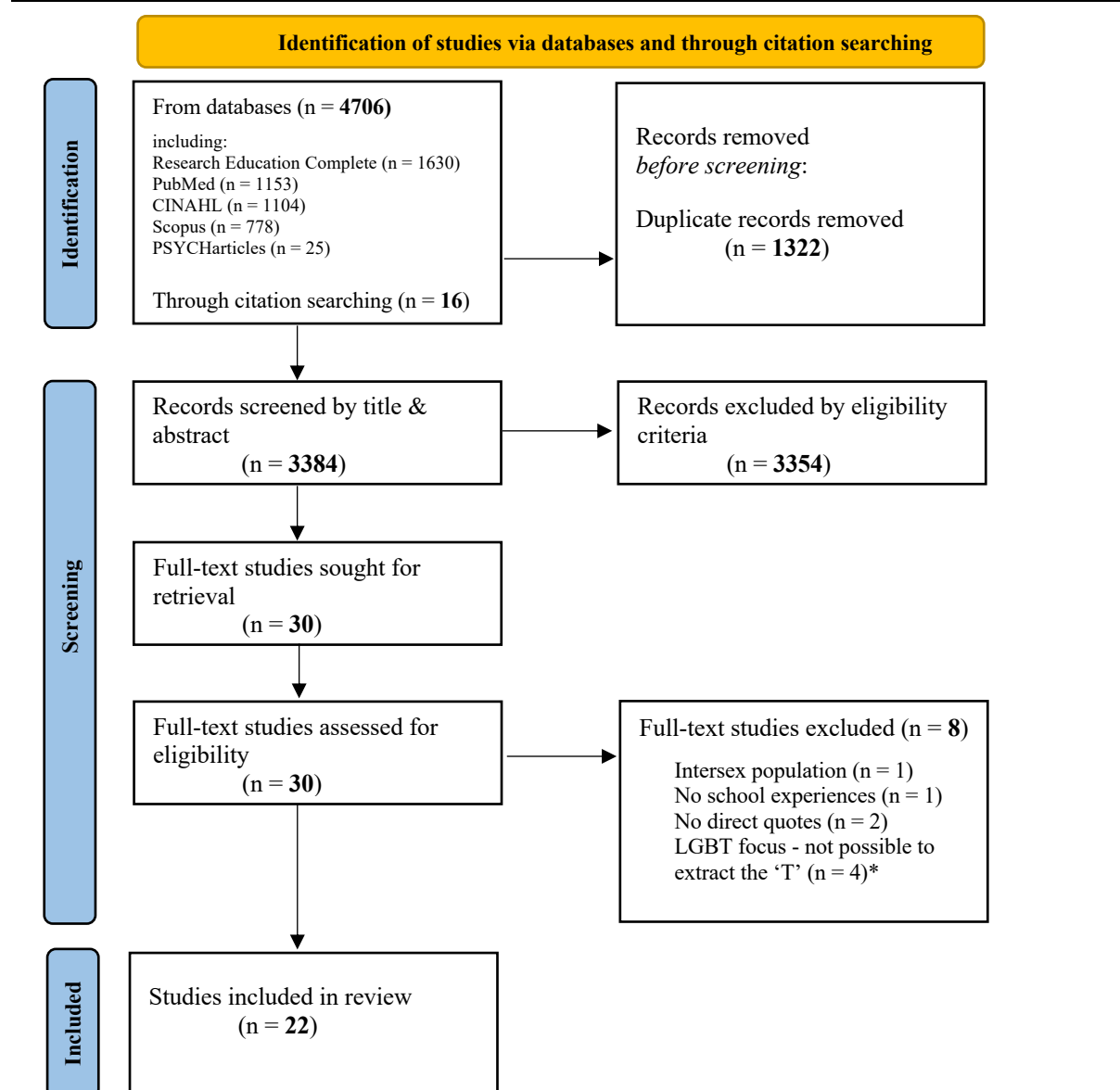
Data synthesis and integration

The synthesis process followed the Thomas and Harden (2008) 3-step method of Thematic Synthesis: 1. line-by-line coding, 2. developing descriptive themes, and 3. generating analytical themes. This method allows not only to summarise the existing data, but to generate novel perspectives on what the data means in relation to the review questions. By employing an inductive approach, this meant that no pre-existing codes or themes were used to guide the process. Team discussions were utilised to inspect and evaluate the resulting findings.

Results

Study inclusion

A total of 4722 studies were identified through database searches, hand-searches and citation searches. A breakdown of how many studies were found through each database and other methods of searching can be found on the PRISMA flow chart (Table x). After removal of duplicates, the remaining 3384 studies were screened against the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria based on information in the Title and Abstract. As expected, a large proportion of the studies were conducted outside of the UK and were screened out in the initial stage. The remaining 30 studies were carefully screened by two reviewers against the criteria based on the full-text article. A final collection of 22 papers was included in the review.

Table 5*Flowchart of Systematic Literature Review Process*

*Details of excluded studies:

Intersex population (n = 1) Connor and Atkinson (2022)

No school experiences (n = 1) Horton (2023a)

No direct quotes (n = 2) McCormack (2012); O'Flynn (2016)

LGBT focus - not possible to extract the 'T' (n = 4) Griffin et al. (2023); Harris et al. (2022); Jadva et al. (2023); Regis (2009)

Methodological quality

Qualitative studies

18 of the 22 overall studies, representing a large majority, were qualitative by design. This group of studies also had the most amount of variability in terms of quality. One of the older studies (Mathews, 2015) was questionable with regard to overall quality and, in particular, the exact method and analysis of the data were described poorly. Nonetheless, this study had a novel focus and added an interesting perspective to see how studies had evolved together with the changing social and cultural context. By contrast, one of the newer studies by Horton and Carlile (2022) offered a highly relevant and more theoretical perspective on what true inclusion of gender diverse students in schools can look like. However, it was unclear how much these findings were rooted in the original data, which also featured in some of the other publications. It seemed that, particularly, the older studies failed to address the relationship between the researcher and the participants, which is unsurprising as explicit positionality is nowadays more recognised as being part of good research practice; it strengthens credibility and trustworthiness (Tracy, 2010) and acknowledges power dynamics when conducting research with marginalised populations. Table 6 presents the quality appraisal process for these qualitative studies.

Mixed methods studies

Three studies included both qualitative and quantitative components. Overall, the methodological quality of these studies was very good, although two of the studies did not include explicit statements regarding the positionality of the researcher or the relationship with the participants. Table 7 presents the quality appraisal process for these mixed methods studies.

Quantitative studies

Only one of the studies (Witcomb et al., 2019) was a pure quantitative study by design, which represented excellent quality and added great value and a novel perspective to the overall synthesis. What is notable is the level of detail and the inclusion of several different questionnaires to understand different aspects of gender diverse young people's lives. Table 8 presents the quality appraisal process for this particular study.

Table 6
Quality Criteria for qualitative studies

[illegible]

[illegible]

Table 7*Quality criteria for mixed methods studies*

	To assess all studies		To assess mixed methods studies					Additional questions	
Study	Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?
Harris et al. (2021)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	CAN'T TELL
Harris et al. (2025)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
McBride and Schubotz (2017)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Table 8*Quality criteria for quantitative descriptive studies*

	To assess all studies		To assess quantitative descriptive studies					Additional questions	
Study	Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?	Is the sample representative of the target population?	Are the measurements appropriate?	Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?	Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	
Witcomb et al. (2019)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	

Characteristics of included studies

Qualitative studies

Some of the studies used novel approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) (e.g., Zeeman et al., 2016) and even incorporated film-making (O’Riordan et al., 2023) to allow participants to step into an active role of co-creating the studies and thus making them more meaningful in representing the true voices of young gender diverse people. Realistically, publications cannot always convey the full depth and creativity involved in these types of projects. Two of the studies (Morgan et al., 2024; Woodhead et al., 2025), looked at not only gender diverse identities in isolation but also the intersecting identities of young people in UK schools. This was a novel perspective to help understand when young people have multiple marginalised identities, how this may shape their experience in education. Many different types of qualitative approaches were used across the studies, most of them following Thematic Analysis or Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Most of the studies gathered data by using semi-structured interviews. Only two of the studies (Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Leonard, 2022) used in-depth interviews with a smaller sample and a more interpretive approach by employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Mixed methods studies

Triangulation of data in mixed methods studies helps to understand school settings as dynamic and complex environments and is particularly welcomed when thinking about interventions to implement local changes to better the lives of gender diverse young people. Harris et al. (2025) captured this aspect thoughtfully in one of the studies that had been more recently published, although the sample included LGBTQ+ students more broadly in addition to specifically gender diverse students.

Quantitative studies

Although Witcomb et al.'s (2019) study focused on experiences of bullying and not exclusively on school experiences, almost all the people included in this sample (91.9%) reported that the bullying happened at school. Also, arguably, there will be some overlap between young people's accounts of overall life and school life. Only one of the qualitative studies (Wilson et al., 2005), in addition to this study, recruited participants through gender clinics, which comes with important ethical and methodological considerations that were acknowledged in both of them. Table 9 provides a summary of study characteristics for all the included studies.

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Bower-Brown et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Surveys with open-ended questions	74 gender diverse young people aged 13-17 (including 25 binary-trans, 25 non-binary and 24 gender questioning young people) in England, Scotland & Wales	To understand the experiences of gender diverse young people in UK schools and whether they are different for binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning youth. To find out how they all navigate the school context.	Gender diverse people use disclosure negotiation, cognitive restructuring and proactive protection to navigate the school environment. They face discrimination from the curriculum, the space, peers and teachers, particularly affecting those who are non-binary or gender questioning.	+ Breadth and richness of analysis + Reflects heterogeneity of gender identities within 'gender diverse' identities + Waiver of parental consent for adolescents who had not disclosed their identity and thus a more inclusive sample - Categorising gender can be problematic
Caudwell (2014)	Qualitative	Theory based analysis/ Critical paradigm	Semi-structured interviews	2 (transgender) young men aged	To privilege the views of these two young people and to expose the complexities around "LGBT" and "transgender" research generally and within sport and educational studies.	Transgender young people have different physical activity experiences in educational settings, and these experiences are not linear. The participants felt taking part in organised men's sports would be unsafe.	Not reported
Ferguson and Russell (2023)	Qualitative	Reflexive thematic analysis	Semi-structured interviews	7 white self-identified trans* people aged 14-25	To explore trans* youth's experiences in PE and how these impacted on decisions to be physically active after leaving school.	Participants were subjected to restricted practices in PE. Following school, medical/other physical alterations were desired before taking part in further physical activity.	+ Increased trust as one of the researchers was known to the participants - Not representative of the entire UK context due to one geographical location - / + Large age range between youngest and oldest participant

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Horton and Carlile (2022)	Qualitative	Thematic analysis (Carlile dataset), Reflexive thematic analysis (Horton dataset)	Semi-structured interviews (2 datasets)	13 trans children aged 5-20 and their parents (Carlile dataset), 10 trans children aged 6-16 and 30 parents (Horton dataset) in the UK.	To reframe conversations on trans inclusion in education, and to make different approaches to trans inclusion explicit, including ideological underpinnings, and implications for how trans children are welcomed in schools.	Application of the Trans inclusion staged model (TISM) differentiated between trans-oppressive, trans-assimilationist, trans-accommodative, and trans-emancipatory approaches. Harms and injustices in non-emancipatory approaches to educational inclusion were highlighted.	Not reported
Horton (2023b)	Qualitative	Reflexive thematic analysis	Unstructured interviews (semi-structured interviews for parents)	10 Trans children and young people aged 9-16 (and 30 parents) from England, Scotland & Wales	To apply the "Gender Minority Stress" (GMS) framework and examine how it manifests in trans children's experiences of school in the UK	A variety of different unique stressors were identified including discrimination, rejection, victimization and non-affirmation, internalized transphobia, negative expectations for the future, non-disclosure, gender dysphoria and lack of trans pride and connectedness	+ Unique sample of children who have transitioned before or during primary school + Richness in data + Interview flexibility with the child participants - Sampling limitation due to most parents being supportive/affirming - Perceptions of GMS influencing perceptions of school support
Horton (2023c)	Qualitative	Reflexive thematic analysis	Unstructured interviews (semi-structured interviews for parents)	10 Trans children and young people aged 9-16 (and 30 parents) from England, Scotland & Wales	To understand institutional cisnormativity in education and trans children's experiences in primary schools and early years of secondary school	Institutional cisnormativity in UK schools manifests in experiences of educational cisnormativity, a failure to protect trans children and educational injustice, all contributing to school drop-out and trauma.	+ Unique sample of trans children who have transitioned before or during primary school - No further examination of why cisnormative policy enabled transphobic practice - No exploration of teacher and leader attitudes

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Johnson and Mughal (2024)	Qualitative	IPA	Semi-structured interviews	6 transgender and non-binary young people aged 18-25 in the UK	To understand how to foster better understanding within schools regarding gender diverse young people	Unsupportive school environments and relationships led to decreased mental health and feelings of otherness. Gender diversity was not found within curriculums. Teachers had the potential to create and foster positive experiences.	Not reported
Leonard (2022)	Qualitative	IPA	Semi-structured interviews	3 transgender young people aged 16-18 in the UK	To explore the positive school experiences of transgender youth in the UK and to highlight the individual strengths and stories they can provide.	How others can support transgender youth was highlighted through the importance of language, individual teacher support, whole-school approaches and the importance of community. Transgender young people also reflected on their own skills and resilience.	- Small sample size - Homogeneous sample - IPA might exclude some participants with language difficulties - Recruitment through an LGBT youth group meant participants are more likely to be active in advocacy - interpretive approach introduces potential bias
Mathews (2015)	Qualitative	Not reported	Semi-structured interviews	4 transgender or transsexual (self-reported) people aged 22-71	To discover the views of trans people who transitioned after attending a religious school as a child	To help transitioning children, schools can examine and amend school policies, train new and established teachers and talk to transgender pupils	Not reported

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
McGowan et al. (2022)	Qualitative	Reflexive thematic analysis	Semi-structured interviews	10 transgender young people aged 13-16 from England and Scotland, recruited through charity (Mermaids)	To explore what are the views and experiences of transgender youth in secondary education	A central theme of acceptance and validation was found with 5 subthemes: seeking acceptance and validation; receiving acceptance and validation; active rejection and invalidation; passive rejection and invalidation; and consequences of rejection and invalidation.	- sample recruited through a single charity where participants received support and were more likely to have supportive parents - less participants from lower secondary school age - / + interpretative aspects of researchers' prior knowledge and experience
Morgan et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Semi-structured interviews & focus groups	32 LGBTQ+ students (and 22 staff and 9 training providers) predominantly from urban areas	To understand perspectives on how schools can be improved for LGBTQ+ students while considering intersectional identities, staff needs and factors influencing uptake and implementation.	To improve school environments for LGBTQ+ students we need a whole-school intersectional approach which shifts the white cis-heteronormative narratives and deficit-focused thinking	+ Inclusion of multiple perspectives + Co-produced with young people at stages of design, analysis and interpretation + Sample included diverse identities of ethnicity, faith, gender and sexuality - Majority were white British
O'Riordan et al. (2023)	Qualitative, PAR project	Film analysis, Case study,	Semi-structured interviews and a co-produced film	3 transgender people aged 16-25 in an LGBTQ+ youth community group in Brighton	To examine experiences of trans students by applying the framework of "liveability" and demonstrating how higher education policies intersect unevenly	Transgender people experience challenges around environment, bureaucracy and policy relating to higher education	+ generative in terms of capturing lived experience - Small scale study

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Paechter et al. (2021)	Qualitative	"analysed thematically"	Interviews & instant messaging	8 non-binary young people aged 13-18 in the UK	To illuminate the experiences of non-binary young people in schools	The curriculum at schools is strongly binary and there is little support available, leaving non-binary young people feeling unsafe, unable to come out and under pressure from bullying and binary expectations.	- Small sample size
Sherriff et al. (2011)	Qualitative	"analysed thematically"	Semi-structured interviews	11 LGBT youth aged 13-26 living in Sussex, UK (and 18 practitioners working with LGBT youth in Sussex)	To explore LGBT young people's experiences including bullying and coming out and their social care and educational support needs (alongside practitioner views of service needs)	LGBT youth experience high levels of bullying and navigate the complexities of coming out. Practitioners lack the skills to provide appropriate support, but are open to receiving training, which LGBT youth also saw as an essential requirement.	+ A deeper understanding of LGBT youth and practitioner views - Relatively small sample - Lack of diversity within sample: most were white, female, out and with access to support services, no gender questioning young people
Wilson et al. (2005)	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Semi-structured interviews	8 young people with "atypical gender identity organisation" aged 14-17 attending a Gender Identity Development Unit	To understand the interaction of young people with atypical gender identity organization with their peers and to focus on the disclosure of gender identity and peer responses.	Most of the participants chose not to disclose their gender identity to their peers. Many of them had experienced bullying and homophobic abuse and friendships were hard to come by.	- The participants were accessing a specialist gender identity service and therefore their "cross-gender behaviour" would have been more evident

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Woodhead et al. (2025)	Qualitative	Reflexive thematic analysis	Focus groups & interviews	32 students aged 13-19, 22 school staff and 9 LGBTQ+ school inclusion training providers, including 11 people with different gender to that assigned at birth.	To examine how sexual and/or gender diverse students with intersecting minoritized identities experience school? What are their support needs and what factors influence implementation?	3 superordinate themes were identified: “What’s important is putting the young person first”, “Move beyond viewing religious beliefs and culture versus LGBTQ+ inclusion as a zero-sum game” and “We need to talk: engaging with parents and school communities”	+ Co-produced with young peer researchers from different backgrounds + multiple meetings with school staff interviewees - No perspectives of parents - Differences within LGBTQ+ groups or between social, cultural and religious groups were not analysed - Findings are contextually grounded
Zeeman et al. (2016)	Qualitative, PAR project	Thematic analysis	Focus groups	5 trans young people aged 14-19 from schools around East Sussex	To understand how resilience and emotional wellbeing of trans young people manifested in school, health environments and community settings.	Trans young people experience adversity in school, the community and in healthcare, but can find places where they feel safe and connected. Their wellbeing and resilience are sustained by individual and collective capacities.	Not reported
Harris et al. (2021)	Mixed methods	Qualitative: "analysed into themes", Quantitative: frequencies & ANOVAs (between-group differences)	Focus groups for young people, (questionnaires and semi-structured interviews for school staff)	28 LGBT+ students aged 11-18 (and some of their friends) from 6 schools in the UK. 153 teachers and staff also included.	To examine LGBT+ student (and teacher/staff) attitudes around school climate and school culture.	Many LGBT+ students experience overt peer to peer discrimination and were mostly unhappy with the lack of LGBT+ topics in the curriculum. Most staff were unaware of this and displayed a reactive stance to LGBT+ related issues.	+ Triangulation of data for a more complete picture of LGBT+ school experiences

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Harris et al. (2025)	Mixed methods (QUAL + quant)	Qualitative: coding for "key themes", Quantitative: Descriptive statistics, ANOVA (between-group differences)	Focus groups & surveys with questionnaires and demographic questions	Interviews: 33 LGBTQ+ students from 6 schools in Southern England Surveys: 257 LGBTQ+ & non-LGBTQ+ students from 5 of these schools	To explore school culture and school climate in 6 schools in England and the impact of these on LGBTQ+ students' sense of self.	Some schools provide more inclusive environments at the level of the school climate. School cultures overall are heterosexist and cisgenderist. These appear to impact LGBTQ+ students' sense of identity.	Not reported
Kettley-Linsell et al. (2024)	Mixed methods	Reflexive thematic analysis	Surveys with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews	30 trans and non-binary young adults aged 18-25 educated in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland	To better understand the experiences of PE for trans and non-binary people.	Both the implicit and explicit school PE curriculum is strongly binary and makes it difficult for trans and non-binary people to navigate this and can result in them feeling excluded.	+ Retrospective accounts offered valuable insight especially to the experiences of those who had not socially transitioned whilst at school
McBride and Schubotz (2017)	Mixed methods	Quantitative data "binary analysed", qualitative data "thematically analysed"	Surveys & semi-structured interviews	Interviews: 5 transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) people aged 12-23, Surveys: 10 TGNC people aged 16 in Northern Ireland	To investigate the educational experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming youth who live in Northern Ireland	Institutional heteronormativity linked with conservative Christian values were found to inhibit open and positive dialogue and cause inequality and injustice to TGNC in educational settings	- Relatively small sample size for both surveys and interviews

Table 9*Summary of study characteristics for all included studies*

Authors	Study type	Data analysis	Data collection	Sample	Aims	Findings	Strengths & Limitations
Witcomb et al. (2019)	Quantitative	Chi-square (frequencies), Shapiro–Wilk tests (normal distribution) & Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> tests (between-group differences)	Questionnaires: demographic questionnaire, The Transgender Bullying Questionnaire & The Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale	274 trans and gender diverse people aged 16-25 recruited from a transgender health clinic in the UK	To explore the prevalence, nature, and outcomes of different types of bullying in trans and gender diverse young people whilst taking into account participant demographics	The participants reported experiencing high levels of bullying; mainly namecalling, mostly taking place in schools, which also had a negative impact on their wellbeing. These effects were greater for birth-assigned females and for those who were out.	+ systematic exploration of bullying in trans and gender diverse (TGD) youth - Sample not representative of all TGD youth (hormone treatment can improve mental health outcomes) - Unknown when bullying occurred - Social transitioning not fully captured with a yes/no answer

Findings of the review

Table 10

Themes and subthemes from Thematic Synthesis

Themes	Subthemes
Looking forward to a better future	Self-discovery and the process related to it Deep understanding of why things are the way they are Young people taking a stance Hope for change
Seeking help and knowing what would help	PE specific needs A need for acceptance and validation School staff can and should lead the way Navigating school policies and rules Recognition of unique educational needs Overall school ethos Help-seeking from anyone who can help Gender inclusive environment and physical spaces
Unseen and unheard	Misunderstood by others Social exclusion The magnitude of coming out Neglect and erasure of identity
The real cost of education	Loss of childhood and adolescence Having to make sacrifices Disengagement as a coping mechanism Sadistic abuse from school staff Appearance related pressures negative emotional impact Bullying and physical violence

Looking forward to a better future

This theme relates to gender diverse young people and adults who are looking back at their previous experiences and spoke more directly about their hopes and wishes and what these may look like, either for themselves or more generally on a societal level.

