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'More than boy, girl, male, female': exploring young people's views on gender diversity within and beyond school contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the views of young people aged 12–14 on gender diversity, drawing upon school-based qualitative data from a study conducted in England in 2015–2016. Although earlier feminist and queer research in schools often found evidence of variable local gender cultures and gender non-conformity, we argue that the contemporary context, with its increasing global awareness of gender diversity, offers young people significant new ways of learning about and doing gender. Findings reveal that many young people have expanded vocabularies of gender identity/expression; critical reflexivity about their own positions; and principled commitments to gender equality, gender diversity and the rights of gender and sexual minorities. We also show how young people are negotiating wider cultures of gendered and sexual violence. Schools are providing some spaces and learning opportunities to support gender and sexual diversity. However, overall, it appears that young people's immediate social cultural worlds are constructed in such a way that gender binary choices are frequently inevitable, from school uniforms and toilets to sports cultures and friendships. Our conclusion touches on the implications of these findings for how educational practitioners, external agencies and young people can address gender rights, equality and justice in schools and beyond.

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Gender r/evolutions?: the shifting landscape of young people's gender cultures

There exist long traditions of feminist and queer empirical research into young people's gender cultures and their experiences of how gender matters in schools during middle childhood (for example, Thorne 1993; Hey 1996; Redman 1996; Jackson 2006a, 2006b; Renold 2006, 2013; Paechter 2007; Nayak and Kehily 2013; Ringrose 2013; Kromidas 2015; Bhana 2016). This body of work highlights the significance of gender to children and young people's experiences, theorises the complexities of gender expression, identifies the (inevitable) failures

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of socialisation/enculturation processes, and provides examples of gender non-conformity and diversity amongst children, whether this concerns the ‘object’ (children who are rejected by peer groups for not conforming to expected gender norms), the self-identified (e.g. ‘tom-boys’; see Renold 2008; Paechter 2010), or the product of the interpretive lens brought to bear by the researcher (Renold and Ringrose 2012; Thomson, Bragg, and Kehily 2018). Much of this research also illustrates how children and young people are regulated by and make sense of their own gender and sexual identities, actively constructing, negotiating and contesting both familiar dominant masculinities and femininities and locally-specific versions of gender hegemony. An important thread running throughout this research is the intersectional analyses of how children and young people’s gendered cultures are produced in a variety of ways and yet governed by a heteronormative logic (e.g. Epstein, O’Flynn, and Telford 2003; Renold and Ringrose 2008; Gowlett and Rasmussen 2016; Meyer and Carlson 2014).

In January 2017, the *National Geographic* produced a special issue on gender in which it declared that ‘we are in the midst of a gender revolution’. While non-binary and gender diverse cultures are certainly not new, and have existed in various forms across different cultures for decades and even centuries (Herdt 1996; Fausto-Sterling 2012), gender and sexual diversity is increasingly visible in a range of spheres. These spheres include popular culture which is paradoxically at once ‘postfeminist’ (Ringrose 2013) ‘sexualised’, diverse and activist, incorporating high-profile non-binary ‘celebrities’ (e.g. Jayden Smith, Tilda Swinton) and trans teen-activist you-tubers (e.g. Jazz Jennings). There is an expanding vocabulary of gender and increasingly multiple and visible ways to identify (or disidentify) with and ‘do’ gender that researchers are both exploring and having to take into account (Meyer and Carlson 2014; Robinson et al. 2014; Westbrook and Saperstein 2015; Jones et al. 2016; Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017. For discussions and definitions of gender diversity, see Hines and Sanger 2010).

In the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission supports gender diversity and transgender equality as a global human rights issue, and it has been illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of protected features, including gender identity, since 2010 (Equality Act 2010). More recently, in 2016, the UK Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry into transgender equality issued a call to ‘degender’ passports and driving licences, and in July 2017, the then Women and Equalities Minister Justine Greening asserted the Government’s commitment ‘to building an inclusive society that works for everyone, no matter what their gender or sexuality’ and to consult on potentially over-hauling the Gender Recognition Act (2004). UK schools, however, are fast playing catch-up with laws and guidance, and how to best support the increasing number of students who are self-identifying as trans* (Hines 2017).

In this paper, we explore how children and young people experience these shifting gender terrains and how gender continues to matter to them. While we did not set out to capture specifically or only the views of trans*¹ young people, our project included participants who identified with and used trans* categories (e.g. gender fluid, agender, non-binary and gender diverse) and paints a rich portrait of contemporary gender cultures, which enable us to identify the challenges for educators in keeping pace with a rapidly moving field.

Researching young people’s contemporary experiences of how gender matters

The research explored in this article arose from a study commissioned by the Office for the Children’s Commissioner for England² (OCCE) in 2015 (see Renold et al. 2017 for the full

report). The OCCE has a remit to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Its previous research highlighted the significance of gender to the realisation of children's rights, and also that relatively little is known about how young people in diverse socio-economic and geographic locales experience gender today. We were commissioned to conduct research in five locations in England, including rural, urban and coastal sites. Most of this work took place in schools with approximately 100 young people aged 12–14 years, with a focus on accessing the voices of minority groups (in schools, defined particularly in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, and young people in care). Research was also conducted with LGBTQ youth groups outside schools, covering a wider age range. In this paper, we include data from the latter only if participants were aged 12–14.³ Our participatory research also involved working with a diverse self-identified 'feminist' advisory group (age 14–17) to co-create a series of activities informed by creative and visual methods (Mannay 2016; Renold 2018).⁴

Our methodology is informed by feminist and queer approaches to gender, specifically theories and concepts that pay attention to the performative (Butler 2004), situated (Haraway 1988) and intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) ways in which gender is experienced as always in process and mediated across seemingly sedimented, yet unstable, discursive, material, temporal, corporeal and affective terrains (Braidotti 2002). The research design thus built on previous studies aiming to create research encounters that invite and hold in play the fluidity, complexity and diversity of changing and transforming gender identities and expressions (see for example, Payne and Smith 2012; Renold 2013; Francis and Paechter 2015; Hines 2017). The research team was also keenly aware of how our research practices and conceptualisations of 'gender' (and other identity markers) create rather than simply 'find' gender formations (e.g. by reinforcing gender binaries or categories like girl and boy). Accordingly, we aimed for an open and exploratory approach to young people's meaning-making practices to capture how young people move *in and out of* gender categories, concepts and cultures.

Practically, we conducted two-hour group workshops and one-hour follow-up (optional) individual narrative interviews, creating a multi-phased process that allowed different modes of expression, including talk, drawing, mapping, photo-elicitation and image sharing (e.g. memes, skins, Facebook profiles) to capture a wide range of social, material, cultural and embodied practices. We opened with activities that invited general talk on names (to access family histories and relationships); getting ready for school or parties (everyday practices of self-care); and feelings associated with navigating different spaces, places and times. After this, we moved towards an explicit focus on gender, discussing gender as identity; stereotypes and expectations; popular culture; gendered forms of violence; and gender-based activism. We finished by inviting young people to offer messages for change on (how) 'gender jars' using paper, pens and a glass jar (see Renold 2018). In this paper, we prioritise young people's narrative reflections on how (far) language, identities, bodies, images, objects, emotions and social relations and relationships are gendered and/or imbued with gendered meanings in the context and practices of their everyday lives.⁵ This approach challenges notions of gender as essentially fixed, binary or undifferentiated, yet still enables us to map if gender is felt or experienced this way.

'Nowadays people are more accepting': young people's views on gender diversity and equality

One significant theme was children and young people's expanding gender vocabulary: 23 different terms for gender identity were used by participants in our research. Many participants were also advocates for the rights of sexual minorities and trans* people, and were highly critical of gender inequalities. They often saw these rights as 'modern' or 'twenty-first century' and as important aspects of their sense of self and values, identifying themselves as more progressive than earlier generations. Katie (age 14, School 2 Inner-City) for example, suggested that it would be beneficial to have less labelling in terms of sexuality, and greater fluidity of sexual expression: 'if you were a girl and you'd been going out with boys your whole life and one time you went out with a girl it wouldn't mean you'd have to change your whole identity'. Lorelei (age 14, School 3 Coastal) advocated trans* rights thus:

You should just be who you want to be. You shouldn't let anyone else stand in your way, because ... you only live once and so if you're not comfortable with how you are, then you might as well change it before it's too late.