Gender diverse people across five studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Horton, 2023b; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Sherriff et al., 2011) claimed

complex circumstances around discovering their self and their gender identity, which for some participants seemed to still be an on-going process: “I still don’t know what gender identity I am but I know that I will know” (Bower-Brown et al., 2023, p. 87), whereas for others this seemed clear as day: “Being transgender makes me know that I am how I want to be and who I want to be” (Horton, 2023b, p. 205). Even though the topic of the research in these studies is not gender diversity itself, the fact that the participants revert to talking about discovering their identity overall perhaps reflects how this journey is immeasurably interlinked with one’s circumstances, especially as children and young people grow and learn to understand themselves in a gendered space. Alternatively, it may also reflect a bias of the research or, in fact wider societal context only seeking one type of story.

Many participants mentioned proposed changes and appeared to hope that circumstances in school would be different. This was directly expressed in six of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; Sherriff et al., 2011; Zeeman et al., 2016). For some participants, this was just about asking for small changes like being able to have a break from class or being listened to: “There’s a lot that needs to be said about listening, and not making assumptions” (Sherriff et al., 2011, p. 950). Others framed the changes as being more transformative, like seeking safety, refuge and liberty. Some of the participants expressed that whilst in school as a young person, their life was on hold: “I know that one day I will be ready, and I hope I will, but for now I will remain where I am” (Bower-Brown et al., 2023, p. 85)

The hope for change was also coupled with participants’ own interpretation, reflection and an understanding of why things are the way they are, including awareness of the wider context. This was reflected across 10 of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2025; Horton, 2023b; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Mathews, 2015; McGowan et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2024; Paechter et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2005; Woodhead et al., 2025). For

example, participants acknowledged the influence of the political climate and how this even affects the school curriculum. Despite having awareness of the broad social perceptions and public lack of knowledge of gender diversity, participants were trying to be understanding of others: “I don’t blame teachers who don’t know anything about it” (Mathews, 2015, p. 40). One participant reflected on the generational impact of lack of education about gender and sexual minorities and a couple of participants emphasized how important and impactful parental views were “Some parents would definitely be supportive, but also a lot of parents might be against it, if they are of certain beliefs then some people think that if there is like a society or club or anything, they think that the school is like almost brainwashing them” (Woodhead et al., 2025, p. 6).

Participants in four studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Leonard, 2022; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021) described being brave enough to take a stance against mistreatment and challenging others for it. This might take the form of engaging in formal LGBTQ+ activism or challenging the behaviour of teachers and peers in school. One participant illustrated this in an example: “I’m pretty good at kind of standing up for myself now and saying, ‘Hey, that’s not right’” (Leonard, 2022, p. 53). Some of the things that participants spoke about as challenging were misgendering, use of offensive language and disagreements in specific classes. Sometimes, simply challenging stereotypes and expressing oneself more freely through clothing, etc., was a way to both stand up to others but also to act according to one’s own wishes.

Seeking help and knowing what would help

Help-seeking from others or at least weighing up whether to reach out to others or not was a less prevalent but still significant theme. Five of the studies spoke specifically about the act of reaching out to others for help (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Sherriff

et al., 2011; Witcomb et al., 2019; Woodhead et al., 2025). The quantitative study highlighted that the majority of participants who reported being bullied told their parents about it (57.3%), followed closely by telling friends 48.1% and telling teachers 45.4% (Witcomb et al., 2019). Although this suggests that a majority of gender diverse young people are likely to be forthcoming and ask for help, whether that is from someone at school or outside of it, this still potentially leaves some gender diverse young people unable to disclose being bullied. The figures of young people unable to seek help may also be higher, considering the sample of young people who are also willing to take part in research may be more open and trusting of others in general.

There were many specific areas that participants highlighted as problematic in schools and something they felt needed addressing. As some of the studies were exclusively focused on Physical Education (PE), this was one of the areas that participants highlighted as causing distress, mainly due to a lack of choice and the negative impact of missing out on PE altogether due to rigid and outdated policies. These PE-specific needs were expressed in four of the studies (Caudwell, 2014; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; Zeeman et al., 2016). The participants expressed that they would want more opportunities for mixed sports, some of them based on their previous experiences: “It felt less performative, a lot less like you were trying to fit into a gender role when it was a mixed class” (Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024, p. 461) and generally longed to be able to exercise again in an inclusive and supportive environment. Some of the participants felt like they needed to wait for medical transitioning before being able to do that: “I have full intentions of doing more when I have surgery” (Ferguson & Russell, 2023, p. 601), so it may be that schools have some limitations in what they can offer to help a gender diverse young person to take part.

13 of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Harris et al., 2025; Horton & Carlile, 2022; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Leonard, 2022; Mathews, 2015; McBride

& Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; O’Riordan et al., 2023; Paechter et al., 2021; Sherriff et al., 2011; Zeeman et al., 2016) touched on gender diverse people having unique educational needs, and something they would like schools to cover. This included especially covering topics of gender and sexual diversity, although one non-binary participant expressed annoyance at the continuous association of these two separate concepts: “I don’t really understand why talking about gender has to be done when we people are talking about having sex” (Paechter et al., 2021). Many participants highlighted the importance of receiving education relating to LGBTQ+ topics, but the delivery of this across schools received a mixed response; most reported feeling the education was either non-existent, stereotypical or simply too late. One of the participants had noticed the contrast between different schools and a better understanding in a school that had screened an educational video (Horton & Carlile, 2022, p. 180).

Eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; Leonard, 2022; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Paechter et al., 2021) highlighted the importance of the school environment and the physical spaces such as toilets and changing rooms, along with the anxiety, the inconvenience and the unwanted attention due to the gender segregation of this nature. For example, having to get changed in front of others was too much for some participants: “It just made me really uncomfortable... I didn’t want to be around people when I was getting changed... I’ve always been extremely self-conscious of my body, and I didn’t realize back then it was dysphoria” (Ferguson & Russell, 2023, p. 597). Many participants vocalised wanting flexibility to choose and access to genderless spaces.

Other related policies and rules, which participants seemed to find difficult and confusing to navigate, were mentioned in 13 of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Harris et al., 2025; Horton, 2023b; Horton &

Carlile, 2022; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; Mathews, 2015; McGowan et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2024; O’Riordan et al., 2023; Paechter et al., 2021) .

For some of the schools’ policies, it was felt that there was a lack of caring: “They just said oh we have this because it is legally what we have to do” (O’Riordan et al., 2023). Something that resonated in how other participants also felt that schools were prioritising the law or existing policies before individual wishes. This left an impression of one rule applying to everyone, which may have felt unfair for the participants who were the ones directly impacted by this.

Moreover, in addition to these more specific areas of difficulty, the participants often mentioned the overall school ethos. This was found to be the case in almost all of the studies. Experiences were varied for different participants across different schools. One participant summarised: “I know about a lot of schools that aren’t progressive, who just like view...trans students I know as kind of more of a logistical problem than, like you know, treating them like a human being” (Morgan et al., 2024, p. 11). Faith-based schools seemed to have their own additional challenges relating to more traditional values clashing with participants’ expectations. Overall, it seemed participants felt let down by the prevailing norms and the apathy towards change.

This also directly related to the participants wanting to be accepted and validated for who they are, which often was not the case in these school settings. This was spoken about in 13 of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2025; Horton, 2023b; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Leonard, 2022; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2024; Paechter et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2005; Zeeman et al., 2016). Contrastingly, young people who were able to attend LGBTQ+ or support spaces specifically for gender diverse people spoke about feeling a deep sense of belonging and validation that lifted them. Having allies and role models was equally important, and participants recognised the value of

teachers who were also LGBTQ+: “it all comes down to teachers...prioritising the students they see themselves in” (Leonard, 2022, p. 51).

Across seven of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2025; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; Mathews, 2015; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Morgan et al., 2024), the role of school staff, usually teachers, was emphasised as being key to children and young people accessing help or having a better experience of education. Moreover, there were expectations of teachers to do exactly that and to take more of an active role in helping gender diverse youth. Participants expressed gratitude towards receiving support that felt discreet, personalised, and action-oriented. The personalised approach is even reflected by one of the titles of the studies: “We are not one-box issue people” (Woodhead et al., 2025), although this relates to LGBTQ+ people, the same can be said about gender diverse people. Participants saw teachers as protectors and felt disbelief if they did not deliver on this aspect. One of the participants reflected on teachers’ responses and how equipped they were to deal with gender diverse young people’s needs: “so if a child shows signs of transitioning, it’s not like the teacher will go, “errrrr, I don’t know what to do about this” (Mathews, 2015, p. 40).

Unseen and unheard

Whilst gender diverse children and young people were navigating through life and compulsory education, it seemed that in many ways, during this life stage, they were unseen and unheard.

The sub-theme of social exclusion was apparent across eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Horton, 2023b; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2005; Witcomb et al., 2019). One participant described: “it can feel very lonely and very isolating” (Horton, 2023b,

p. 205), and especially peers connections were missing from these participants. It left participants feeling withdrawn and like they just wanted to be away from people, perhaps resulting in further exclusion.

Many participants described what seemed like being misunderstood by others, and this was present across eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; McBride & Neary, 2021; Paechter et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2005; Zeeman et al., 2016). Some participants struggled to understand all aspects of their identity themselves and recognised that they are complicated. This was mentioned in Caudwell's study: "lots of children have, you know, body issues when they're young...and lots of children have gender identity issues when they're young...doesn't mean they're going to grow up to be trans" (Caudwell, 2014, p. 405). Another participant stated: "No one understands what being transgender is" (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Nonetheless, being subjected to assumptions seemed to have a profound impact, especially when others were speculating about their sexuality or even their sexual organs.

Perhaps these experiences led to the neglect of identity or the attempted erasure of it, especially as some participants spoke about having to hide who they are or that their identity was not recognised by others. This was reflected in four of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2005). One participant spoke about their identity as something they hoped would "go away" (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 311).

12 out of the 20 studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Horton, 2023b; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; McGowan et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2024; O'Riordan et al., 2023; Paechter et al., 2021; Sherrieff et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2005; Witcomb et al., 2019; Zeeman et al., 2016) highlighted the magnitude of coming out to others about one's identity and how this played an important part in the participants' social lives. Some participants

expressed fear of being outed by others before they were ready to do so, and others chose not to come out at all because they felt unable to. It seemed that those who were assigned female at birth felt more able to come out and to also socially transition whilst still in school (Witcomb et al., 2019), although why this may be needs further clarification. Nonetheless, this process was something that most participants did not take lightly. One of the participants wondered if things would have been different had they come out at a different time: “maybe I could [have] come out earlier, when I was like, when I knew... or come out after school... I wouldn’t have been bullied as much” (McGowan et al., 2022, p. 32).

The real cost of education

Out of the 20 studies, 15 reported experiences of bullying, physical threat and violence that the participants endured whilst attending school. This was often spoken about in detail and featured more frequently in some of the studies compared to others. Bullying took place either in school, out of school or on the school journey: “I had been followed, while walking out of school” (Harris et al., 2025, p. 1093). Participants described the nature of the bullying as being prolonged, targeted, and often instigated by more than one person. This included name-calling, gossiping and provocation, as well as more severe forms of violence such as the use of weapons and physical and sexual violence. The quantitative study pointed to gender diverse people being more likely to be bullied than not be bullied (Witcomb et al., 2019, p. 219), which suggests how common these experiences are.

In a small minority of the studies (six studies out of 20) (Harris et al., 2025; Horton, 2023b; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2005)) participants even spoke about being subjected to similar threats from teachers, which due to the power imbalance, has a different nature and could therefore be described as sadistic and abusive. For example, one of the participants in McGowan et al.

(2022) shared: “she (the teacher) turned to me and said ‘you’re not a real boy so I don’t have to treat you like one” and more than one participant had witnessed transphobic or homophobic name-calling by teachers.

In addition to these psychological and physical assaults, participants also described starting to withdraw and disengage, most likely as a coping mechanism. This was represented in eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Harris et al., 2025; Horton, 2023c; Horton & Carlile, 2022; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; Zeeman et al., 2016). For some participants, this meant not attending school anymore, whereas for others, they disengaged from certain aspects of school, for example, not attending PE or no longer using toilets. This was also closely linked with the previous theme of social exclusion. One of the participants wrote: “it makes you feel like you want to dig a hole into the ground and stay there for the rest of your life” (Bower-Brown et al., 2023, p. 82).

Many participants related their school experiences to a subsequent substantial negative emotional impact. This was also directly discussed in almost all of the studies. Participants spoke about only being able to take so much of the bullying: “Until you crack and go crazy” (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 310). Participants spoke about having bad memories of school, sometimes of a traumatic nature. They also described feeling scared, unsafe and angry. The quantitative study suggested that anxiety was more prevalent in gender diverse people who had been bullied (Witcomb et al., 2019, p. 221).

Eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Caudwell, 2014; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Johnson & Mughal, 2024; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; O’Riordan et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2005) discussed gender diverse youth having to make sacrifices along the way. This was especially highlighted in taking part in school PE. For example, for one participant who had difficult experiences of attending school PE: “I just

couldn't be bothered so I . . . got an exercise bike at home and just reverted to that" (Ferguson & Russell, 2023, p. 597). For a gender fluid participant, navigating the school environment came with difficult choices and left them having to choose one bad option over another: "I was stuck in the girls changing rooms and be with the girls, but it is probably better with the girls than with the boys" (Bower-Brown et al., 2023, p. 81).

Participants also spoke about appearance-related pressures, and this came up explicitly in eight of the studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Harris et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2025; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). The school uniform was mentioned several times, and many participants spoke about the feelings of discomfort of having to wear a gendered uniform: "I just constantly felt this wasn't the right thing for me" (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Participants felt pressure to look a certain way, which sometimes led them to compare themselves to others. Some participants spoke about hating their bodies, which was attributed to bullying in some instances or dysphoria in others.

There was a sense of lost innocence and leaving childhood and adolescence behind prematurely: "That's just how the world is, you've just got to put up with it" (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 310). Similar codes related to this theme were found in five of the studies altogether (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Kettley-Linsell et al., 2024; O'Riordan et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2005; Zeeman et al., 2016). It seemed that the participants were not given the same freedom to experiment and to express themselves as others, something commonly associated with an important developmental stage in adolescence. They were forced to be resilient, and others seemed to have unrealistic expectations of how much they can tolerate. Zeeman's study especially focused on gender diverse people's resilience: "We do all have to be resilient every time we walk out of our front door, that is when we have to start being resilient" (Zeeman et al., 2016, p. 388).

In many ways, the review that I completed reflected a harsh reality for gender diverse young people accessing education in the UK. I was overcome by a sense of overwhelm in learning about the extent of difficult experiences young people were facing. At the same time, I couldn't help but notice the dichotomy between negative experiences, which were often linked to the cis-normative environments as well as the targeted assaults reflected by this, and the highly contrasting positive experiences of feeling appreciated and validated elsewhere, usually in organised LGBTQ+ groups or inclusive online spaces. One of the studies was even directly focused on the positive educational experiences of gender diverse young people. Based on these reflections, I intentionally wanted to avoid offering my own constructions of what I believe to be "good" or "bad" as a cis-gender person who went to school outside of UK, and feeling overall quite negative about my own schooling (despite education in Finland often being referred to as "the best in the world"), and carried over these reflections to how I approached the empirical study that follows.

Discussion

Some of the findings from the review reflect information that is already known from previous reviews, which have included international literature mainly from Western cultures. For example, experiences of bullying and vulnerability to mental health difficulties, including eating disorders in gender diverse youth is already documented (McBride, 2021; McGregor et al., 2023; Tyni et al., 2024). One of the limitations of this review is related to the challenge of identifying relevant research whilst the language around the topic area is rapidly evolving, which may suggest that some important research might have been missed.

This review suggests that when it comes to appearance-related pressures, it may be that the school environment creates a distinct vulnerability for gender diverse young people, some of whom may already be navigating a complicated relationship with their bodies.

Help-seeking behaviour by gender diverse children and young people remains an area for further exploration. In some respects, the act of taking part in research itself could be a way of seeking help, if not for oneself then for others. It is possible that some gender diverse people do not feel as comfortable seeking help, especially through public services (Donovan, 2019), and this may also be influenced by specific local contexts, intersectionality, as well as the wider sociopolitical context.

Events such as the Cass Review (an investigation into NHS gender identity services for children and young people) coming out in April 2024 and the UK Supreme Court ruling of what is considered lawfully considered a person's "sex" in April 2025 have caused rapid changes to take place and have had a profound impact on communities. Only three of the studies in this review (Harris et al., 2025; Morgan et al., 2024; Woodhead et al., 2025) had been published since the Cass Review became public. It may be that we have yet to see the changes in research reflected by this, and what we might expect is an increase overall in research looking at gender diverse people's experiences in the UK. However, similar trends have been noted in other industries, such as the rise of literature, films and theatre, including representation of gender diversity or covering topics of gender diversity (TransActual, 2025). A strength of this study has been the more specific focus on the UK context, although without a detailed contrast, and based on the overall findings, it is difficult to say how this differs from the international context.

The existing empirical research also raises questions about the lack of social opportunities for gender diverse people and how gender diverse people feel the effects of being left out of communities and potentially having to withdraw to protect themselves.