Many young people oscillated between the need to invest in and retain gender categories ('we need gender') yet not be constrained by them ('it should be free if you like'). One participant stated 'if you want to be a boy that wears dresses, you should be able to. If you want to be a girl who walks around in jumpsuits and a big top then you should be able to' (Jacob, age 14, School 2 Inner-City). A desire for gender fluidity or openness was strongly evident amongst some of our participants, such as Mary Lou who changed gender identity on the school roll call from girl (Mary-Lou) to boy (Lou) in primary school, and then back to girl (Mary-Lou) in secondary school, but who struggled to maintain more expansive non-normative gender expressions in the face of both peer and family expectations:

I didn't want to be a boy, I kind of wanted to be nothing. I don't relate to what people say for a girl or a boy. I think that's what I had to understand. Being a girl isn't what I hated, the boys I did ... I wear boy clothes, I buy my stuff ... out of the boys' section. My mum wants me to be a girl but I say no because I don't want to. (age 13, School 2 Inner-City)

Even when the language of gender binaries and difference was asserted, it was often combined with support for feminism, defined as not limiting what people might achieve:

Like I do think that obviously, girls and boys are different, they're equal but they're different. And I think that there's definitely things that makes a girl, things that makes a boy, but I don't think that they should be contained as to what they can do and what they can achieve and stuff. (Luisa, age 14, School 1 Inner-City)

There was debate and contestation across group and individual discussions about whether acceptance of gender and sexual diversity conflicted or could be reconciled with religious and family beliefs (cf. DePalma and Atkinson 2009). Certain beliefs and attitudes (e.g. male superiority or homophobia) were sometimes castigated as belonging in the distant past, and described as 'old-fashioned' by some young people:

They're old-fashioned and like, that's not nice to be honest. Like, technology is expanding but the people who are living in this world, their mind's thinking like the ones a couple of hundred years ago ... like, they still believe that boys are better than girls and stuff! (Navera, age 13, School 1 Inner-City)

Contemporary society was depicted by some young people as 'more accepting' of gender and sexual diversity, with some suggesting it was a feature of Britain in particular. 'Old' people

– meaning, grandparents, or less often parents – were sometimes deemed more ‘backwards’ and less ‘educable’ than young people:

In the modern time, modern days, like, there’s more equality. ‘Cause like, everyone’s trying to like, you know, get involved in everything. (Khaliif, age 14, Inner-City 1)

In this country there is a bit of, like, more equality than some parts of the world, and like some people, some like, girls, cannot like ride a bike in some areas of the world, like Saudi Arabia or something, which is disgusting. (Dacar, age 13, Inner-City 2)

Society has changed over the years, so your parents would’ve been brought up with something else and, nowadays, people are more accepting. (Jacob, age 14, Inner-City 2)

For Carlita, ‘old-fashioned’ anti-gay attitudes were seen to be caused by lack of information and education. The Internet, she suggested, is now addressing this:

People are much more accepting now ... 50 years ago if you were gay or anything like that, you would have been heavily judged for that ... people would beat you up on the street. But now I think there are people who I know [are gay] here and they don’t get beaten up every day, they don’t get severely bullied, some of them just get on with it and they’re accepted. I think it is slowly getting better ... because before we couldn’t spread information as quickly as we can now. Now in a click of a button we can spread information to the whole world in less than a second, but before that was impossible. People are being educated in a different way rather than just (in their) household. (Carlita, age 14, Inner-city 2)

Sometimes young people’s experiences of racism and their understandings of racial diversity seemed to prompt them to support sex, gender and sexual diversity, underpinned by a desire that differences of any kind should not be a barrier to self-identity and self-expression. Sometimes it was part of a general morality about ‘live and let live’, letting others make choices that are different from your own:

If you’re born a female, I think that’s the way you were supposed to be ... that’s just what I think ... [but] that’s their life, that’s their business ... they have made the choice so what can I do about it? (Kamsi, age 14, Inner-City 1)

If he (Conchita, a trans celebrity) wants, if he wants to be like, wants to do that, I don’t really mind. It’s his life so if he wants to live it. (Marek, age 14, Inner-City 1)

I respect what they’ve chosen. But it’s just something I wouldn’t choose. (Kushtim, age 14, Inner-City 1)

In some cases, religious beliefs conflicted with young people’s sense of themselves as modern (more accepting or pro-gay):

I know for a fact, my religion, the most wrongest thing you can do is either be gay or be something that God didn’t choose for you, because God doesn’t make mistakes ... Honestly, I think it’s wrong, I’m not going to say that I think it’s right: because you were born like that you should embrace it and everything. But if they don’t feel that way then I’m not going to question it. It’s not up to me. (Layla, age 14, School 3 Coastal)

I’m a Muslim but I feel like some of the things are wrong, like ... a person should be allowed to marry the person that’s the same gender as them ... and, in my religion, that’s really wrong ... but I believe in it ... and I usually go with my head, rather than my heart ... my religion’s in my heart ... so head-wise, my mindset is that’s gay ... it should be allowed ... that’s what I personally believe. (Navera, age 13, Inner-City 1)

These data illustrate how young people of diverse faiths navigate conflicting beliefs, with Layla raising complex questions about right and wrong, God and choice, and Navera supporting gay rights despite her religious background.