Recruitment of marginalised populations in research can be challenging, and unsurprisingly, some of these studies have found it difficult to meet their initial targets of recruitment. It is also important to consider how to interpret the findings of studies that have recruited their sample only from specific community groups or gender clinics.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations for clinical practice

Clinical practice recommendations are relevant for all clinicians working with children or young people in schools or adults past the age of compulsory education. For Clinical Psychologists specifically, the widespread bullying and the emotional impact due to these potentially distressing and life-altering experiences are likely to persist past the age of compulsory education and might make it difficult for gender diverse young people to feel comfortable or safe in other institutions or when interacting with authority figures. Gender diverse young people may feel comfortable seeking help from others, and this is identified as a real strength, especially when coupled with a deep understanding of their circumstances and the wider systemic influences. A personalised yet consistent approach for each person is recommended, and respecting their wishes when it comes to disclosures, as these are seen as significant social risks with varying consequences. Clinicians with expertise in working with gender diversity may consider working indirectly through consultation or training to provide schools with further support in this area, emphasising areas of significance such as social transitioning, coming out to family/peers and navigating appearance-related pressures and/or gender dysphoria. In education, whole-school approaches are recommended alongside policy changes, especially to address bullying and discrimination and the legal protection around this, for gender diverse young people to have their basic needs met and to thrive towards personal success and emotional wellbeing.

Recommendations for research

Further focus on ethical considerations as well as explicit researcher positionality is recommended for future studies. Quantitative and mixed methods studies can add value to this relatively new, although growing, research area. For qualitative studies, further research gathering rich, detailed accounts privileging the lived experience of a small group of gender diverse people and their school experiences, by using methods such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or Narrative Analysis, can provide a different perspective and understanding of this area. Research topic areas that would be of particular relevance include further research with non-binary young people, appearance-related pressures for gender diverse young people in the school context, and help-seeking behaviour within different groups of gender diverse young people. It might also provide a valuable perspective if future studies contrast research done in different geographical areas to see if there are any significant differences in how gender diverse people experience school settings based on their cultural and sociopolitical context.

Rationale for the current study

Since the release of the Cass review and other significant events in the UK, there may be differences in how gender diverse people come forward and talk about their personal experiences, including their time in school. Narrative Analysis can provide an understanding of people's lived experiences told by their words in their given context, and how they construct and make sense of it (Riessman, 2008). By focusing on linguistic and discursive details, this method may also help us understand how retrospective accounts shared by young adults who are looking back at their educational experiences are also directly shaped by the sociopolitical context and through the available narratives during times when gender diverse

people are at the forefront of politics and media more than ever before. Guided by the review, some of the areas that might be personally significant for the participants are relationships with peers and teachers and the appearance-related pressures that young people may experience in the school environment. By increasing research in this area, we are ensuring that relevant guidelines and practices are representing gender diverse peoples' voices and making sure we stay focused on what is helpful, relevant and rooted in ethical practice.

During the time when I was drafting the initial research proposal for this project, another significant document was released by the Department of Education: the draft guidance for schools and colleges in England regarding gender questioning children (Department for Education, 2023). However, by the time I started recruiting, there had already been further developments, including the Supreme Court ruling relating to the interpretation of "sex" as a protected characteristic, and a community group I had been communicating with expressed that, in their opinion, focusing on education was no longer the top priority for the community of gender diverse people. This illustrates the fast-paced shifts of the sociopolitical landscape and how this also influences what research is most current and needed at the time. As a researcher, this can feel disheartening, but it is also an opportunity to come to terms with the value and validity of the research. I could have made changes to the research topic, but sticking to the initial topic felt like the right decision, as further developments since then have taken place, including the new Relationships and sex education (RSE) and Health Education guidance for schools (Department for Education, July 2025), which relates directly to teaching children and young people about gender diversity. Speculating from the direction of these sociopolitical turns it is also likely that further changes will come.

Research aims and questions

This study aims to explore gender diverse people's constructions of attending education in the UK context, and more specifically, of those young adults (aged 18-25) who identified as gender diverse during their schooling years. By focusing on young adults' personal narratives, our aim is to gain further insight into their lived experiences as gender diverse young people in the UK, who collectively attended education approximately between 2005 and 2025.

The study attempts to answer the following research question:

How do gender diverse young adults story their past experiences of school in the UK?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter overview

So far, the previous sections have introduced the research topic area, as well as existing research, and the rationale for conducting this particular study. As mentioned, the aim of the study is to explore the narratives of gender diverse young people in the UK about their school experiences. This section will now outline the steps involved in completing each stage of the research project. Finally, a quality appraisal tool will be used to appraise and support the credibility of the current study.

Qualitative design

This study used a qualitative research design of Narrative Analysis through a social constructionist lens. A qualitative design was a natural choice because of the need for an in-depth understanding of a complex, multifaceted social phenomenon. Furthermore, as Tracy (2010) suggested, there is a “need for a tool or instrument to be at least as complex, flexible, and multifaceted as the phenomena being studied” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). This is to aim for high-quality research with sufficient rigour and with data to match the anticipated richness of the lives of gender diverse youth navigating the educational system.

Narrative Analysis

Since pre-historical times, people have used stories to construct and communicate histories, preferred interpretations and teachings (Sugiyama, 2017). This act of storytelling usually involves setting a scene and some type of plot development, often including conflicts and resolutions. Narrative Analysis (NA) is a qualitative research method that utilises these special characteristics of storytelling, including the stories that individuals tell and the wider

social narratives that they reflect and also simultaneously influence (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Our narrative way of thinking relies on the temporal structure of narratives, including sequences to make sense of what has happened and to predict the future; they bring together the past, present and future through a shared understanding (Bruner, 1986). Our understanding relies on cultural repertoires, as these can and are often drawn upon to construct stories. As such, the lack of available narratives can be problematic if the existing narratives do not sufficiently represent the complexity of lived experience, for example, of groups of people with poorly understood experiences.

NA does not claim to find an existing generalisable truth similar to that of inferential statistics, but instead allows for generalisation to theoretical propositions (Bryman, 1988; Riessman, 2008). NA, as a qualitative approach, encompasses a range of different approaches within it, and therefore, similar to many other methods of research, it can be seen to suit a variety of epistemological and ontological positions. My approach to the epistemology of this study leans towards social constructionism, particularly as it also considers the external factors the participants' stories are influenced by, including my presence as a cisgender immigrant researcher. Reflecting on external factors, including the wider sociopolitical context in the UK, but also internationally, is particularly pertinent now, whilst we inhabit a social climate where opinions can seem polarised, and gender diverse people are being positioned at the centre stage of political debates. Squire et al. (2014) explains constructionism in NA as: "... aim[ing] to explore how meaning is constructed in narratives in relation to available cultural, social and interpersonal resources" (Squire et al., 2014, p. 8).

Further to the ontological position of the research: arguably, there are aspects of a gender diverse person's reality that can seem difficult to grasp by cis-gender people, but nonetheless there is a reality to these deeply personal experiences, one that can be reflected

by a critical realistic view point; where reality is multi-layered and includes an unobservable “real world” as well as constructs that rely on our perception and interpretation (Bhaskar, 1978).

Alternative qualitative methods

A variety of different qualitative approaches exist, offering both diversity and choice. For the research approach of interest, the alternative analytic approaches most suitable included Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 1999). However, to also address gaps in the existing literature, as highlighted by the review in Chapter 2, RTA was excluded.

IPA was considered as a credible alternative research method. When guided by the original principles (Smith et al., 1999), IPA could have also provided a rich and detailed data set, adding a valued perspective to understanding the school experiences of gender diverse young people further through its deeply interpretive approach to analysing a person’s lived experience. However, as a method, it does not generally account for the temporal nature of how gender diverse people make sense of their experiences whilst growing up in a particular sociopolitical and cultural context, in the same way that NA does, as its main emphasis is not on culturally and relationally constructed experiences (Smith, 2021).

Moreover, because IPA relies on the researcher’s own interpretation (through the double hermeneutic: “the researcher...making sense of the participants’ sense making” (Tuffour, 2017, p. 4)), it is sometimes criticized that it is not possible to abandon our prior beliefs, and the researcher should have some personal expertise on the subject matter in order to read between the lines of what is being said. For example, the authors of related research chose not to look at intersex people’s experiences of education by using IPA, because they were non-intersex and perceived this as being unethical (Connor & Atkinson, 2022).

Based on these reflections and assumptions, Narrative Analysis was chosen over IPA.

Consultation with research consultants

In conceiving and setting up this study, there was ongoing consultation with adults who also identify or have identified as gender diverse and have attended school in the UK. These research consultants were highly valued as part of this research project and allowed for deeper reflection on the purpose and meaningfulness of the study as well as consideration of ethical and practical aspects.

Two research consultants were invited to take part. One of whom was recruited coincidentally through professional connections, the other through contacting various charities and asking for the availability of research consultants.

The consultants were financially reimbursed by a £20 per hour payment for their time and valuable input on the study. Special consideration was taken to ensure the minimisation of harm similarly to that of the research participants. For example, consultants were clearly informed of the process of being involved in the study and what this would entail. It was emphasised that this was a casual arrangement and that consultants could choose not to provide further consultation at any point.

At the proposal stage of the research, consultation was sought for the creation of recruitment materials, mainly the recruitment poster. This included thinking about the content and text, use of language and visuals, etc. The final version was created closely following the consultant's advice.

Prior to submission of ethical permission, consultants were asked for reflections on topic areas to be explored during the interviews, which then contributed towards the loosely structured interview topic areas.

Prior to the interviews, one of the consultants agreed to take part in a practice interview exploring his own journey of attending school as a gender diverse young person. Further reflection on the process of the interview and the topics took place with the consultant, and informed subsequent interviews with the participants, including the addition of further topic areas.

Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key part of most contemporary approaches to qualitative research, and it allows the researcher to use subjectivity as a strength rather than a weakness (Finlay, 1998). Authors Rogers and Brown (2024) especially recommend an iterative process of “critical ethical reflexivity” when conducting research with gender diverse people as a cisgender researcher, by which cisnormativity is actively challenged, and a humble approach to knowledge production is taken. Conversations with the research team were constructed with the view of allowing space for reflections and for different views to emerge during the process. The research team itself consisted of researchers of different genders, including gender diverse researchers.

During the research process, I spent time reflecting on my own gender and at times questioned my own identity and consequently my credibility as a researcher. The perceived permanency of stating only one way of viewing oneself felt uncomfortable at times and different to other aspects of my identity. It made me consider how much information I share with my participants and how this will ultimately influence the interviews and subsequently the findings of the research.

The role of a reflexive diary has often been awarded importance in qualitative research by using it as a tool to understand one’s responses to the data and participants (Janesick, 1999). A reflexive diary was utilised throughout the research process and helped

support decision-making in key stages of the research and during different research dilemmas. It was particularly valuable following interviews, allowing for further inspection of different thoughts, feelings and reactions within myself as an interviewer, a recipient of stories and as a co-creator of the space where participants narrated their experiences. Extracts from the diary are included in various sections of this report, as well as in a more comprehensive summary found in the appendices (Appendix C).

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was applied through the University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority and granted on 11th March 2025 (see Appendix D). The protocol number is: 0465 2025 Mar HSET.

Inclusion & Exclusion criteria

This study aimed to include gender diverse young adults across the UK, including diverse genders and other intersectional identities. We acknowledged that some young people might have a different identity now to how they identified at the time of being a young person accessing education. Nonetheless, the study was open to people of various gender identities, including those who no longer identified as being gender diverse. The identification of being gender diverse during school years was self-determined by the participant, and ultimately, it was their decision whether their experiences felt relevant to talk about in the context of accessing education in the UK.

Although the focus of the research is on childhood and adolescent educational experiences, rather confusingly, our target population is young adults. In the UK, young adulthood is generally considered between the ages of 18 and 25. This is linked to scientific evidence suggesting that brain maturation typically continues until mid to late 20's (Giedd et

al., 1999), although newer evidence disputes this (Mousley et al., 2025). By including young adults up to the age of 25, their recall of school experiences is likely to still be comprehensive, but with minimal distress, as they are adequately distanced from the school environment and people, etc. Although conceptually this made sense to us as a research team, the challenges were more related to communicating this to the ethics committee and to potential participants, especially whilst being clear about our inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 11).

Table 11

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participant characteristics

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Aged 18-25 at the time of participation	
Went to school in the UK (including any educational setting provided until the age of 18; e.g. primary school, secondary school, sixth form, college etc.)	Spent more than 2 years abroad (outside of the UK) during school years
Identified as gender diverse during school years (including trans, non-binary, gender fluid etc. or a mixture of these)	Not able to think about school experiences in connection to their gender identity

In the recruitment stages, there was a potential participant who expressed interest in taking part at first, but then felt she wasn't suitable due to spending her school years in the closet. I desperately wanted to include her, but in the end, I understood how perhaps she felt her story was only beginning back then or, as my colleague suggested, she hadn't found the language yet to describe it. This particular individual decided not to take part; however, I had a few other people with similar experiences, and this ended up being one of the hardest decisions in relation to the research. I decided to exclude one other potential participant based on similar reasons, but overall, I decided to explore this decision collaboratively with the participants themselves. I also decided to adapt the way I approach the topic areas so

“coming out” was not essential, but this also meant that participants would need to have enough reflection about their gender identity during school times, which again was difficult to establish without going through the actual interview.

Recruitment

This study utilised a purposive sampling method to reach gender diverse young adults with various gender identities, including those from diverse backgrounds. Social media represented the main focus of the recruitment strategy. Currently, there does not seem to be readily available data about what online platforms gender diverse young adults might prefer, although recent survey data suggests that young adults in the UK mostly use Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat (Ofcom, 2024). Most relevant charity organisations, University student and staff LGBTQ+ networks across the UK, trans pride events, etc., had their own Instagram and LinkedIn pages. They were contacted on these platforms and, in some cases, via email and asked for help in sharing the recruitment materials with potential participants.

The recruitment materials included a poster (see Appendix E) and a Microsoft Forms form to register interest (see Appendix F). These were created in collaboration with one of the research consultants and included inviting visuals, including colours from the trans flag. The poster stated that the research was open to anyone who is or has identified as gender diverse during their schooling years (including trans, non-binary, gender fluid, etc.). It emphasised how “your story can make a difference” and mentioned that participation would entail a “one-hour conversation”. I included some additional details of myself as a researcher/student and some photos in the Instagram page purposefully created for the research project to make it more personable and to be more transparent about who the participants would be telling their story to, should they choose to do so (Appendix G).

Participants

A total of eight participants took part. Narrative Analysis tends to use 3-10 participants, depending on the type of study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and the resources available. It is, however, suggested that even one participant is enough, should the data equate to adequate richness (Wells, 2011). Most participants came forward in stages after the Instagram recruitment poster was shared by different organisations, people and university networks. Participants were not asked how they found out about the study to protect their anonymity further. 29 people expressed interest in taking part, some of whom then decided not to go ahead with the interview. After the potential participants filled in the form or made contact via email, they were sent the study information form and the consent form, and it is possible that by providing this further detail, it made some people hesitant to take part. A small minority of those who were interested did not meet the inclusion criteria based on their age or, after further reflection, felt that their school experiences were not relevant to this particular study.

Participants were invited to select their own preferred pseudonym; a procedure with psychological importance in research (Allen & Wiles, 2016). This was particularly relevant in this study to ensure the suitability of the pseudonym in line with the participants' gender. As gender diversity was one of the main inclusion criteria, participants were asked during initial contact: "How would you describe your gender identity now? How about in Secondary School"? Many participants spoke about exploring different gender identities whilst in Secondary School, and some also mentioned having come out at different stages of school.

Before commencing the interview, the participants were asked again about their gender identity to make sure this was in line with their current identity. They were also asked

about their preferred pronouns so others, including myself, would have the correct pronouns to refer to them. Table 12 illustrates the participants’ demographics.

Table 12

Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Pronouns*	Age	Gender Identity**
Cessie	She/They	23	Non-binary/Feminine
Forest	He/Him	22	Man
Robin	He/They	21	Transmasculine
Nine	They/Them	19	Non-binary
Charlie	They/Them	20	Non-binary
Adam	He/They	23	Transmasculine
Avelline	She/Her	23	(Trans) woman
Dylan	He/Him	25	(Trans) man

*Preferred pronouns at the time of research

**Self-described gender identity at the time of research

Ethical considerations

Beyond the ethical considerations relevant to most qualitative research, this study raises particular issues because of the potential vulnerability of the participants in the current socio-political environment and due to their relative youth. Additional issues arise from the nature of Narrative Analysis; in the emotional nature of telling stories of what may have been painful experiences, as well as the difficulties of maintaining confidentiality in contextually rich, extended accounts.

Guidelines such as the BPS Guidelines for Psychologists Working with Gender, Sexuality and Relationship Diversity (British Psychological Society, 2024), The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH) ethical guidelines for research involving transgender people & communities (Bauer et al., 2019), the BPS Code of Human

Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2021), alongside guidance from the research consultants were used to inform and guide the ethical decisions in this study.

Risk assessment

In line with expectations from the University Ethics Committee, a risk assessment was devised to reflect on potential risk scenarios and possible harm arising from the study (e.g. psychological distress for participants) and what proportionate actions could be made to mitigate these risks. This was reviewed by the Ethics Committee prior to granting ethical approval. Overall, no harm was known to occur during the study. See Appendix H for further details.

Informed consent

Once the participants had made contact either via email or the MS form, they were then provided with further information about the study, including the study information form (Appendix I) and the consent form (Appendix J). Participants were made aware that they could change their mind about taking part and that even after the interview, if they no longer wanted to include their data in the study, they could let me know within 2 weeks of the interview, and this would be erased. Participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions about the study both verbally and via email.

Confidentiality

Considering the current high level of hostility towards gender diverse people in the UK, additional care was taken to make sure the true identity of the participants was protected. Additionally, the CPATH guidelines suggest that because of the small size of the gender diverse population, there is an increased risk of privacy breaches, especially when interviewing gender diverse people from smaller cities or when multiple diagnoses are

disclosed, etc. (Bauer et al., 2019). In line with general anonymisation procedures, identifiable names of people or places were removed. In some cases, participants were asked at the end of the interview whether they could think of any identifiable information that should be modified.

Following the interviews, participants were informed that they would no longer be contacted, as this was recognised as creating an additional burden on them beyond the expectations of the study. Participants themselves were encouraged to get in further contact in case they had any questions regarding the study, etc., and two participants requested a copy of the written report once completed. A couple of the participants also requested additional time to come up with a pseudonym, and this was accommodated.

Data Protection

In accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018), all data was securely stored (on the UH online drive, requiring a double identification process). Gender in this context was considered special category data, and additional measures were taken to make sure that information related to participants' gender was not stored jointly with any identifiable personal information (such as name and contact details). Personal data such as name, email and phone number were requested as a means of contacting the participants. Additional information, such as disability status, was also relevant to ensure a diverse sample, although this data was decided not to be included apart from what the participants chose to share in their interviews. The participants were informed that the research data (including the transcripts) would be erased after 5 years from the interview.

Debriefing

At the end of the interview, participants were offered additional time to spend on an optional debrief, the purpose of which was to allow participants to reflect on the process of attending the interview and any possible difficult topics coming up and the possible impact of this. None of the participants chose to take up the offer for the debrief.

All participants were provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix K), detailing advice on what to do should they find themselves distressed following the interview. This included details of different services available to support emotional wellbeing specific to gender diverse people, alongside emergency services available to everyone.

Participants were also encouraged to contact the research team or the ethics committee if they had concerns on any aspects of the study. None of the participants expressed any concerns relating to distress or any other aspects of the study.

Remuneration

Much discussion has been created on the topic of fair payment for participants in research. A commentary by Haughton and Frith (2024) suggests that not all participants want to be paid, and some prefer for their participation to be appreciated and acknowledged by other means. After further reflection on the matter and due to the increasing reports of fraudulent participants taking part in research simply to access the financial benefit, it was decided that financial payment would not be offered as a means of remuneration, although this was an uncomfortable decision, which was also questioned by one of the charities that I had contact with.

It seems that I have been left with an ethical dilemma of not wanting to scrutinise potential participants over their authenticity and whether they are there as “genuine participants”, especially as this can be seen to mirror experiences of accessing care in

gender clinics. At the same time, I believe participants should have been paid for their contribution, especially as young adults who might not be in a financially secure position. It left me feeling conflicted and perhaps drawn towards a decision that I wasn't entirely happy with. In hindsight, I think there should have been financial remuneration for participants.

Data collection

The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and all took place online via Microsoft Teams, where they were recorded and transcribed. Face-to-face interviews were offered as an option for those whose location was within a reasonable distance and who needed this as an adjustment for a disability. However, all participants preferred the online option. Participants were made aware of the videorecording and transcription, and verbal consent was sought. The initial transcription took place via MS Teams' built-in AI, but was then checked and hand-transcribed using the transcription codes adapted from Jefferson (2004). This included noting down pauses, laughter and notable changes in pitch or pace of conversation as well as accentuated words, gestures or other non-verbal cues. The transcription key can be found in Appendix L.

The interview was described as being "more like a conversation" by the researcher. The purpose of which was to facilitate more naturalistic language and thus storytelling, in line with the preferred narrative method. Participants were gently guided to approach the research topic and what it was like for them to attend school as a gender diverse young person; this was done by having a quick initial conversation before the interview, strengthened through the recruitment materials, as well as more directly by setting up the interview with a preamble that included comments such as: "I'm interested in your story of going to school as a gender diverse young person... it's up to you how you want to tell your story".

The interview schedule was loosely structured, incorporating prompt areas rather than specific questions to be asked of the participants. These included: “noticing one’s own gender”, “attitudes of others”, “relationships with peers/teachers”, “family involvement”, “schoolwork” and “support available in school” and were decided in collaboration with the research consultants. Further topic areas such as “romantic interests” and “relationship with the body” were also deemed relevant and could be explored if the participants seemed comfortable talking about them, as these were recognised as potentially being more sensitive topics (see Appendices M & N).

The topic areas were explored with questions that encouraged further storytelling, such as “Can you tell me about a time when you first started noticing your own gender?” or “Can you tell me about a time when you became aware of other people’s attitudes towards your gender?” If the participants used words that are widely known but can have different meanings in different contexts, the personal meaning of these words to the participants themselves was clarified: “You mentioned gender dysphoria, could you explain what this means to you?” Although it is acknowledged that this may feel frustrating for the participants and inadvertently position them as “the educator of others”, it is equally important not to solely rely on assumptions and consequently misinterpret the participants’ own meaning-making.

Data analysis

Mishler (1991) uses the analogy of a photographer’s use of different lenses and filters and how the photo is altered by these, to illustrate a similar process of the interviewer’s role in co-constructing narratives; the interviewer’s pre-determined identities, as well as the questions they ask of the interviewee, inevitably guide the interview process. This is why the analysis can be thought to begin in these early stages of data collection.

The process of narrative analysis can also be understood by the application of different lenses. The analysis here will utilise a combination of three different lenses that focus on the structural, thematic and dialogical aspects of analysing narratives, following the guidance set out by Riessman (2008).

To explain these three lenses further: the structural aspect refers to what stories look like and *how* they are told (eg with a recognisable beginning, middle, end and ‘point’), but also in terms of their development, direction and other structural characteristics (e.g., does the story take the form of a recognisable plot or genre, with its associated characters and roles); the thematic refers to the content of stories (i.e., recognisable themes in *what* is being said); and the dialogical (also known as performative), refers to understandings of *how and why* a story is told the way it’s told and *to whom* (eg how different discursive features elicit emotional or compassionate responses, or work to entertain or educate; and linguistic makers that suggest recipients beyond the interviewer,).

The purpose of looking at narratives through these three lenses is to appreciate narratives in their full complexity. Although the findings section will not explicitly make reference to these three levels of analysis, instead they will be interwoven to narratives that combine aspects of all three of them: the what, the how and the why.

Following the interviews, the process of analysis continues with initial familiarisation with the data, which was supported by the transcription process and included in-depth linguistic details such as pauses, laughter and significant gestures of the participant as well as the interviewer.

The reflexive diary was used throughout the analysis to help keep track of how the interview process was shaped and evolved from the first interview to the last one. In-depth reading and re-reading (similar to that of holistic content reading (Lieblich et al., 1998)) of the transcripts helped to create further familiarisation with the data and allowed for the data

to be analysed using the three lenses. MAXQDA (version 2024) was used as a software tool to help with the process of indexing and making sure all parts of the text were considered in analysis (see Appendix H).

The write-up of the analysis (in the findings section) will first focus on brief case-based narratives of each individual participant, reflecting individual storylines. This will then be followed by combined broad storylines, reflecting comparison and contrasting these individual stories with each other, resulting in dialogue between them and further understanding of potential patterns that may present through interpretation. In line with the social constructionist approach, the narratives are not inspected in isolation, and several different contexts, including local (e.g., interpersonal) and broad (e.g., historical), will be brought into the analytic process.

Quality appraisal

The quality appraisal of the current study utilised the Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for assessing qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Further details can be found in Table 13.

Table 13*Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research (Tracy, 2010)*

Worthy Topic	Rich Rigour	Sincerity	Credibility	Resonance	Significant Contribution	Ethics	Meaningful Coherence
There is increasing research focused on gender diverse people’s school experiences, but this is mostly in the international context.	NA provides a good fit for a sensitive and also complex multi-faceted topic rooted in a socio-political context.	Researcher positionality is addressed and spoken about transparently and meaningfully.	The analysis and reported findings were contributed to by a research consultant who is gender diverse themselves by sharing reflections.	The participants’ stories were emotionally moving, and this was reflected in the overall write up.	This study included extensive consultation with gender diverse people.	Various ethical research guidelines including specific guidelines for conducting research with gender diverse people were utilised.	The different components of the study are meaningfully connected.
In the UK context, there is limited research using more interpretative methods such as IPA or NA.	Participants were recruited during a 6-month period through various different organisations.	Researcher reflexivity is aided by using a reflexive diary. The diary was shared with the supervisory team and samples are included in the study.	The research team consists of researchers of various genders including gender diverse researchers, which brought different perspectives to discussions and reflections.	The reader is likely to be able to resonate to the stories that reflected young people’s experiences of navigating rigid institutional settings whilst trying to find their own identity and belonging with others.	The extended narrative accounts told by young adults add richness and nuance to a relatively new research area.	This study is focused on retrospective accounts. The age range, 18-25, is somewhat narrow and excludes those who are slightly older who might have had similar experiences in education.	In areas such as the SLR where a different epistemology to the overall study was adopted, this was acknowledged and justified.
Existing research also mainly uses survey data, although there are some small-scale interview studies too.	The final sample included young adults with different gender identities, although lack of diversity in racial identity is acknowledged.				The findings allow for further understanding of general areas to address in guidelines for health and education sectors.	Data collection took place during a time of significant hostility towards gender diverse people in the UK.	
	Examples of transcription and analysis were included to provide transparency.						

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

Chapter Overview

Following the detailed method section, this section will now present the main findings of the empirical research project. The findings will be presented in two separate sections.

The first section represents the individual storylines of the participants in the order that they were interviewed. This provides further detail about their context, and quotes from the interviews are included verbatim (shown in *italics*) for the reader to get a good sense of what was said and how the stories were told. The quotes are accompanied by my own observations and reflections to help draw out some of the relevant local and wider contexts.

The second part will consist of the collective storylines, which look at the participants' stories in dialogue with each other. These will be presented in four main stories that represent the key patterns found amongst the individual storylines, including points of convergence and divergence.

Individual storylines

Cessie's story

Cessie (she/they) was a 23-year-old who told me of having settled with a non-binary identity that leaned more towards feminine, especially as she was getting older. Cessie was my first participant, and I felt nervous for this reason. I met with her online, as I did subsequently with all the other participants. We encountered technological issues straight away, which, perhaps together with my own nerves as well as Cessie's disclosure during the interview of having struggled with social anxiety, led me to worry even further about the flow of the conversation.

The interview started with Cessie referring to a moment of realisation related to her identity, when she was around 13-years old and watching YouTube videos of gender non-conforming identities, and “*that sort of like turned on the switch in my brain that has been off since*”.

She continued, and the story unfolded with her describing this realisation further as her having “*the mental feeling that I wasn't in the right body*”. She told me of this leading to her “*kind of*” coming out for the first time, but her reversing her steps a few months later.

Although Cessie talked about keeping her identity mostly hidden from others, she told me about eventually coming out to her friend in what she initially described as “*like a bit of a fun story*”. She explained that she was out drinking alcohol and had an accident involving a vehicle where she got injured, and, driven by the “*adrenaline rushing*”, spontaneously came out to her friend. It made me curious and left me wanting to know more, but Cessie summarised, “*yeah, it is like a weird story*”, and the conversation moved on. Other stories also had abrupt endings, and the storyline was mostly unchronological, which left me struggling to keep up.

Another story that stood out to me was one where she portrayed an intimate moment with herself buying a dress for herself for the first time: “*I say that's the first time like (.) I could say I was experienced anything close to more like as in gender euphoria*”, and it made me visualise what it was like for her. She described this as one of her important milestones in her journey as it helped her realise that “*this is the right decision for me in the end*”.

Although Cessie talked about having friends during school, including a trans friend, there was a sense of loneliness and lack of connection with others especially after she drifted away from what sounded like her core friendship group, or as she playfully coined as “*the nerds of the year*”; “*I always felt more or less on the outside after that period (.) apart from two maybe one or two people*”, which also positions her as “a lone hero” type of character in

her story, similar to those of historically well-known literature archetypes. She ended the interview with a final remark (or coda): *“hopefully it's been helpful hheh”*, perhaps being aware that I have been trying to play catch-up during the interview. I also acknowledge that there may be an incentive for the storyteller to protect her privacy, which is a right often not granted for gender diverse people (Fritz & Gonzales, 2018), and could explain why some details of Cessie's story were left out for the audience.

Forest's story

My second participant, Forest (he/him), was a 22-year-old man. He explained that being trans is not something that needs to be shared with just anyone and: *“in the grand scheme of my entire life (.) this is such a small part of it”*. I was left with the impression of him as an articulate and persuasive communicator. I felt at ease and found myself getting carried away with his storytelling skills, often involving lengthy, storied narratives with very few interruptions from me, perhaps also reflecting my easing into the role of researcher.

He started by recounting his story of coming out as a 13-year-old whilst being schooled in an all-girls religious setting. School context is significant here, and his smile whilst referring to this seemed slightly teasing to me. He continued by stating: *“surprisingly there's a lot of queer people in religious schools”*, which challenges a social repertoire and created an added suspense for the story that followed.

He talked about difficult interactions involving himself and the school staff: the school refusing to use his legal name, being deliberately ignored by a class teacher, etc. These stories had added depth by being portrayed through vivid descriptions and constructed in a reciprocated manner: they said this, and then I said this. To me, it almost read like a battle between the two. The story then took a turn, and his position softened when he talked about starting to feel frustrated: *“I'd had a few different arguments with different teachers (.)*

different people (.) just about me (.) literally like being at the school". I saw this as resembling the ongoing public discourse where the mere existence of gender diverse people is being challenged and scrutinised.

These stories of challenge were contrasted with stories of being supported, heard and respected when Forest moved to a different Sixth Form: *"really don't think I could have been supported more (.) after I moved (.) which was (.) a really stark difference (.) but a really amazing difference at the same time"*. When the focus was back on the old school: *"I would never treat anyone like that"*, it also drew on personal morals and perhaps indirectly on religious teachings; do to others as you would have them do. Through this narrative, contrasting and the added reference to morals, the storyteller also gains more credibility for his own position.

Forest's story also assigns him with another role of being the "educator of others" when it comes to topics relating to gender diversity. He told me: *"I find it really exhausting to educate people"*, and there is a part of me that wondered whether this message is also directed at me. He repeated talking about feeling exhausted and then made a joke *"I'm not(.) like some kind of Oracle where I can just be like (.) yeah (.) this is everything"*, which lightened up the mood. He ended the interview by talking about how his actions at school were disproportionately watched and monitored, and I got the sense that he *was* tired, maybe by the interview, but also by the constant and unnecessary focus on his gender identity.

Robin's story

Robin (he/they) was a 21-year-old transmasculine university student. He began by setting the context of realising that he was bisexual from an early age, followed by starting to explore his gender in year 7-8. Robin had a casual way of storytelling, which included some

expressive language and occasional out-loud exclamations, especially accompanied by stories involving interactions with his peers and teachers. It was easy for me to warm up to him and align with his “*don’t give a shit*” attitude that encompassed some of his stories.

His stories were varied and often referred to different classes in school, some of which seemed to align with his interests and others that he “*hated*”. In “*working through his gender*”, as he described it, his stories centred around acceptance and self-acceptance: “*I am quite happy about being trans (.) I wouldn't want to be cis (.) because that wouldn't- I wouldn't be me (.) mm but I didn't have that same attitude at school (.) I definitely wanted to be a cis person*”.

Although Robin referred to being “*openly queer*”, he also talked about not bringing up his gender identity with his teachers: “*I- I was sort of like my friends know who I am and that's really what matters (.) I don't want to make it a big thing*”. The exception to this was a story of a teacher who picked up on Robin’s friends calling him by another name and took an interest: “*it was just nice for an adult to see (l) me as being trans and sort of be like ‘that's fine’ (.) like ‘you can explore that’*”. A predicament was also introduced here as the more teachers knew about his identity, the more likely it was that his parents would find out too, before he was ready to make this disclosure.

In referring to the school curriculum and the absence of conversations about queer identities, Robin compared this to his experiences of growing up as autistic and why having the knowledge and understanding from an early age is so vital: “*I could have gone through school knowing that there wasn't something wrong with me (.) it's just a different (.) you know*”.

Robin drew the interview to an end by referring to his position as: “*an educationalist myself*” and by making a plea for gender diversity-inclusive changes to the UK education system: “*I think if we included it more in education and it was embedded into the curriculum*

and staff got training on how to respond to trans kids and how to deal with questions about that (.) we wouldn't have this as an issue". His position not only as an expert by experience, but also as someone with professional expertise in education, make his recommendations even more compelling. His concluding mark doesn't mention anymore *what* the issue is and that is for the audience to decide., but interpreted his plea as us having plenty of evidence already relating to the needs of gender diverse youth, and now needing to match that with actions.

Nine's story

Nine (they/them) was non-binary, and my youngest participant at 19 years old. They described themselves as "*sarcastic*" and an undertone of dry humour featured in many of their stories. Nine started off by highlighting the binary nature of schools and how this is ingrained into children from an early age: "*it's just it's so like strictly enforced (.) it's very strange and I've always thought it was a very strange like imposition on children.*"

I found myself challenged by Nine's narrative as they had completely flipped the script; suggesting that cis identities are the "*strange ones*" and that gender diversity is not only natural, but not a big thing at all, at least if others don't make it that way. These themes of strangeness, normality and otherness repeated throughout the interview.

Nine introduced a lot of talk around appearances: "*I feel like the main turning point would be when I cut my hair short*". They also mentioned formal events, including school proms and how these draw out the gendered expectations around formal wear.

When I asked Nine if they experienced any bullying, they offered numerous examples, yet also mentioned that "*it's not something I recognised at the time*". I felt struck by the way they described their bullies' motives for bullying as seeing Nine as an "*ugly looking girl*" and pretending to show romantic interest in them. This drew me to an

uncomfortable alternative narrative of children and young people of being capable of deeply cruel actions and made me concerned about the potential long-term impact on self-esteem and intimate relationships for gender diverse young people who may be targeted in this way.

Afterwards, Nine talked about their mental health struggles and accessing professional support whilst at school. They also returned to the topic of bullying: *“I think it happened in like very insidious ways”* and drew parallels with their own perception with teachers who also seemed to fail to recognise what was happening: *“I guess they just didn't pick up on it”*. Nine added a quiet remark, *“it wasn't the best”* and I was left with feeling there were many more layers to their story that we could touch on that day.

Nine then went on to discuss PE, *“period talks”* and school trips, and often included some gentle mockery; for example, they described the girls' PE lesson consisting of: *“slowly walk around and that's your lesson”*, highlighting the gender inequalities affecting both non-binary and female identities, and the mockery as a rhetorical device acting here as positioning the storyteller slightly above all of it.

The interview ended with a reflection from Nine, that I took as a message to a wider audience: *“I feel like people should look more at like binary identities (.) because I've always thought like (.) how can you have that? (.) like it doesn't make sense to me (.) but obviously that's a minority opinion”*, taking a one down position here, and creating further rationale to see things from their perspective: *“it's not being like “oh I have transitioned in some way” (.) I've not ever felt that (.) I just existed in a way that I've been taught distinctive from some normal”*

After the interview, Nine wanted to send me an additional note to help explain their context further: *I have near constant derealisation and depersonalisation, so as a result I've never had a strong sense of connectedness with my body and actual self and that's perhaps why I've never really felt integrated into a gender in the same way as others around me. This*

felt like a significant gesture to me, and I interpreted this as the need to talk about mental health more openly too, even with the risk of being pathologised, misunderstood or categorised, because telling stories about mental health is also an important part of young people's journeys and alongside that: their identity construction.

Charlie's story

Charlie (they/them) was a 20-year-old non-binary person. They expressed uncertainty about where to start, and I prompted them to think back to when they first started noticing their own gender. Charlie began to share examples from primary school when boys didn't want to play with them, saying: "*you're a girl*". Charlie laughed and said: "*no, I'm not*".

The story then jumped to secondary school, where Charlie mentioned some of their peers coming out as lesbian, trans, etc. and that "*we started talking about it a bit more at school anyway (.) like naturally (.) like I think it came up a little bit in PSHE*" (PSHE= Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education).

Charlie talked about conducting some of their own research and realising, first, that they are queer, and then, "*that something might be going on in the gender department too hheh*". However, when Charlie talked about hearing about the term "non-binary" for the first time, they described their reaction as "*mm that's a bit weird*", and even hint towards having some judgements: "*I'm kind of thinking people who identified as non-binary should like (.) I don't know (.) just either- either fully transition into the other one or just kind of stop it hheh*". Identity formation was shown here as involving complexity and even initial hesitation, which contradicts a current dismissive discourse of young people changing genders just because it's in fashion.

Charlie explained further: "*it sounds really bad (.) but I'd grown up in like (.) a tiny village*", highlighting the overarching impact of cisnormativity and positioning Charlie as "a

mere mortal” prone to judgments just like anyone else, and yet choosing to go against the grain anyway.

Charlie’s acknowledgements of their teachers feature heavily throughout the rest of the interview. They praised them with vivid expression and at points drew their hands on their heart whilst proclaiming: “*they were all so lovely (.) genuinely*”.

Charlie’s description of their secondary school was celebratory; emphasising the positive changes on an individual and systemic level, painting a picture of a school that is truly inclusionary, where the pride flags were “*everywhere*”. Similar to a life story construct of “communion” (McAdams & McLean, 2013), this story emphasises interpersonal connection and belongingness. The story also seemed to feature “a heroine”: a queer teacher who calls people out on discriminatory language, sets up an LGBTQ+ space; “*there was a massive change while I was at school... thanks to her (.) essentially [yeah]*”.

I felt curious towards experiences where things weren’t quite as perfect and asked Charlie further about other people’s attitudes. That’s when they went on to detail about the senior staff getting involved, and “*that’s where the problem started*”.

Charlie talked about being called into the office and questioned over their new name and being told: “*that I needed to tell my parents before the school accidentally did*”. The story intensified when Charlie is questioned again and asked about their progress in coming out to their parents. Charlie’s voice quickened when they talked about the impact of being questioned for the second time: “*the day after (.) I missed every single one of my lessons ‘cause I was too busy having a panic attack hheh*”. With the accompanying nervous laughter, I got the feeling that the sense of threat here is tangible, similar to that of traumatic memories.