Across the research sites, young people were eager to promote change in relation to gender inequalities, stereotypes, (hetero)sexism and homophobia, and they suggested strategies for doing so. Many indicated that participating in the research was the first time they had been invited to speak freely about gender issues:

We've never done anything like this [research interview] so it's all sort of bottled up, 'cause I'm quite opinionated anyway so it's quite nice that someone is gonna read this and actually take note of it rather than just like ranting about it on Tumblr or whatever, and then everyone's like 'oh yeah I agree with you' but no-one ever does anything about it. (Sinead, age 14, School 3 Coastal)

However, local cultures influenced how much young people could explore gender identities and promote change, as we now explore.

Local gender cultures supportive of gender diversity and non-conformity

A noticeable feature of the research was the diversity of young people's gender cultures, and how some had developed supportive contexts for exploring gender non-conformity, openness and instability. In School 3 (Coastal), we met members of a sizeable and cohesive peer group who were confidently exploring identities such as 'gender fluid', 'agender', 'gay', 'lesbian or bisexual' or 'pansexual'. We also found pockets of non-sexualised relationships: two girls described their 'respectful' male friends as 'boy true friends', 'sort of like a girl in a boy version' (Millie and Alexis, age 14). In all schools we found instances of boy-girl friendships, including amongst young people who did not conform to normative gender stereotypes and who supported each other in their non-conformity. For instance, Dameer aged 14 spent his time with girls and his best (girl-)friend, Khaz, because they share the same interests and support his gender expression (School 1 Inner-City).

Young people described peer relationships (face to face and/or online) and (more rarely) families, schools and teachers that accepted and sustained gender diversity. Alin and his friends all supported each other in playing with gender expression. They described sharing stories of wearing make-up or dresses as small boys, exploring self-expression through alternative gender identities on social media, and holding views on gender inclusivity that would not be shared by their peers. They explained the importance of having friends who 'understand you':

It might be a little harder, like, without someone to support you. If you have, like, friends that understand you, it's a lot easier to kind of be a little different ... 'cause you know that group of friends that always support you ... It just helps to, like, talk about things and how you feel and then, like, if you're by yourself, I think people will be like suffering ... you might get to feel worse. (Alin, age 13, Inner-City 1)

Support sometimes came from the family. Mary-Lou for example described how her aunt helped her resist gender conformity:

My aunt, she doesn't care, she has the same haircut as this guy here and she doesn't care what people say. People at her work go like, 'you're a transvestite because you have a boy's haircut' ... but you don't need to care about what other people say about you because you are the one who lives, you do whatever you want, you dress yourself in whatever you want. And I think she's right because if she wants to have a short haircut she can. (Mary Lou, age 14, Inner-City 2)

Mediated learning about gender diversity and non-conformity

Young people drew on popular culture such as gender diverse public figures, celebrities and social media networks to find ways to describe themselves and others as ‘gender fluid’, ‘agender’ and other terms that locate gender identities on a continuum rather than as fixed or binary. Celebrities who sparked thinking about gender diversity included Laura Jane Grace (transgender musician), Ruby Rose and Laverne Cox (both stars of the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, set in a women’s prison) and musician and performer Pink. An image of Eurovision-winner Conchita, used as a research prompt, sparked much debate:

Conchita ... she’s saying that you can be whatever you want to be ... just don’t let anyone pull you down. (Ryan, age 13, Inner-City 1)

Nat: Yeah, amazing if she’s [Conchita] comfortable then way then go ...

Olivia: Just because she’s not shaved her beard it’s showing that she’s fine with being who she is. She’s not going to get rid of it because she’s afraid of other people making fun of her for having a beard.

Nat: She’s gorgeous.

Olivia: But she’s so pretty anyway.

Tess: Yeah, I’m quite jealous to be honest.

Nat: If she has the beard or not she’s gorgeous. Literally she has the perfect, the lips, she’s just pretty.

Maia: And courage to go on that show the Eurovision ...

Olivia: She’s prettier than an actual lot of girls ... I don’t mean she’s not a girl but, people who are born girls, she looks a lot prettier. (all age 14, School 4 Rural)

Throughout our research, young people’s narratives suggested they were working hard to educate and inform themselves, each other, and indeed us as interviewers, about contemporary gender cultures:

Everyone just assumes that there’s transgender then male and female, but most people don’t know about agender and the difference between transgender, transsexual and transvestite ... You can put a hashtag in [to Tumblr] ... LGBTQ, non-binary sexuality ... there’s this one picture I’ve got and it explains sexualities and everything and it’s really useful ... I thought there was just homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual and it turns out there’s like poly-sexual, demi-sexual, all sorts of things. (Sinead, age 14, School 3 Coastal)

Finding and sharing sources of support – often online – make a tangible difference to young people’s feelings of isolation or vulnerability (Albury and Byron 2016). Young people in the LGBTQ+ youth groups had particularly nuanced and long-standing insights into the range of gender identities. Ricky (age 13), for instance, who self-identified as lesbian and non-binary, described first becoming aware at age five that gender could mean ‘more than boy, girl, male, female’. Ricky shared stories of being inspired by and ‘want[ing] to be like’ their favourite gaming YouTuber who they describe as ‘a lesbian, married with kids’ who produces the best ‘comebacks’ to the homophobic/biphobic comments that so many women experience in the online gaming world.

Subcultures of gaming were mentioned by others as sources of learning about gender. Daryl (age 14, School 3 Coastal), talked at length about the 2014 ‘gamer gate’⁶ controversy and the gender politics of gaming, despite being in other respects rather conservative on gender issues. Meanwhile, Lauren and Poppy (13, School 4 Rural) were critical of how online gamers regulated gender stereotypes/expectations. Lauren recounted her ‘annoyance’ when some gamers suggested she change the gender of her ‘girl’ avatar on Minecraft to ‘boy’, a

request possibly motivated by assumptions that girls cannot be serious and competent gamers (Fisher and Jenson 2017):

Lauren: If you're a girl and you play video games ... you're expected to play stupid ones or you're expected to only play them to impress someone and not just be interested in them. Like one time, somebody told me that I should change my Minecraft character because I shouldn't be pretending to be a girl, which I thought was a bit annoying.

Int: Oh, so they thought you were a boy pretending to be a girl?

Poppy: Yeah, because my Minecraft name's (removed for anonymity) so, it's kinda boyish, but not really. (age 13, School 4 Rural)

Safe spaces, networks and forums for alternative gender expressions, gender activisms and learning about and sharing gender injustices were very important to some young people. For instance, some boys experimented with creating a female online persona (such as a Facebook profile or online avatar). Self-identified 'best friends' Kye and Pjeter (age 14, Inner-city 1) were educating themselves about feminism through their use of sites like Tumblr, and following celebrities like Kurt Cobain. They discussed 'calling each other out' on sexist attitudes, challenging macho and aggressive expectations, and apologising to a girl for participating in earlier 'slut-shaming' activities. They were beginning to explore how gender binaries held less relevance now, and to find a vocabulary (such as 'heteronormative', 'non-binary', homophobia) to articulate heterosexualised social pressures on young people:

Kye: I know people that are, don't, er, identify male or female, you know? ... Be how you want. If you don't feel like you're a boy or a girl then you're not a boy or a girl, you're non-binary, you know?

Pjeter: I feel sometimes when you're seen talking to a girl you're, it's like ooerrr

Kye: It's again that heteronormativity thing as well, like um, boy and girl. (both age 14, Inner-City 1)