The interview ended with Charlie making reference to the COVID pandemic as a unique time in education; depicted here as the chance to take time to do things that truly matter; “*I’m like (.) ‘why am I memorising quadratic formulas or whatever (.) when- (2)*

whatever I'm thinking could change my life'', emphasising again how a change in the external can also facilitate a change in the internal, giving hope for future generations.

Adam's story

Adam (he/they) was a 23-year-old transmasculine person. He described himself as being *"mistakenly assigned female at birth by a bunch of idiots"* and since his teenage years as being someone who *"didn't really visibly pass as any kind of gender"* except for instances of *"social rewarded performance of femininity"*, where he experimented with make-up and *"the whole (.) umm rolled up skirt: (.) like the untucked shirt"*, although he made it clear that there were no "rewards" after all.

Early in the interview, he mentioned having a health condition, which seemed vitally relevant for his context of being at school, including his primary school years. He explained: *"a lot of my experience was a bit different based on (.) mm being in and out of hospital at the time"*. I interpreted this as making claims about how relatable (or unrelatable) his story is to others, but it also positions Adam as someone who has endured suffering in more than one way; adding more depth to the stories that were about to follow.

Adam kept me on my toes with his storytelling, often divulging into humour and occasionally containing dramatic descriptions, especially when he detailed what his lived experience of gender dysphoria is like: *"I don't think I can ever approach anything from a-mm perspective of self-love because 'what is worth loving?' (.) I am stuck in the very body that has caused the most suffering for me"*, leaving me speechless at times and deeply sympathetic.

There was a sense of blame, regret and resentment when he talked about not having awareness back then of *"the idea that you can have access to medical transition (.) and that starting younger might (.) you know (.) yield better rewards in the end (.) there was none of*

that". He even went on to express "*hatred*" towards other people who had the opportunity to transition earlier, where he didn't. It reminds me of a "contamination" story construct (McAdams & McLean, 2013), where, despite being in the process of medical transitioning later on, he was robbed of the opportunity to do so, when *he* thought it was vital.

He talked about being bullied by his peers at school, by the use of "*humiliation tactics*" as he refers to them. He goes on: "*it's this thing of 'oh like how- how could this person who we perceive as ugly get a partner?'*" My own reaction resisted what Adam was trying to say, but I also understood this as part of a wider narrative that places gender diverse people's bodies as objectified and undesirable at the same time (Fielding, 2021).

As the interview progressed, Adam's own experiences began to get more entangled with the political landscape as he criticised the media and pop culture, including pride merchandise, calling for "*real changes*" to happen. When Adam started talking about people's attitudes towards young people, there was a sudden shift where Adam stopped on his tracks, apologised to me and explained: "*I have just become very desensitised and jaded*".

When I directed our conversation back to Adam's school experiences, and he told me about exploring his sexuality and romantic relationships, I found these stories provided a contrast to some of the earlier emotionally heavy stories: there was a sense of playfulness and joy. Adam laughed when he said: "*out of school hours (.) we used to go back to people's houses and like (2) make cakes and like kiss*", and I couldn't help but chuckle.

Adam then got into a very passionate spell again about the history relating to the systemic silencing of gay and trans identities and ended the interview by making a last plea for teachers to be more flexible with rules, convincing me of the urgency for the need for changes in education.

Avelline's story

Avelline (she/her) was a 23-year-old (trans) woman who offered to share her unique experience of medically transitioning whilst still in school. I saw Avelline as having a gentle way about her. She was a skilled storyteller, academically gifted and a self-described “*English kid*”. Her stories included rich descriptions, clear examples, listings and often drew on existing narratives.

Before I even got to finish the preamble, Avelline took over and began by providing an example of as a child having the option to choose a pink or blue toy and that “*something within me always picked the like female pink option*”. What stayed with me was the description that this choice was “*completely innately*” and “*without any external interference*”, resembling other LGBT narratives and also referred to as the innate essence identity model (Nordmarken, 2023).

Like some of the other participants, Avelline also attended a religious Catholic school. She talked about queer identities and how “*that was never even a topic of conversation (.) it was always kind of (.) kept under wraps*”.

She told me about her experiences of being bullied in primary school, which included name-calling, and retells her reaction as: “*I don't know what these people are talking about (.) I've like- I don't care- I WAS SIX (.) I wasn't experiencing attraction to anyone*”. The way that sexuality is portrayed here is akin to a narrative of children as innocent and not sexual (Lamb et al., 2018).

Avelline talked about being offered support by someone who specialised in sexual health and emphasised that “*obviously this isn't a sexual problem*” making clear the distinction between sexuality and gender identity. Although, I got the sense that she felt grateful for all the support she had at the time (which included seeing “*about 6 therapists a month*” at one point), there was an underlying message here about professional expertise,

especially with school, who she said: *“didn't know what to do with me (.) like (.) I was the first kid to transition at this Catholic secondary school while at school”*.

When Avelline spoke about her experiences of being bullied in primary school, the effect of these were mitigated by her saying: *“I wasn't mercilessly bullied”*, but when she started to details some of her experiences from secondary school I understood why this may be, as her later experiences included more extreme examples such as: *“I got pushed into a road like of oncoming traffic while I was walking home from school”*.

There was a natural progression to Avelline's story, and when she finally got to talk about her transition, it felt like a story of “rebirth” (Booker, 2006). Some of the adversity that she mentioned on the lead up to that (including having to go “*head-to-head*” with the local board of governors or medical treatment turning her “*immediate 16-year-old menopausal*”) only seemed to make the ending that much sweeter. She even returned to the story of being pushed into a road to make a joke about it, and I was left with the impression of her character as having control over her own fate, a construct associated with various identity narratives involving a person's agency (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Dylan's story

Dylan (he/him) was a 25-year-old (trans) man. Much of our interaction was shaped by an assumption of a shared understanding, as Dylan shared that he also works in mental health. Many of Dylan's stories included extensive evaluation, and I got the sense that he has spent time reflecting on his experiences.

Dylan started by providing an “*overview*” and how, from an early age, he was labelled as being “*just a tomboy*” with interests that didn't fit stereotypical expectations. Once he started secondary school, he was met with further expectations specific to the “all-girls

school” context: “*we are all obviously girls (.) you're all obviously young women (.) that will grow up to be wives and mothers*”.

Dylan talked about the injustices he experienced at school, but it also felt like he expressed regret or guilt over his own behaviour. After having explored different types of identity and realising “*I only ever want to be a man*”, he referred to an internal conflict and pressure of having to reject all aspects of femininity to pass as a man. As a result, he explained not being “*as nice as I could have been*” to the girls at his school, which created complexity around his characterisation of himself. He went on to explain that people were understanding of his behaviour because they “*knew that home life wasn't great*”.

Perhaps the most descriptive and detailed story was one of Dylan’s art teacher; he was portrayed as a wise character, who is supportive through small acts such as recognising when Dylan is upset or letting him know he is accepted by expressing: “*you're a good kid and that's all I need to like (.) think about with you*”. Dylan provided a contrasting story about his English teacher who “*normally is very like supportive and comforting*” but didn’t call Dylan by his preferred name, something that Dylan understood already at the time as having something to do with the “*higher-ups*”.

As the interview progressed, I asked directly about the interactions with Dylan’s family and the school, but I soon gathered based on non-verbal cues that he seemed guarded about this topic. In respecting this, I emphasised my interest in the school context. Dylan explained that his school was often included in professionals’ meetings regarding Dylan’s wellbeing, but they took no action to get involved when Dylan’s family tried to stop him from accessing his gender appointments: “*school wouldn't really say a peep about that (.) because they didn't really care*”.

For the remainder of the interview, the stories became shorter in structure. Dylan began to summarise in anticipation of the end of the interview and turned the focus to his professional duties, expressing concern for “*how (.) like queer kids in general are doing*”.

It felt poignant not only in the current context of queer young people, but also in relation to himself, when he ended the interview by posing a question: “*if home isn't an option for safety and security and support (.) school is the next best (.) and when that's not there (.) where do they go?*”

Collective storylines

Moving from the individual storylines to the collective storylines, the overarching main storylines and sub-stories are now presented (summary in Table 14), where the individual stories are drawn alongside each other, to consider how they align and diverge from each other.

Table 14

<i>Main storylines and sub-stories</i>	
Main stories	Sub-stories
	Stories of learning and researching
Stories of living and being	Stories of “coming into”
Stories of openness	Stories of prejudice and persecution
Stories of vulnerability	Stories of being up against authority
Stories of strength	

Stories of living and being

The participants constructed their childhood and youth stories of attending school as ordinary and extraordinary at the same time; the ‘being gender diverse’ part as being normal and natural, but the influence of the cisheteronormative context as a complicating factor as well as often an uphill battle. The only clear exception to this was Robin’s story, where he talks about being happy with being trans in the present day, but wanting to be cis when he was younger. Whilst the participants’ current identities represented various gender identities (including trans and non-binary identities), no one identified as cis at the time of the interview, and elucidating the processes of coming into one’s identity and finding out information about gender diversity, came across to me as being the stories that participants were either particularly keen or expecting to share with me, despite my own cis identity. These stories often led in the interviews, being mentioned early on, and helped to set the broader context or were woven into other stories over the course of the interview. This strengthened the natural and ordinary nature of being gender diverse, and that this is something that can be brought to others’ attention without it being a big deal.

Stories of learning and researching

Epistemic Injustice is a concept introduced by Miranda Fricker, which refers to an injustice imposed on a person as a knower; whether this relates to their credibility to be believed (testimonial injustice), or their lack of access to information to understand particular experiences (hermeneutic injustice) (Fricker, 2007). Children are identified as particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice, especially in adult-governed systems such as Education (Carel & Györffy, 2014). As an interviewer, I became more attuned to hearing these concepts within the stories being told by the participants, especially as many of them distinctively pointed out the very moment they became aware of gender diversity:

Adam: [but] I do remember being in the car (.) in my mom's car (.) on the way to work (.) not- well >she was on the way to work (.) I was on the way to school<

Katri: [Ok]

Adam: [and umm] on the radio (.) hearing a thing about (.) umm (.) >like oh there's an article about trans people in the news (.) and I asked my mom (.) "what's that?" (.) and she's like "oh it's people who get born in the wrong body and then they have to be the other gender"<

Katri [Mm]

Adam [and] I was like "WHAT (.) like that can happen?"

Adam (He/They), Transmasculine, Age: 23

This vivid description from Adam portrays this moment as memorable, although he told me he wasn't sure how old he was exactly at the time (approximately Year Seven- Nine), which then led to independent research online in social media, which he also framed as unhelpful and wished he had known more about trans identities from a historical perspective instead. Like Adam's narrative, Charlie also talked about independently researching information, after coming across the term "non-binary" during the Covid pandemic:

Charlie: [Mm] so that was when I realised that I was probably non-binary (.) mm (1) yeah so I got more information then from things like social media

Katri: Mm

Charlie: Mm and hearing other people's stories (.) mm going to the resources that they would signpost (1) mm and then I found (1) I think I- (.) I read a lot (.) so I read my first book with a trans- trans character (.) not long after that (2) and then just did

more and more research (.) but there wasn't much readily available (.) without me actively looking for it

Katri [Mm]

Charlie [and there] was nothing in my school

Charlie (They/Them), Non-binary, Age: 20

Although Charlie's narrative did include a turning point, after Covid, where their school went through a transformation (a transformation led by the heroine in the story; the queer teacher, who instigated this change). As a result, Charlie hypothesised that future students would have plenty of information available nowadays. In another storyline, Avelline introduces herself as a young person going through puberty, and as a result, feeling alien in her own body and suicidal, but not being able to make sense of her experiences, and situates the "not knowing" in a wider religious context, where education related to gender diversity was perhaps in direct competition with other expectations:

"I'd never been given the language to describe that or understand why that might be (.) like I was raised Catholic (.) so I was taught like (.) you get married or you become a priest"

Avelline (She/Her), (Trans) woman, Age: 23

Even when some information related to gender diversity was referred to as being available at school, this was often framed as unhelpful and criticised. For example, Robin, who also positioned himself as an "*Educationalist*", uses this position in his narration to make claims about the suitability of the curriculum, together with his lived experience. He

made reference to a debate during a Religious Education (RE) lesson, where the class were engaged in an exercise that was described as:

“sort of a debate about whether or not queer people deserve rights and I was just sat there like ‘this is lovely that we’re debating my existence’”

Robin (He/They), Transmasculine, Age: 21

Even without directly referencing his own emotional state, Robin’s short story, enhanced by the ironic use of the word “lovely”, positions him as a vulnerable outsider whose existential rights can be casually questioned in this school environment. In contrast to this position of vulnerability, subsequent stories of learning and researching position storytellers as agentic, arming themselves with knowledge to understand and speak about their lives and make credible epistemic claims for themselves. Jointly, these stories of learning and researching, which often took place outside of school, framed the storytellers with agency and achievement (McAdams & McLean, 2013); going against the odds, to discover something that almost felt like purposefully hidden from them.

Stories of “coming into”

Nordmarken’s concept of “coming into” one’s gender identity (Nordmarken, 2023) is borrowed here to illustrate the different processes of identity formation, although not all stories were constructed as such. These stories of “coming into” were often closely accompanied by the stories of learning and researching, although some participants narrated that even without the lack of words, there was an innate feeling as if signalling them of “something”, from an early age.

Dylan's narrative especially focused on the process of "coming into", and his stories highlighted the pragmatic steps of gender exploration through social actions to see how they fit and feel. Encouragement by one of his peers, who also soon became his girlfriend, featured as a key step and was illustrated through the use of direct speech:

"then like this-soon-to-be girlfriend was like: 'yeah so maybe try out (.) like maybe try a new name (.) maybe a new name would help you feel a bit more comfortable or (.) maybe like (.) just wearing masculine clothes and saying like today I am more masculine (.) and that's my identity today (.) and trying out he/him pronouns and stuff like that or (.) try using they/them a bit see if that fits'"

Dylan (He/Him), (Trans) man, Age: 25

Dylan referred to continuing his exploration until he "*realised*" only ever wanting to be a man, similar to other narratives of "gender experimentation" and the expansive gender-identity discourse, which positions individuals as having the power to change their identity (Nordmarken, 2023). By contrast, Avelline's narrative directly disputes this. Here she responded to a predicament presented by herself of how others can change some superficial characteristic that may cause them to be bullied at school, but gender identity is not something that can be changed:

"I was like (.) 'I'm not pretending to be a boy when that's never felt right' (.) that's never fit me (.) mmm and it's society (.) it's everyone else that's like projecting this idea of masculinity onto me (.) that actually I've rejected since birth you know (.) like my gender identity has been consistent throughout my whole life"

Avelline (She/Her), (Trans) woman, Age: 23

How gender identity is narrated has many implications: socially, whether a person is seen as “trans enough”; medically, whether they can access treatment, etc. and therefore the potential costs can be high. Similar to Avelline, Nine’s storyline also drew on narratives reminiscent of the “innate-essence identity model”, but in such a way that identity formation was not explicitly named at all, as if taking back the power from cisnormativity and rewriting the rules altogether.

Stories of Openness

Chronologically, the stories of “coming into” were then often followed by stories of openness, although it’s important to note that in the participants’ narratives, coming out to others wasn’t necessarily a given, and it was not unusual to be more open with certain people and not so open to others about their gender. In these narratives, it appeared that friends were often the first who would be confided in, and in some cases, the family was either the last to know or had not even been told at the time of the interview. The portrayal of others’ reactions varied, and sometimes reflected the existing broader narratives:

“oh it’s just a phase (.) you’ll- you’ll change your mind (.) it won’t last forever”

Dylan (He/Him), (Trans) man, Age: 25

In the quote above, Dylan storied coming out to a few family members initially as gender fluid, and Dylan referred to this reaction as not feeling very encouraging. The stories of coming out to school staff also featured frequently and involved various complicating actions in the narrative structure. In contrast, within Charlie’s story, coming out to a teacher was presented with a positive twist:

“I told her and she came- (.) comes over to me and she goes (.) ‘oh my god I’m so proud of you (.) you seem so confident now’ and gave me a hug (.) and I was like (I) ‘oh my God’ hheh”

Charlie (They/Them), Non-binary, Age: 20

Charlie’s narrative also uses humour, when a close friend is introduced as the first person Charlie can turn to: *“Mmm so pretty much every time I message her now (.) she’s like ‘what form of queer do you need to tell me about now?’”*, highlighting the important role of support from close friends, and perhaps the open-mindedness that is needed to accept and welcome changes in identity. Sometimes, there was a dilemma that was presented in more than one of the interviews, where being in a position of coming out to the school meant coming out to family too. It often led to careful consideration of whether it was worth the risk:

“I never specifically came out to a member of staff or went to the staff and I was like ‘I want you to say this or that’ because I wasn’t out to my family yet either (.) and I knew if I told staff they would tell my mum”

Robin (He/They), Transmasculine, Age: 21

Avelline’s and Nine’s presented almost no stories about identity disclosures, which could be seen as a move away from the plethora of “coming out” stories, which can be seen as stereotypical on the one hand and also inspirational on the other, especially for those who are apprehensive about doing so. At the same time, not everyone goes through distinct and intentional acts of disclosure even if their identity is known to others, and there may be

pressure to conform to these acts. Thus, the act of non-disclosure could be seen as resisting these stereotypes or perhaps making a distinction between gender identity and sexuality disclosures. Cessie's narrative, focused not only on her coming out as an isolated event, but more so a subtle process where she would start presenting herself more openly towards her friends and introducing conversation about topics such as make-up, etc. This extract illustrated with descriptions of emotional states, the laborious process of "*getting out of the closet*":

"it would build up in my head and I'd get very stressed and I'd get probably quite close to coming out but I never really I never really like struck that point where it like overwhelmed me to the point where I did"

Cessie (She/They), Non-binary/Feminine, Age: 23

This is consistent with previous research (Mousavi et al., 2025), in which young peoples' identity disclosures were shown to be continuous, complex processes. Similarly, the structure of storytelling in these participants is in line with conclusions from Taylor (2024), who argues that queer narratives are characteristically non-linear in structure, as queer lives are far from linear, event-centred, or goal-oriented.

Stories of vulnerability

As demonstrated by the Systematic Literature Review in chapter 2, gender diverse children and young people are vulnerable in different ways in the school context including by exposure to bullying and discrimination. Storylines of vulnerability also emerged in the individual participants' narratives, especially those focusing on discrimination, although

sometimes it was difficult to differentiate between bullying, discrimination and mistreatment based on the constructions of the participants alone.

Stories of prejudice and persecution

These stories centred mostly around bullying by other students, although not all participants referred to these experiences. Although behaviour that was instigated by school staff also seemed to fit under the definition of bullying, it wasn't named as such. NSPCC refers to bullying as "intentional behaviour that hurts someone else. It includes name-calling, hitting, pushing, spreading rumours, threatening or undermining someone", and adds that transphobic bullying is also a hate crime in the UK (NSPCC, n.d.). This may also indicate that not all stories of bullying are currently socially available.

Early in the interviews, some of the participants referred to being bullied by peers, sometimes in passing, before returning to describe it in more detail, where it became relevant to the topic. For example, Adam talks about being bullied in primary school, before he started socially transitioning:

"I'm pretty sure that a lot of the main reasons that I was bullied was just being clocked yes but (.) not really as trans (.) but as just sort of (2) ((shaking hand)) unusual"

Adam (He/They), Transmasculine, Age: 23

These stories had less performative aspects to them, but used evaluation instead, to infer to potential causes of bullying:

Avelline: *I didn't think that there was anything inherently like other or feminine or unusual or whatever*

Katri *Mm hm= (nodding)*

Avelline: *=but clearly there was something about me that everyone else seemed to (.) be able to like pick out*

Avelline (She/Her), (Trans) woman, Age: 23

Stories of being up against authority

As mentioned, it may be difficult to distinguish between acts of bullying, discrimination and other behaviours. Nonetheless, many of the stories spoke to the power differentials between the gender diverse students and the authority that they were up against. I make the distinction here between stories of being up against authority and the previous stories of prejudice and persecution, not based on the content of the stories, but more in how the stories were told and their intricate performative aspects, such as the example below.

This extract from Forest's interview illustrates an interaction between Forest and a queer teacher, whom Forest has felt comfortable talking to before the school intervenes. Forest and the queer teacher are positioned as innocent and unknowing against the school authority, who remain unnamed, reminiscent of a narrative of a fight between good and evil:

Forest: *so I was basically told to stop speaking to her about it (.) so I did (.) but then (.) the teacher who I had spoken to about it came up to me and was like "I've noticed you haven't (.) like you've stopped speaking to me about it (.) is everything ok (.) like are things better?" mm and I (.) literally I said to her (.) "no (.) I've just been told that I can't speak to you about it anymore*

Katri: *mm=*

Forest: *=because it's inappropriate and it's putting you in a weird position" she never said that to anyone (.) so basically it was just the school being like "yeah you can't talk"*

Forest (He/Him), Man, Age: 22

Nine's story included emphasis and repetition to describe their teacher's actions in reaction to Nine's friendship group, which was said to consist mainly of boys:

"and it was that whole thing of like 'oh: is that your boyfriend?' (.) and this is coming from adults you know (.) like this weird teasing that you'd expect from like schoolyard children (.) and it's coming repeatedly (.) and I mean repeatedly it was- it's actually very strange looking back (.) repeatedly from like your teacher (.) like your main teacher"

Nine (They/Them), Non-binary, Age: 19

In fact, almost all the storylines included some element of going up against authority, whether this was in relation to the participants trying to negotiate their transition or to what seemed like bullying or discrimination. Often there was a real sense of disbelief or frustration to these stories and sometimes they were narrated in the present tense, as if the situation was still live:

["just let] me be who I am" (.) [like I'm] not asking that much

Avelline (She/Her), (Trans) woman, Age: 23

It is important to resist labelling experiences as traumatic, especially as these terms were not used by the participants in this sample. However, the use of the present tense resembles the temporality of traumatic memories, where traumatic events are not processed as coherent memories (PTSDUK, n.d.). More fragmented stories or “chaos narratives” are often associated with difficult experiences such as personal illness (Frank, 2022), although these stories did not follow such a structure either.

It may be that due to the power dynamics, these stories of young people being up against school authority require more persuasion for the audience, which may be supported by different rhetorical devices such as direct speech, repetition or emphasis. Overall, by genre, these stories resembled either horror stories, where assaults came “out-of-nowhere”, and the participants were powerless to act to protect themselves, or war stories where fighting against the enemy took enormous effort and courage.

Stories of strength

Alongside more hostile narratives, there were also stories of strength, where participants presented their time in education through the use of celebratory stories; stories of acceptance and support that gave testimony to either personal resilience or courage from others around them. Systemic influences, including social support, are recognised as important factors affecting young people’s resilience (Tankersley et al., 2021), and different turning points in young people’s lives are opportunities to implement positive change (VicHealth, 2015). Apart from Forest’s and Charlie’s narratives, where clear systemic changes were highlighted (“*a really stark difference*” (where Forest moves schools) or “*after Covid*” in Charlie’s school), the other storylines were more stable and did not seem to represent “transformation stories”. Instead, the role of social support, where relevant, was presented as being more constant. Forest’s narrative used several examples to illustrate that

there are many ways to support a gender diverse young person, even if understanding is not always possible. Here he talked about his family:

“I can also talk about struggles and things (.) and even if they don't understand (.) they'll, you know (.) be really supportive and empathetic (.) you know (.) “I'm really sorry (.) is there any way I can help?” mm yeah”

Forest (He/Him), Man, Age: 22

Having a friend with a gender diverse identity was portrayed as being especially powerful, and many of the participants spoke about having LGBTQ+-identifying friends, including gender diverse friends and sexual minority friends. In Cessie's storyline, where she was narrated mostly as a lone character, *“having a trans friend”*, showed her that there were options for transitioning, and she talked about this being *“like a tunnel of light I suppose”*. Robin's storyline also devoted time to appreciate what it was like *“having another trans guy”* as a friend in school, almost acting like a testimony:

“whenever people ask me about my school experience (.) mm I always say like I wouldn't have gotten through it (.) or I wouldn't have (.) >not necessarily survived it< (.) but it wouldn't have been as positive as I think it was (.) if I didn't have my best friend (name) with me”

Robin (He/They), Transmasculine, Age: 21

By contrast, Avelline's storyline positioned her as less reliant on others and having to make her own way to get through school, drawing on self-determination and self-resilience:

[there] was nothing- (1) that was going to stop me from- (1) from presenting authentically and living my authentic truth (.) like nothing could prevent me from doing that (.) mmm it didn't matter how many (.) people like laughed or made fun of me or like whatever (1) mmm yeah (.) and I- and I knew I was- (.) I had already outgrown that place and those people”

Avelline (She/Her), (Trans) woman, Age: 23

Even though previous research supports the role of family involvement, these narratives contextualise what this can mean, including its negative effects, and suggests that sometimes sources of strength and resilience might need to be sought elsewhere. For example, Charlie’s storyline introduced the mental health implications of what it may mean if school coercively try to get the young person to tell their family about their identity. In Dylan’s storyline, his family were involved through various meetings with school and was shown as disruptive when Dylan made the decision to transition and was supported by professionals to go through this, including being referred by different pronouns:

“My birth mother was extremely against it (.) erm to the extent that (.) as an example (.) mmm would start like crying in the middle of a meeting and arguing with both teachers”

Dylan (He/Him), (Trans) man, Age: 25

In line with the constructionist approach, these narratives are not presented here as stand-alone evidence of any particular phenomenon, and at the same time, they speak to some of the existing themes relating to previous research with gender diverse young people. The participants’ stories illustrated that exploring gender takes place during childhood,

adolescence and adulthood and that social context is key to this exploration, even though most stories centred around adolescence. The exploration or discovery of their gender was framed as part of their everyday lives, albeit complicated by external factors. At the same time, the process of discovery and disclosure was storied as continuous and complex. Where this process was interfered with or interrupted, this was narrated with frustration or distress. The urgency transmitted through these narratives in hoping for further information and education relating to gender diversity, which was also strongly linked to one's identity exploration, highlights its continued importance for all systems within the young person's ecology. Some participants referred to external resources as well as their own subsequent expert positions to emphasise that changes were still needed in the UK educational system and even more so for the sake of current generations. Although bullying remained a present theme, its form and impact and how these stories were presented varied across stories, and these were framed as protected by strong relationships with peers, family members and an inclusive school environment. Relationships with authority figures within school systems also seemed central, and instances of bullying and/or discrimination by these very authority figures featured in these storylines and were told in ways that left little room for doubt of how harmful these experiences can be, which seemed to continue to saturate young gender diverse people's lives whilst navigating educational systems in the UK.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter overview

This final chapter will now revisit the research question and the key findings of the study, along with some suggested recommendations for future research and clinical practice. Critical appraisal of the study can be found in the earlier methodology section (Chapter 3), but some of the strengths and limitations will be considered here in more detail. This is to ensure further transparency and so readers can apply critical thought when appraising my interpretations, conclusions and implications of the work.

During its design, this study set out to find out more about the school experiences of gender diverse young people in the UK and their constructions of what it was like when having the opportunity to look back on it as a young adult. Within the framework of the chosen constructionist framework of Narrative Analysis, the research question became:

How do gender diverse young adults story their past experiences of school in the UK?

Summary of findings

The eight participants in this study were interviewed about their school experiences retrospectively, and despite their differences in gender identities, ages, characteristics, and school contexts, which even included some all-girls schools and religious schools, some recurring storylines or threads amongst the narratives can be heard.

It became clear that these stories were constructed against the cisnormative narratives that they sought to free themselves from. This was sometimes supported by storied memories of an awareness of an innate difference between themselves and others from an early age, which directly challenges the narrative of children being susceptible to others' ideologies and at danger of being corrupted by them. Many other main societal narratives were often

explicitly named in these stories, and participants spoke about being aware of negative attitudes, including “*it’s just a phase*” or “*you’re just mentally ill*”, and having to get on with their otherwise ordinary lives whilst navigating these hostile projections.

Despite references to early childhood, most of the events of the storylines took place in Secondary School (unsurprisingly, given the stated interview topic and questions). This was storied as representing a key time for changes and often challenges where the young people came to face the power of traditions, hierarchy and collective identity.

Through different performative aspects of storytelling, participants positioned themselves either above the school contexts that they were once a part of or otherwise separate and alone, whereas others portrayed school times as a chance to explore and find themselves, even if it meant going against the norm and up against authority.

The collective storylines, as reflecting the intersections of the participants’ stories, consisted of stories of living and being, stories of openness, stories of vulnerability and stories of strength. Although there were often no clear conclusions or transformations to these narratives, such as those present in other popular narrative structures, these stories were largely non-linear and less event or goal-focused (as suggested to be commonplace for queer narratives overall (Taylor, 2024)), portraying these stories as ultimately only the beginnings to encounters with further rules and reminders of social order.

Limitations

As the main researcher, despite extensive input from others, as a cisgender female and predominantly an outsider researcher, I hold biases and a lack of insight into different aspects of the research. Gender itself can be considered to be on a spectrum (Arrighi, 2025), and the issue of assuming heterogeneity of all gender diverse identities has been previously raised (Bower-Brown et al., 2023), as well as the need to consider intersectional identities alongside

gender minorities (Woodhead et al., 2025). This study's potential to respond to these claims was limited. The participants who took part represented largely white British individuals, some of whom were neurodivergent and disclosed having a disability either in relation to neurodiversity or mental health, although explicit adjustments were offered but not needed in place.

The research was advertised for young adults regardless of their current gender identity, as long as they identified as gender diverse during their school years (whether that was trans, non-binary, gender fluid, etc.). Some of the participants opened up about the uncertainty of their gender and the exploration relating to it, and therefore, the decision to include all gender diverse representations seemed to fit best with the study design as it involved historical accounts. Otherwise, it may have been practically complicated as well as unethical to request participants to be knowing of their identity as one fixed category during their school years, especially as some of the narratives demonstrated that participants often lacked information about gender diversity altogether.

Nonetheless, it may have deterred some participants from taking part. It may have also resulted in research that could be interpreted to contribute towards further stereotypes about gender diverse people by assuming everyone is the same. Although the analytic approach hopefully has helped to defend against such assumptions, it has been demonstrated that the narratives had many points of convergence as well as divergence.

All the while, recruitment of marginalised people can be challenging, and this was also a point of focus in the Systematic Literature Review, as some studies resulted in recruitment through snowballing or through existing connections such as support groups. The participants in this study were predominantly recruited through Instagram, which perhaps can capture a larger audience, but also privileges the perspectives of people who may have previously taken part in research or were more assertive in putting themselves forward. This

in itself falls neither on the side of a strength nor a limitation, but the recruitment of participants from various sources might have been preferable to represent different constructions. The role of social media as a source of information about gender diversity was also touched upon in the participants' narratives, and spoke to what connection it might have had to their experiences. To further protect the anonymity of participants, they were not asked how they came to know of the research (whether this was shared with them or whether they stumbled across the advert themselves), although this knowledge might have been helpful to inform future research.

Strengths

In line with the approach of “nothing about us, without us” (Charlton, 1998), which is traditionally applied to disability rights, but is also relevant when thinking about other diverse perspectives such as race, gender and background, co-production with gender diverse people was centred as one of the core principles of this research. In practice, this meant co-production was part of every stage (with the exception of data collection and transcription). A research team consisting of both cisgender and gender diverse researchers allowed for different perspectives to guide decision-making. In addition to this, research consultants who were “Experts by Experience” in having attended school in the UK as a gender diverse young person contributed by sharing valuable insights, especially in the early stages of the study. This represented one of the key strengths of the study.

A sample size of eight might be considered small for studies with a positive approach relying on statistical generalisability. However, as a qualitative study where Narrative Analysis was employed as the chosen method, and after eight in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately an hour, this resulted in rich and detailed data sufficient to address the level of detail needed. The benefit of loosely structured interviews permitted participants to

explore their experiences of school more freely and allowed for diverse narratives without pre-existing expectations. Although the process meant that, as some topics became more relevant during the course of interviews, these might have been more generously leaned on by the interviewer in addition to the pre-existing topic areas of interest. Overall, the participants were encouraged to tell their stories the way that they wanted to, and the interviewer allowed room for stories to emerge that weren't part of the interview schedule. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and potentially distressing topics, this was in-line with ethical practice, but also the process of narrative interviews (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review that took place as part of the project, investigated gender diverse young people's school experiences in the UK comprehensively by collating evidence from quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies. To our knowledge, this type of review has not been completed previously, although some similar reviews concerning international literature have been published. Although the exclusive focus on the UK context produced similar findings to those of international literature, there may be some nuances that would only become clearer upon a more rigorous comparison. What was noteworthy is that the literature around gender diversity in schools largely consists of studies done in the last five years. The review, together with the findings of this empirical study, gave a solid basis for recommendations for future research, which will be discussed below.

Recommendation for future research

As illustrated by the Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review, research focusing on gender diverse young people's school experiences remains a relatively new research area.

Some recommendations based on this were already presented in Chapter 2. However, in light of the findings from the empirical study, there are additional considerations to be made.

In Chapter 2, it was suggested that subsequent research might want to consider the appearance-related pressures relevant for gender diverse youth in the school environment, and although the narratives touched on this aspect, it was perhaps more difficult to see how these linked directly to the school environment apart from obvious connections such as the school uniform.

Overall, as a population, gender diverse people have been identified as being at high risk of harm from others, and as a highly marginalised group of people, it is imperative that future research remains ethical and utilises extensive and collaborative co-production with gender diverse people themselves.

The MMSLR findings, taken together with the findings of the empirical study, point towards consolidating the traumatic nature of the school experiences. Further studies may then want to investigate further the prevalence of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related symptoms and presentations, and their connection specifically to school experiences. This could be done in appropriate mental health care settings for either young people or adults, as we know that PTSD often goes untreated for long periods of time. The findings from this study specifically highlighted the power imbalances associated with difficult and potentially traumatic interactions with school staff. Such interpersonal circumstances may exacerbate the likelihood of developing PTSD or Complex PTSD in children and young people overall (Alisic et al., 2014).

Another potential area that has yet to be explored is interviewing gender diverse teachers and other gender diverse school professionals about their perspectives on inclusion, anti-discriminatory practices and support for gender diverse young people. It may also be valuable to hear about their own experiences of the school environment and whether they

perceive it to be supportive and allows them to bring their personal identity to the workplace. This could help elucidate some of the systemic factors present in complex systems such as school institutions.

Focus groups are often utilised to gather data to help design targeted interventions, and future research can also do this to support some of the following recommendations that are made for professionals working with gender diverse children and young people.

Recommendations for professionals

Education and information

As highlighted by the collective narratives of researching and learning, gender diverse young people in the UK may be lacking access to educational material relating to gender identity. This may have been more prevalent for the young adults who were slightly older and attended school some years ago, compared to the younger participants. There is also a strong incentive to ensure that information is available not only to children and young people in education, but also professionals working with them, which may include teachers, psychologists, nurses, etc. Existing guidelines already recommend including information about gender diversity in the school curriculum (Department for Education, July 2025), ideally both in the overt and covert curricula (Donovan et al., 2023), where it is more naturally integrated. Yet, the findings from this study clearly dispute its successful implementation, although differences between schools are also acknowledged. More rigorous auditing and feedback might be considered to ensure that best practice is met.

According to some behaviour change models, such as the Transtheoretical model (TTM), change is only possible where the intervention appropriately meets the readiness of the recipient; where there is still hesitation (pre-contemplation stage), educational information is preferable (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). In line with the TTM, it may be

that despite the overwhelming evidence suggesting gender diverse young people need more support, schools and key stakeholders are not yet in a position to receive intense and transformative interventions. Ambitious models for inclusion, such as the trans-emancipatory approach proposed by Horton and Carlile (2022), offer inspiration and hope, but whether schools in the UK are ready for this is another question. Further suggestions will be offered in the next paragraph, which include alternative approaches.

Representation

Drawing from Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), modelling is a powerful psychological tool, often used in parenting relationships where the parent demonstrates a desired behaviour so this can be assimilated by the child. Related approaches such as mentoring and the use of positive role models have yielded positive results (Cole et al., 2022; Stapley et al., 2022). In fact, the UK government recently allocated £20 million towards a preventative model-based initiative using positive role models to tackle misogyny in schools (Home Office et al., 2025). Similar initiatives have not yet been proposed to tackle violence and discrimination towards gender diverse people. As demonstrated by the participants in this study peers as well as teachers were often portrayed either as supportive allies or powerful role models.

Inclusive recruitment is a potential low-cost alternative that ensures LGBTQ+ representation, including gender diverse teachers, are employed in positions where they may be able to act as role models and support gender diverse young people. LGBTQ+ school professionals have been suggested as well-suited for leadership positions due to key attributes such as compassion and managing risk-taking (Lee, 2020).

However, both the distribution of information and inclusive education should be backed up with policies as well as clear legal frameworks to protect schools and teachers, as

otherwise they may fall short of progress due to fear or risk of legal challenges (14-19 Learning & Skills Bulletin, 2024).

Gender exploration and recognition

Current guidelines for keeping children safe in education set out by the Department of Education state that children who are “gender questioning” need a cautious approach but are also considered more at-risk of harm when there are no adults with whom they can be open with (Department for Education, 2025). Exactly what is meant by a “cautious approach” is contested and unclear, but this is likely to deter adults from using preferred pronouns or names requested by the young person, which is often referred to as social transitioning (Cass, 2024). In the absence of clarity, it is difficult to make any conclusions, although some of the participants in this research spoke about the harmful effects of seemingly being coerced into making identity disclosures to their parents or having been blocked from accessing treatment at gender clinics.

The term “social transitioning” was not used by any of the participants in this study, although they spoke at length about the legitimacy of chosen names and pronouns and the struggle associated with negotiating with others about their use. The findings suggest that this negotiation is an additional stressor for a group of young people who are already vulnerable and under enormous strain due to minority stress. Therefore, supporting a young person to explore their gender, which includes the use of chosen pronouns and names, could in fact benefit the young person. This is already backed up by previous research (Russell et al., 2018).

The current guidance suggests that children are more at risk if they cannot be open with adults (Department for Education, 2025). In the narratives of this study, young people were presented as having agency and making an informed choice about whether to talk to

adults and if this would align with their wishes. This may suggest that the increased vulnerability associated with not being able to be open with adults may be due to a lack of trust in adults, which is ultimately compounded by adults' inability or unwillingness to support young people in their gender exploration or transition. Thus, representing a cyclical phenomenon which ultimately places young people in a difficult position and possibly left without support. The findings from the current study may also suggest that adults might have a tendency to overestimate their influence on the young person's trajectory. The narratives focused on social transition among peers just as they did on transitioning enabled by adults.

Some of the wider narratives also privilege debates relating to the age of gender diverse pupils and appear to want to draw a line between childhood and adolescence, suggesting that separate advice should be available for pre-pubertal children. This is, of course, not a new debate, and the decision-making abilities of children have widely been debated with principles such as 'Gillick competence' in place to protect their autonomy when appropriate (British Medical Association, 2025). The narratives in this study focused primarily on events taking place in secondary school, but that is not to say interventions or support should only be available at this later stage.

Tailored interventions

There are no current NICE guidelines outlining best practice when working clinically with gender diverse young people. It is important to note that neither gender diversity nor gender incongruence in itself constitutes the need for clinical intervention and should not be pathologised. Nonetheless, as indicated here, there is a possibility for clinical need based on the associated risks due to circumstances, and young people left feeling professionals are unable to work with them effectively. The first recommendation is therefore to produce

appropriate NICE guidelines for health care professionals. Similar guidelines could be produced for teachers and other staff working in educational settings as they seem to rely on guidance provided by local councils.