For over a year, Kye and Pjeter had been sharing what they described as 'feminist' quotes, memes and blogs to learn more about gender inequalities. They talked about how they routinely 'check themselves' since coming to believe that much of what they previously watched and shared on social media (such as 'The Lad Bible') was sexist. Kye (mixed heritage West African and English) and Pjeter (Eastern European heritage) supported each other in rejecting 'the whole machismo thing,' and the expectation for boys to be aggressive and misogynistic. They were highly critical of how fixed ideas of gender and the gender binary 'can lead to boxing people in'. They questioned why people think there are 'only two genders,' because of how 'the genders have been really rigidly defined. If you're a man you must do this and if you're a woman you must do this'. Pjeter particularly disliked the widely held view that 'all people from South-East Europe are naturally angry or aggressive, which I'm not'. Kye was exploring how class, race and gender played out in perpetuating inequalities. He had started reading books and blogs on black feminism, reverse sexism and men as feminist allies, such as iwriteaboutfeminism.tumblr.com, which he commented was 'really cool cause she writes about what went on in (the police shooting in) Ferguson and a lot of that,' and *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. He argued that it would be inappropriate for him as a man to engage in feminist blogging himself: 'I don't think I should speak about it ... I think to use where I am to elevate women's choices'. However, for both boys their interest in feminism and gender inequalities remained underground, operating

below the radar inside a school culture they described as 'sexist' and 'heteronormative'. Our research project was the first time they had spoken openly on these issues to anyone else.

Many young people described online spaces as the most important to gain information about issues related to gender and sexuality, and challenge gender injustices where they surfaced. They referred to social media networks, especially Tumblr, Twitter and ASK.FM as ones where they accessed useful information everyday. Taneisha (age 13, Inner-City 2) described how important social media was in her daily life as a social outlet and a place to stay in touch; she used multiple platforms, often simultaneously, including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Tumblr and ASK.FM. Taneisha brought up screenshots about gender issues and celebrity feminism throughout the group interview.

At the time of our research, Tumblr and Snapchat story were noted as having a sophisticated gender politics:

Peter: Social media like Snapchat ... they did one of those public stories about Pride ... You post something on, like, a London story and then everyone in London can see it, not just your friends ...

Rachel: Yeah, other people can see they can say their views freely, that other people are saying it too, they're not shy to say what they like ...

Peter: There's an amazing image I saw of Obama holding the multicoloured flag.

Helena: I think social media's good because you can see celebrities ... things like that. (all age 14, Inner-City 2)

As well as learning from social media, young people were contributing to online communities. For instance, Ricky scripted a critique of the social media meme where (straight) women declared 'I'm gay for Ruby Rose' as offensive and belittling of what it means to be gay or trans, and posted it every time they got 'infuriated':

I just have it copied and pasted ... because literally every single day there is somebody saying 'oh yeah I'm gay for Ruby Rose' so it's just like ... here we go again ... it's basically me just telling them that they can't just treat women like they are a, a slab of meat that you can suddenly be (gay) and that, yeah. (age 13, urban LGBTQ + youth group)

The unevenness of young people's gender cultures and the persistence of gender binaries

Despite pockets of vibrant experimentation and self-crafting that showed young people's awareness and understanding of gender diversity in variously assembled gender relations, we also found striking differences in young people's experiences of gender, both within and across peer groups, age groups, schools and regions. For example, in the inner-city school where Kye and Pjeter were learning about feminism through social media, many girls recounted tales of gender-based and sexual harassment. In the coastal school, where self-identified 'gender fluid' peer groups were experimenting with identity play, we met Honey, a 12-year-old girl in foster care. She described how she had to be driven to school because of the sexual harassment she experienced from male drivers when waiting at a bus stop, and how her social media use was heavily monitored by her foster carers following an incident involving, in her words, an older man 'perving' on her. She was flagged for safe-guarding at school. She gave her gender as 'female', wrote that 'I like being a girl', said that she 'never even thought about' gender, while nonetheless speculating in interview about whether she would like to live as a boy for a day or a week. A fixed gender identity and expression seemed to be a relatively minor concern to her. We can read her experiences as

part of a complex social, cultural and technological matrix where ‘risk indicators’ (sexual harassment, socio-economic background and looked-after status) position her as a vulnerable girl and where imagining life as a boy may offer her an escape from some of these conditions. Likewise, in the same school a boy described being bullied on account of both being in foster care and his interest in ‘girl things’, such as having girls as friends, or a desire sometimes to wear dresses and make up. Rather than finding his own preferred identifications, offensive and ‘sticky’ labels were assigned to him, such as ‘he-she’ and ‘goy’ (a ‘girl-and-a-boy’, as he explained it, although this term relates to longer established histories of cultural differentiation and hierarchy). Even young people who were not self-consciously gender non-conforming described homophobic judgements being applied to them, such as Jo (aged 14, Coastal) who was consistently called ‘gay’ because of his interest in horses.