As further evidenced by this study, gender diverse young people represent different identities, characteristics, stories, etc. Therefore, any interventions to support gender diverse young people should be tailored and personalised according to individual circumstances. However, some of the narratives in this study gave credit to whole-school approaches, in line with more systemic practice, and those resembling the guidance set out by several organisations such as Brighton & Hove City Council (2024) or The Proud Trust (2024).

Peer-led interventions generally have proved effective for gender diverse young people (Johnson & Rogers, 2020; Kia et al., 2023; Kia et al., 2021). References to peer support also featured extensively in the narratives presented in this study. In UK school settings, this generally means either peer- or teacher-led LGBT clubs that are based on the US-invented Gender and Sexuality Alliances (or formally known as Gay Straight Alliances; GSAs) (Dominique, 2007). Although, as iterated by the narratives, gender diverse people are likely to be keen to differentiate between their sexual identity and their gender identity. Therefore, support available might be considered specifically tailored for gender diverse youth rather than designed to be LGBTQ+ expansive.

Further investment might be put towards creating more formal peer-led interventions, such as paid peer workers/mentors within schools. The role of Clinical Psychologists might then be best utilized with offering consultation for schools whilst working directly and/or indirectly with gender diverse young people who may have more complex presentations due to additional mental health needs. Some of the participants in this research highlighted that the support they received did not feel appropriate to their needs.

However, previous research shows that Clinical Psychologists and other mental health professionals, even when wanting to be supportive, may lack the confidence or the skills to work clinically with gender diverse people (Canvin et al., 2023). This may mean equipping Clinical Psychologists with appropriate knowledge and training to begin with, and connecting them more widely with specialist interest groups, charities and trainers, etc., to upskill the workforce.

Final reflections

To end this chapter, I will consider key aspects of the research study reflecting my personal thoughts around it. I chose to approach the research with a social constructionist framework, although little did I know what a rabbit hole it would take me down. Even the consideration of “What is sex?” and “What is gender?” gave me enough to ponder about for at least a year, and I learnt to slow down, think things over, and not to take anything for granted.

During the process, I was aware of how highly politicised the topic is, and at the same time thought about how insensitive it is to reduce a person’s life to a mere “topic”. The narratives surrounding gender diversity had become so loud in the media, politics and entertainment, etc. that not only could I not unhear them, but I wished not to. Conducting research during such a time inevitably influenced it in many ways, including what the participants were drawn to in their narratives, what I was curious about, and how I chose to interpret our brief interactions.

I sensed that overall, there was a concern for current and future generations of gender diverse young people in schools, echoed by my participants, my supervisors, my consultants, the ethics committee, etc. During the early stages of research, I also wondered whether it would be considered wise to carry out this research at all, considering that gender diverse

people were under such attack. However, I came to realise that there is probably always a tension when carrying out research with marginalised communities and whether the risks are worth the rewards, something that I had to consider, especially as it was my own “want” to do this research. Yet I anticipate that without that drive, I would not have gotten far.

I understood what a huge risk the participants took in coming forward and sharing their stories with someone with whom they do not have a personal connection with. I believe the university itself and its good reputation, as well as guidance from my supervisors and consultants, helped me put forward a case, where participants understood my intentions and commitment towards this research. However, the responsibility of ethical research can be a heavy burden, and I found throughout the research that there were many aspects that I needed to think carefully about and even some that I wish I had done differently. I hope that maybe others can learn through my reflections and continue to strive towards improving and adding to the research base. I might even find myself returning to the data, as looking back can offer new meanings and perspectives from a different standpoint (Andrews, 2008).

Narrative Analysis as a method of research was mostly unfamiliar to me, although I had attended a workshop on this previously, and found myself intrigued by this way of looking at text and conversations. In fact, NA can be applied to a whole range of data, including photos (Harper, 2005). This also represented one of my steepest learning curves, and in reading different books and articles about NA, I found myself inspired by Riessman’s writing (Riessman, 2008) as well as existing research on combat veteran’s narratives of surfing (Caddick et al., 2015). At the same time, I found some of the other literature and guidance confusing, and I was not surprised to hear that the complexity had deterred others from taking this approach. I wondered whether overall there is enough literature around NA that centres neurodivergent perspectives and constructions. This was especially relevant as some of my participants were autistic, and the widespread recognition of an association

between autism and gender diversity (Cooper et al., 2023; Corbett et al., 2024). I was pleased to hear that further research was on its way, focusing on autistic non-binary young people's school experiences (Brooks, 2026).

Endless reflection on my positionality felt tedious and repetitive at times, but there is no denying that this labour was worth it in the end. As a cis researcher, I needed to justify my every action, knowing that I will never get close to understanding what the true experience of a gender diverse young person in the UK is. In some ways, NA felt like a cop-out, as understanding the truth was not only impossible, but not one of my objectives. I often considered the role of my identity as LGBTQ+ or my immigrant status in relation to the research, but gave less thought to my position as a Psychologist, perhaps because of the uncomfortable associations related to Psychologists who may be seen as gatekeepers and contributing towards problematic systems of gender care (Moon, 2024).

My supervisors encouraged me to think about dissemination even before I began working on the project, and many of the participants also wanted to know what would happen as a result of the research before they agreed to take part. I understood dissemination as a professional and ethical responsibility. I noticed that although guidelines included suggestions for dissemination, I hoped for more substantive information (such as those concerning Systematic Literature Reviews), as arguably dissemination is one of the most important aspects of research. Where the findings are disseminated will need careful consideration to ensure that they are understood within their contexts and do not add to further discrimination of gender diverse young people. Once the findings are "out", they will then be met with further constructions.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Image of window display with various demonstration placards



Appendix B: Image from the Museum of Transology featuring a placard

Appendix C: Extracts from reflexive diary

Monday 07/10/2024 10:35	Research proposal This is my first entry on my reflexive research diary. I'm in the process of submitting my proposal after writing a first draft and having received feedback from my research supervisors. After doing some further reading in Qualitative Research in Psychology and after having discussions with my supervisors, I'm beginning to understand how personal the research journey is. I'm thinking a lot about how I'm influencing the research and how the research is influencing me. <i>I spent time reflecting on my own gender and at times questioned my own identity and consequently my credibility as researcher. The perceived permanency of stating only one way of viewing oneself felt uncomfortable at times and different to other aspects of my identity. It made me consider how much information I share with my participants and how this will ultimately influence the interviews and subsequently the findings of the research.</i>
Friday 24/10/2024 13:30	Gender diverse research team I felt a sense of stuckness and not knowing how to navigate a situation regarding the involvement of consultants in my research, as one of them also had substantial research experience. I felt fortunate to have representation of gender diversity in my research team already and I decided to extend the research team even further to have more skills, knowledge and representation of gender diversity, which I think I will be a great asset to the research.
Thursday 12/12/2024 09:45	Following the news and other developments I'm not one to follow the news too much. Since the pandemic I have been limiting my own engagement with the news. It can also be difficult to navigate "fake news" that are so prevalent now, even though news have always been biased or distorted in some way. However, issues relating to gender diverse young people and their healthcare have been in the news at such frequency that it is hard not to notice. Yesterday I read that puberty blockers (that temporarily stop the progression of puberty and sex hormones) are to be indefinitely banned in the UK (outside of clinical trials). This will have huge implications for young people wanting to medically transition. It makes me think about how current this research is and how I need to think really carefully about the conclusions and recommendations following the analysis of data.
05/03/2025 16:51	Social construction of gender and my own school experiences Today, prompted by my supervisor, I started thinking more gender as a construction and how it is so connected to our childhood and youth experiences. It made me think of some of my own school experiences, and even thought at first, I thought my Finnish background meant that I grew up in a more liberal environment, but we as children and young

	people were also subjected to experiences that were cisnormative, binary and inflexible. For example, at the end of my Upper Secondary School (or the Sixth Form equivalent), there was a tradition of the students having a sort of a prom, which included rehearsed ballroom dancing and dressing up; the boys would wear old-fashioned suits, and the girls would wear old-fashioned dresses. There were clear expectations and traditions that should be followed and this included how you should dress, dance etc. You could choose to go with any partner, but the expected norm was that boys would be paired with girls. I think I was the only student from my year who decided not to go to the prom. I remember thinking it made no sense. Another concept which is important to gender identity is the use of pronouns as they communicate preferences and perceptions of gender. In Finnish language, there is only one pronoun to describe another person, which does not reveal anything about their gender, it is merely an acknowledgement of the person being a person other than me or you. This is something that I have reflected a lot on and how this shapes our way of thinking and existing. In my opinion, it certainly makes things a lot easier and straightforward. Consequently, I have had to adapt to using pronouns differently and respect that it in different cultures they can have different meanings.
13/03/2025 10:30	Starting recruitment Finally, the ethics application for the study have been approved! Some of the feedback and amendments required highlighted how the sampling strategy needed to be more specific. During a conversation with my supervisor, we thought about diversity within the sample and what we might expect. I said to my supervisor that I automatically assumed we might get participants who represent a variety of different genders including trans, non-binary, fluid, agender, questioning etc. I never considered that only one particular gender identity might be overrepresented in our sample. I guess I will soon find out.

16/03/2025 15:34	Field research Yesterday I visited both the Queer Britain museum and the Museum of Transology in King's Cross. Both of the museums were so wonderful in including so much richness and creativity. I found myself reflecting on many aspects of gender diversity. The Museum of Transology contained many medical artefacts including many vials and tubes of testosterone, HRT and even a pair of breasts! I was especially struck by the pair of breasts floating in some liquid in a jar. I had never thought what breasts might look inside including all the fatty tissue. The person who owned the breasts, I think his name might have been Joe had to fight hard to be able to keep his breasts after the top surgery. There was also a letter on display from the surgeon who explained how Joe could only collect the breasts 2 weeks after the removal because of additional testing and how they expected him to dispose of the breasts safely and responsibly. I'm not sure if having them on display in a museum was exactly what they had in mind. <i>I understood how much scrutiny was involved in gender diverse people making decisions about their own bodies. As someone with a chronic health condition and having related experiences, I felt the frustration and anger related to these decisions and interpreted the breasts as symbols of body autonomy.</i>
15/06/2025	Selecting participants <i>There was a potential participant who expressed interest in taking part at first, but then felt she wasn't suitable due to spending her school years in the closet. I desperately wanted to include her, but in the end understood how perhaps she felt her story was only beginning back then or like my colleague suggested she hadn't found the language yet to describe it. This particular individual decided not to take part; however I had a few other people with similar experiences, and this ended up being one of the hardest decisions in relation to the research. I decided to exclude one other potential participant based on similar reasons, but overall, I decided to explore this decision collaboratively with the participants themselves. I also decided to adapt the way I approach the topic areas so "coming out" was not essential, but this also meant that participants would need to have enough reflection about their gender identity during school times, which again was difficult to establish without going through the actual interview</i>
17/04/2025 07:59	Interviewing first participant I'm about to meet my first participant and I'm feeling nervous, overwhelmed and all over the place! She is non-binary/feminine, but also talks about herself as being trans. I've noticed that not many people seem to connect with the term "gender diverse" and I might have to consider changing that. I've had a phone call with her, during which she was asking whether she can talk about her sixth form experiences, which I confirmed. I wonder if some of the materials suggest that the experiences that someone is talking about should focus only on primary

	and secondary school. Again, something that is important to clarify with future participants.
06/08/2025	Interviewing more participants I haven't written in the diary for a while because I have spent some time writing the method section and focusing on doing the SLR. However, based on our last meeting and after much toing and froing, I decided to interview a few additional participants. My next interview is with a female trans person, which I am feeling excited about.
08/08/2025	Final interviews Yesterday I met with my 7th participants in the morning. I was very much looking forward to interviewing her because she was one of the very few trans women that were interested in taking part. I realised now that some of my earlier reflections on what I anticipated about the participant characteristic didn't go quite the way that I thought. Female trans people were definitely the minority in coming forward and I tried to prioritise including them as participants for this reason. I noticed that the interviews had become noticeably easier in a way. There was a better a flow and I felt more prepared to ask questions that lead to further storytelling by the participants. I think I had to learn the process of interviewing that matched with my proposed method, but it naturally took some time for it to click.
12/11/2025 09:31	Systematic Literature Review In completing the SLR, it appears none of the existing reviews on school experiences focus exclusively on UK based studies. I have contacted the researchers based in Scotland who are planning to do a similar SLR but who plan to include international studies. <i>In many ways, the review that I completed reflected a harsh reality for gender diverse young people accessing education in the UK. I was overcome by a sense of overwhelm in learning about the extent of difficult experiences young people were facing. At the same time, I couldn't help but notice the dichotomy between negative experiences which were often linked to the cis-normative environments as well as the targeted assaults reflected by this and the highly contrasting positive experiences of feeling appreciated and validated elsewhere, usually in organised LGBTQ+ groups or inclusive online spaces. One of the studies was even directly focused on the positive educational experiences of gender diverse young people. Based on these reflections, I intentionally wanted to avoid offering my own constructions of what I believe to be "good" or "bad" and reflect this in the way that I approach the resulting empirical study and the way it is designed.</i>

Appendix D: Letter from University of Hertfordshire ethics committee

To: Katri Seppala

Your application for ethics approval for the study listed below has been approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. **Please read this letter carefully.**

Study Title: Personal narratives of gender diverse young adults about their time in UK schools

Your UH protocol number is: **0465 2025 Mar HSET**

This reference must be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

If you wish to use the UH Ethics Committee logo disclaimer in your communications with participants, please find it in our UH Ethics Canvas site under 'Units - Application Forms': [UH Ethics Approval \(instructure.com\)](https://instructure.com).

This ethics approval expires on 30/09/2025

Amending your protocol

Individual protocols will normally be approved for the limited period of time noted above. Application for minor amendments (including time extensions) of a protocol, may be made for a maximum of 4 working weeks after the end date of that protocol.

It is expected that any amendments proposed via the online system will be minor. Should substantial modification be required, it would be necessary to make a fresh application for ethical approval.

Note that you must obtain approval from the relevant UH Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority **prior to implementing any changes**. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of ethics regulations (UPR RE01).

Adverse circumstances

Any adverse circumstances that may arise because of your study/activity must be reported to ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk as soon as possible.

Permissions

Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study/activity must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

Ethics Administration Team

ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk

Appendix E: Participant recruitment poster

The poster features a light grey background with abstract pink and blue shapes in the top corners. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold and regular fonts. A hand-drawn heart and a pencil-drawn line are used as decorative elements. A QR code is located in the bottom right, and a rainbow flag logo is in the bottom left. The University of Hertfordshire logo and Ethics Committee information are at the bottom.

If you:

- are **18-25** years old
- went to school in the UK
- identify or have identified as gender diverse (e.g. trans, non-binary, fluid...)

Your story can make a difference



We welcome you to take part in our research that aims to understand the experiences of **gender diverse people in UK schools**.

This involves a conversation for around 1 hour. Online or in-person. Your data will be kept safe, confidential and anonymised.

Scan the QR code or email me if you have any questions:
Katri Seppala (she/her),
student and researcher, at
K.Seppala@herts.ac.uk



University of Hertfordshire **UH** Ethics Committee

This has been approved by the University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology ethics committee with delegated authority.
The UH protocol number is: 0465 2025 Mar HSET

Appendix F: Study contact form

[← Back](#)[Computer](#)[Mobile](#)

University of Hertfordshire research: Gender diverse people in UK schools

Thank you for showing an interest in our research study.

We are still looking for people to take part in our research that aims to understand the school experiences of gender diverse people in the UK.

We are hoping that our research can help to create change and opportunities for relevant and useful recommendations.

We want it to help new generations of gender diverse children and young people in UK schools or those struggling to access education.

I'm a student at the University of Hertfordshire and this study will contribute towards my DClinPsy qualification.

We can either offer online meetings or in-person meetings in the London or Hertfordshire area based on your preferences.

If you are interested in taking part, please fill in the details below and we will get in touch with you.

1. What is your age?

Enter your answer

2. Are you or have you identified as gender diverse (e.g. trans, non-binary, fluid...)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

[← Back](#)[Computer](#)[Mobile](#)

3. Has most of your schooling been in UK schools (e.g. UK primary and secondary school)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

4. Full name

Enter your answer

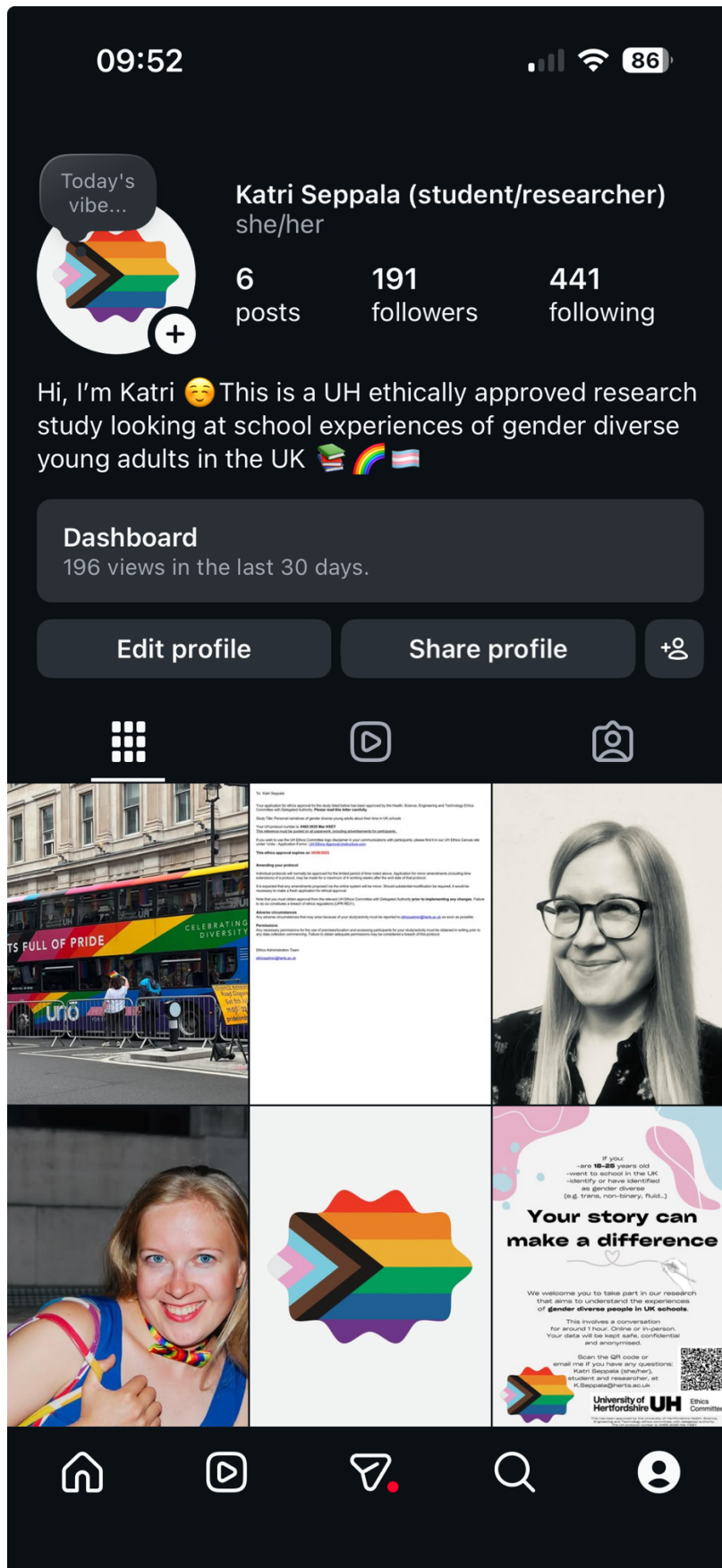
5. Email

Enter your answer

6. Phone number

Enter your answer

Appendix G: Instagram recruitment page



Appendix H: Risk assessment

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE
ETHICS COMMITTEE

HARMS, HAZARDS AND RISKS: ASSESSMENT AND MITIGATION

Name of applicant: Katri Seppala

Date of assessment: 11/01/2025

Title of Study/Activity: **Personal narratives of gender diverse young adults about their time in UK schools.**

Activity Description					
1. IDENTIFY RISKS/HAZARDS	2. WHO COULD BE HARMED & HOW?		3. EVALUATE THE RISKS		4. ACTION NEEDED
<u>Activities/tasks and associated hazards</u> Describe the activities involved in the study and any associated risks/ hazards, both physical and emotional, resulting from the study. Consider the risks to participants/the research team/members of the public. In respect of any equipment to be used read manufacturer's instructions and note any hazards that arise, particularly from incorrect use.)	<u>Who is at risk?</u> e.g. participants, investigators, other people at the location, the owner / manager / workers at the location etc.	<u>How could they be harmed?</u> What sort of accident could occur, eg trips, slips, falls, lifting equipment etc, handling chemical substances, use of invasive procedures and correct disposal of equipment etc. What type of injury is likely? Could the study cause discomfort or distress of a mental or emotional character to participants and/or investigators? What is the nature of any discomfort or distress of a mental or emotional character that you might anticipate?	<u>Are there any precautions currently in place to prevent the hazard or minimise adverse effects?</u> Are there standard operating procedures or rules for the premises? Have there been agreed levels of supervision of the study? Will trained medical staff be present? Etc/	<u>Are there any risks that are not controlled or not adequately controlled?</u>	<u>List the action that needs to be taken to reduce/manage the risks arising from your study</u> for example, provision of medical support/aftercare, precautions to be put in place to avoid or minimise risk or adverse effects NOTE: medical or other aftercare and/or support must be made available for participants and/or investigator(s) who require it.
Risks associated with the Interview conducted virtually	Participant	Risks of conducting the interview virtually involve cybersecurity related risks and difficulty monitoring risk of psychological distress of the participant and harm from others	-Zoom/Teams are currently approved safe to use by the university -Because of the nature of virtual meetings, it can be difficult to establish who is present in the location where the participant is joining the meeting and any associated risks -Having someone present following the interview can also protect against potential psychological distress	No	-Only Zoom/Teams will be used as platforms for conducting the interview -Participants are informed that interviews can only take place with cameras on during the interview -Interview will be terminated and rearranged if the participant is unable to keep the camera on -Participants will be asked at the beginning of the interview if anyone else is present and if they feel comfortable to take part in the interview in the present moment and location
Risks associated with the interview conducted in-person at the participant's home/other familiar residential setting	Participant, Investigator	-Depending on who the participant lives with or who is currently in the residence, there is a risk of others	-Having someone present following the interview can also protect against	No	-The investigator will inform a nominated colleague prior to the interviews about the interview schedule, location and contact details.

		overhearing personal/sensitive information relating to the participant. The reactions/consequences of this can be varied. There is a risk of increased psychological distress to the participant. -There is a potential safety risk to the investigator when entering a previously unknown property	potential psychological distress		-The investigator will contact the nominated colleague once the interview is finished -In the event of the nominated colleague not having been contacted by the investigator, they will try to make contact first with the investigator and if not successful, then with the participant and if still not successful, they will contact the police. -If private and confidential space cannot be guaranteed at the time of the interview, the interview will be terminated and rearranged -Immediate safeguarding (including contacting emergency services) will take place as appropriate
Risk associated with the interview conducted in a public location (e.g. café, library, university etc.)	Participant	Depending on the location, there is a risk of others overhearing personal/sensitive information relating to the participant. The reactions/consequences of this can be varied. There is a risk that some bystanders could behave in a discriminatory manner during the interview, immediately after or at a later point after identifying the participant.	-Offering an in-person interview due to adjustments required by the participant (disability related) is likely to outweigh any potential negative effects	No	-To mitigate these risks interviews will be primarily offered virtually (once both options have been offered and if the participant has not specifically requested for an in-person interview and is able to attend virtually, then the interview will be held virtually) -In the event of any interference in the form of negative behaviour from members of the public, the interview is to be terminated and safeguarding the participant's wellbeing will take priority in this moment (this might include having to contact emergency services etc.)
General risk of psychological distress/harm (in any situation)	Participant	-The participant could be at risk of psychological distress as the topics discussed in the interview can be of sensitive nature -The current sociopolitical situation can increase the risk of psychological distress through potential threat to gender diverse individuals	-The investigator is a Clinical Psychologist in training with experience of helping people in distress, which might help determine appropriate action	No	-Participants are given the information sheet in advance including the research topic area, and they are given an opportunity to ask questions prior to the interview. They will be aware that they can withdraw from the study at any point. -If participants are showing signs of distress during the interview, they will be offered a break where the recording will be stopped, and they will be reminded that they can choose to terminate the interview -An optional debrief will be made available to participants either immediately after or soon after the interview -Participants are encouraged to get in touch with the investigator or the principal supervisor in case they feel distressed by the interview, or anything related to the study -A list of available support services will be made available and given to all participants following the interview -Immediate safeguarding (including contacting emergency services) will take place as appropriate

					-Regular supervision with the principal supervisor and the research team with opportunities to discuss any re-occurring difficulties
Risk of infectious diseases (Covid-19 etc.)	Participant, Investigator	The participant or the investigator could both be at risk of being infected by an infectious disease during the interview or on the way to/from the interview (in-person interviews only)	-In the current public health situation these risks are largely determined by individual circumstances	No	-Find out if participants are at increased risk of ill health if conducting interviews in-person -If there is an increased risk: offer additional precautions such as wearing a mask, cleaning surfaces, hand hygiene, ensuring ventilation and keeping increased distance as appropriate -Avoid in-person interviews when participant/investigator is showing signs of illness. In the event of illness of the participant/investigator, interviews will be cancelled and rearranged if appropriate. -Follow government and UH guidelines in the event of any changes to public health risk

Signed by a licant: 	Dated: 06/03/2025
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Appendix I: Participant information sheet



UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE ETHICS COMMITTEE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Hello, we welcome you to take part in our research study! Please take the time to read this information. You can talk to others about it too. You can ask us any questions about anything that is not clear or if you need more information. Please take your time to decide whether or not you want to take part.

Title of study

Personal narratives of gender diverse young adults about their time in UK schools.

What is the purpose?

To understand gender diverse people's experiences in UK schools better.

Do I have to do it?

It's completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part. If you want to go ahead, you will be given this information sheet and be asked to sign a consent form. Saying that you want to join the study does not mean that you have to go through with it. You can also change your mind afterwards, by contacting the researcher within 2 weeks of the interview without having to give any reason for it.

Is there anything that can stop me from doing it?

If you think being gender diverse during your school years no longer describes you, please let me know. This study is only for those who identified as gender diverse (for example, non-binary, transgender, gender fluid etc.) during their school years. If you didn't go to school mainly in the UK, please let me know. This study is only for those who attended UK primary and secondary schools. If you spent most of your school years abroad (more than 2 years), you will not be able to take part. You will need to be aged 18-25 during your participation in the study.

How long will it take?

If you decide to take part in this study, the duration of the interview will be around 1 hour and no more than 2 hours. After this, you will no longer be contacted. You are welcome to contact me afterwards, if, for example, you want to know more about how the findings are being used to help others.

What will happen to me?

First, I will explain everything you need to know about the study and give you a chance to ask any questions. You will be given this Participant Information Form, and you will be asked to sign a Consent form. If you are happy to go ahead, we will then record our conversation. If we are meeting in-person, the interview will be audio recorded. If we are meeting virtually, the interview will be video recorded. I will be asking you questions about your experiences of attending school in the UK as a gender diverse person. It's entirely up to you what you choose to share or talk about. After we have finished, I will stop the recording and offer you some time for an optional debrief. You are welcome to ask any further questions before you decide to leave.

What are the downsides?

Our discussion might include sensitive topics and although I will do my best to make you feel comfortable, it is possible you might find something upsetting. I will also ask you about any additional needs (including disabilities, mental health or physical health needs), so I can try to offer adjustments that can make it easier for you to participate.

What are the benefits?

We hope to increase research that includes gender diverse people at the forefront. We hope that the results from the study can be used to share information and suggestions that can help gender diverse children and young people as well as decisionmakers, family, friends, school and health care staff. Participating in the study might feel personally meaningful to you, or it might help others. Many people who take part in similar research said they have found it useful to tell their story to someone.

How will my identity and data be kept confidential?

Protection of personal and sensitive data is maintained through the university's policies, the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), and the current UK legal framework; Data Protection Act (2018) and General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679.

**What exactly will happen to the data?**

You will be asked to share some information containing personal and sensitive data (for example, your name, email, phone number and gender identity). This data as well as the audio/video recording will be stored electronically in a password-protected environment on my university OneDrive cloud storage system (accessible only to me and my research supervisors) for a duration of 5 years. After the completion of my academic studies, it will be transferred to the primary research supervisor's UH drive and will be deleted within 5 years of collection.

The results of the study will be presented first in a doctoral thesis for the purpose of gaining a qualification in Clinical Psychology. We will then also expect to share the results more widely in articles and conferences etc. Please be assured these published results will only contain pseudonymised (by a name chosen by you) quotes and none of the recordings or other identifiable data will be shared.

Will the data be used in further studies?

The data may be re-used within the 5 years (only by the research team) as part of other future ethically-approved studies. This re-used data will also only contain pseudonymised (by a name chosen by you) quotes and none of the recordings or other identifiable data will be shared.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by: The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. The UH protocol number is: 0465 2025 Mar HSET

Is everything confidential?

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained unless you report that a child or vulnerable person is at risk, in which we would need to refer this information to appropriate services. We only mention this because we have a duty as professionals to protect those who are vulnerable, but please keep in mind that our goal is not to assess you for risk as part of this study.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me, the primary researcher, by phone or by email: Katri Seppala, [REDACTED]. Alternatively, you can contact my principal supervisor: Wendy Solomons, [REDACTED].

For more information:

<https://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/governance/university-policies-and-regulations-uprs/uprs>

If you have any complaints or concerns about the study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar at the following address:

Secretary and Registrar
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane
Hatfield
Herts
AL10 9AB

Thank you very much for reading this and thinking about taking part!

Appendix J: Participant consent form



UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE ETHICS COMMITTEE CONSENT FORM

I, [please write your FULL NAME here, in CAPITALS]

.....
agree to take part in the study entitled:

Personal narratives of gender diverse young adults about their time in UK schools.

UH Protocol number: 0465 2025 Mar HSET

- 1 I confirm that I have been given a Participant Information Sheet including the study's aim(s), methods and design, the names and contact details of key people and, the risks and potential benefits, how the information collected will be stored and for how long, and any plans for follow-up studies.
- 2 I give consent for anonymised data from this study to be made available for re-analysis as part of future ethically approved studies.
- 3 I have also been informed of how my personal information on this form will be stored and for how long. I have been given details of my involvement in the study.
- 4 I have been assured that I may withdraw from the study at any time up to 2 weeks following the interview without disadvantage or having to give a reason.
- 5 In giving my consent to participate in this study, I understand that voice or video-recording will take place and I have been informed of how/whether this recording will be transmitted/displayed.
- 6 I have been given information about any potential risks of my suffering harm or adverse effects.
- 7 I have been told how information relating to me (data obtained in the course of the study, and data provided by me about myself) will be handled: how it will be kept secure, who will have access to it, and how it will or may be used.
- 8 I understand that if there is any revelation of unlawful activity or any indication that would or has put others at risk, the University may refer this to the appropriate authorities.

Signature of participant.....Date.....

Signature of (principal) investigator.



Name of (principal) investigator

KATRI SEPPALA

Date

Appendix K: Participant debrief form



UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE ETHICS COMMITTEE PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF FORM

Thank you for taking part in the study and for your valuable contribution.

After completing the study, some participants might find themselves thinking about the interview; what they have said and things that have happened. We think that this is quite common, and we hope that your contribution felt meaningful to you.

If you find yourself feeling distressed following the interview or after recalling difficult events, we encourage you to speak to others about this. Sometimes, this can be a friend, a partner or a family member. Sometimes, speaking to trained professionals can also help. Please find a list of resources available that might be helpful:

GP

Your GP can advise you about your wellbeing and signpost or refer you to different services available on the NHS. They take a holistic approach and can sometimes offer access to therapy and/or medication where needed. First, you would need to make an appointment with your GP.

NHS 111

By calling the national helpline, you can receive advice on different NHS services available if you need immediate help. Call: 111 on your phone or use the NHS 111 online service: <https://111.nhs.uk>.

SAMARITANS

By calling the national helpline, you can talk to a trained professional if you need help. They are trained to listen non-judgementally. Call: 116 123, open 24/7 all year round.

SHOUT

This is a texting service, similar to Samaritans, where you can speak to a trained professional (over text) if you need help. You can contact them by texting: SHOUT to 85258. They are also open 24/7 all year round.

SWITCHBOARD

This is a national helpline for LGBTQIA+ people where you can talk to trained volunteers about anything related to gender, sexuality and beyond. You can contact them by calling: 0800 0119 100 (open 10:00-22:00) or by using the online chat: <https://switchboard.lgbt>.

GALOP

This is a national helpline for LGBT+ people who have experienced any type of abuse or violence. Please check the website as they have varied opening hours: <https://galop.org.uk>. You can contact them by calling: 0800 999 5428 or by emailing: help@galop.org.uk.

PINK THERAPY

If you want to find a private therapist, this directory can help you find private therapists that vouch to be LGBTQIA+ supportive: <https://pinktherapy.com>.

GENDERED INTELLIGENCE

This organisation offers a range of support options such as support groups for young people and young adults, one-to-one support, mentoring and a directory for searching for private therapists that have training in working alongside gender diverse people: <https://genderedintelligence.co.uk>.

We would like to remind you of our contact details if there is anything else you would like to get in touch about the study: Katri Seppala: [REDACTED] Wendy Solomons: [REDACTED]

Once again, thank you!

Appendix L: Transcription key adapted from Jefferson (2004)

Symbol	Example	Explanation
(.)	I did it (.) I went there	Pause, less than a second
(1)	But yeah (2) it was hard	Pause, length in seconds
[]	P: [Yeah] I: [Mmm]	Overlapping speech
=	P: Then= I: =What happened?	No breaks between turn-taking
-	I had to (.) I- I-	Broken off word
:	Wha::::t?	Prolonged word
hheh	Yeah hheh	Laughing
hheheh	Ridiculous hheheh	More pronounced laughing
<u>Underlined</u>	<u>Totally</u> unfair	Emphasised words
CAPITALS	I said “WHAT”	Words said louder
> <	>She went there and told them<	Pace quickens
< >	<Sometimes I think about it>	Pace slows down
↑ ↑	↑I couldn’t believe it↑	Pitch gets higher
↓ ↓	↓It is what it is↓	Pitch gets lower
()	My friend (name of friend)	Omitted text to protect confidentiality
(?)	It was (?)	Inaudible speech
(())	((yawning))	Describes actions

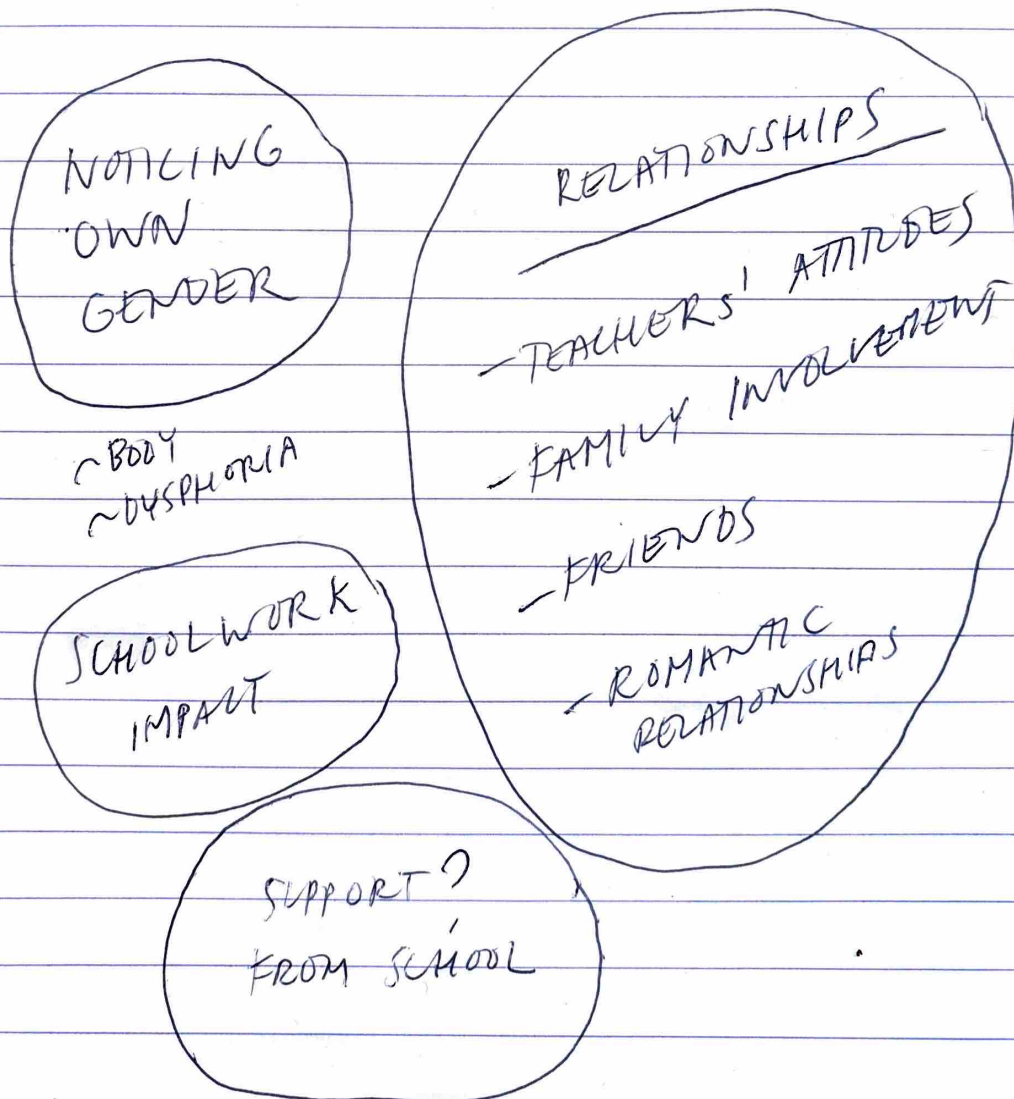
Appendix M: Note with key interview topic areas

(2) START INTERVIEW

→ RECORD & TRANSCRIBE!

EXPLAIN THE PURPOSE

- WE ARE HERE.....



IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE?

Appendix N: Interview schedule with example questions



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

At the start of the interview participants will be talked through a general introduction of what the interview will consist of:

For example:

'I'm here to hear about your experiences of being at school as a gender diverse young person and what that was like for you...

I'm interested in hearing your story...

There are no right or wrong things to talk about,

And it's up to you what you want to talk about...

You can start wherever you would like to start,

If you get stuck and don't know where to go, I can prompt you with certain topics,

But you are always in charge, and if there is something you don't want to talk about, you can tell me that you don't want to go there.

Where would you like to start?

Some of the suggested topics include the following:

-Noticing own gender and its visibility or invisibility

(For example: 'Can you tell me about a time when you first started noticing your own gender?')

-Expressing oneself (through appearance or nicknames)

-Attitudes of others including peers and teachers

-Gendered/othering experiences

(For example: 'Can you tell me about a time where you were made to feel different or 'othered?')

-Exploring identity through schoolwork or expressing oneself creatively through it

-Finding out more about gender

-Support or lack of it and what that looked like

(For example: 'During this time that you talked about, can you remember if there were opportunities for you to reach out for support?')

The interview will be concluded with an opportunity to mention anything else:

For example:

Is there something else that you want the opportunity to tell?

Appendix O: Screenshot showing data indexing