Dameer (age 14, Inner-city 1) was passionate about equalities, describing how he and his brother supported each other to cope with the ongoing homophobic and fat-shaming harassment they respectively suffered in (and out of) school and online:

I’m not gay, but let’s just say I am gay, I don’t get why people would worry about me if I’m gay like, if I’m gay, I’m gay, what is it to you? ... We are all humans and it doesn’t matter if we are gay, lesbians or Muslim, Christian, Sikh, short, white, black, we are all human and we should stop discriminating each other because it’s not right ... He [brother] hates shopping, I like shopping. He likes football, I hate football. So it’s kind of like we’re the opposite but like we still get along and yes, it’s just like, he mostly gets in fights for me because of how people call me gay. He just backs me up, and I get into fights because people call him fat. So, like a brothers’ thing. (Dameer, age 14, Inner-City 1)

Young people in a farming community argued it was easier for celebrities to transgress, possibly positioning celebrity culture as something ‘other’ to ‘normal’ life, or alternatively as more progressive than their ‘old-fashioned’ community:

It would be different where I live because it’s more countryside and people have quite old fashioned views ... I think in our village if a boy was running around in a skirt and a dress-top kind of thing, people would judge them more because it’s like local ... your local little village and you’re expected to be normal, how people think of normal, kind of thing. And because if you’re well known, like, Miley Cyrus is quite well known for doing different stuff, so it’s not as difficult for her. (Kyle, age 13, School 4 Rural)

Support for sexual equality was not universal but young people often challenged ‘intolerant’ views in the group discussions:

Anele: I respect people like that, but I personally don’t think it’s right and they’ll need help.

Zeynep: Like, some people are gay and lesbian, we should just get over it, to be honest.

Anele: But they should have help with that because I don’t think ... I will respect it but I don’t find it right.

Havva: Religion-wise, it says it’s wrong, but ... people that are gay, I find it something they should be proud of, they’re different.

Zeynep: Like, people should get over it, to be honest. (all age 13, Inner-City 1)

Many young people were reflexive about conflicting sets of beliefs or values, or why they struggled with particular gender issues. Kushtim, Marek and Lyndal (all age 14, Inner-City 1) discussed how they might feel if Conchita walked into their classroom and sat at their table. They shared their fears of feeling ‘uncomfortable’ and why they might feel this way, suggesting that perhaps it related to transgenderism being ‘common’ on television, but more unusual in their communities. Kushtim commented that ‘I think the first time I saw a gay person, like, kissing was in Year 6 [aged 10–11]. I was shocked because I’ve never seen it in

my life. Now when I see them it's just Oh, OK. Like I've seen it a few times now'. They agreed that one day transgenderism might be more acceptable, less 'shocking and new', less 'weird', even if 'it's not something they would choose'.

Schools supporting change?

As noted, most of our research took place in schools, and arguably school- or 'adult'/teacher-approved discursive genres and norms of discussion are evident in some of the data we cite above, where we hear young people supporting universal rights and tolerance, reflecting thoughtfully even on their own 'prejudices', and courteously contesting each other's positions. If so, then we might identify such norms as in themselves an achievement at least partially attributable to formal education systems.

The schools that provided sites for our research were promoting gender equalities in more specific ways. Inner-city School 1's initiatives included a 'girl power' lunch club and a whole-day event to encourage girls to take-up computer science and coding. Inner-city School 2 had established a weekly lunchtime feminist group, of which most of our participants were aware. The group seemed to raise awareness of feminist issues, open up space for debating a position in relation to gender equality and equity, and offer language to express what it means to live in and negotiate a gendered world. The few older girls we interviewed who had participated in it discussed how the feminist group helped them challenge sexism both in school and out, such as at parties, stating: 'we like to get quite passionate as a group'. Boys were also aware of the group, which meant they had greater familiarity with the notion of feminism and the possibility that it was a political view held by boys and men. Indeed, a group of 13-year-old boys debated sexism in sport, arguing that 'adding women's teams (to FIFA) ... it's a big step towards equality'. They also readily agreed that men could be feminists, and directly challenged a boy who argued that he 'couldn't be bothered with' feminism. However, the extra-curricular nature and timing of the feminist group was a barrier in terms of attendance: students therefore pointed to a need for more gender content on the formal curriculum to address and combat gender and sexual inequities and inequalities, from the structural and institutional to the micro-social and affective (see Kim and Ringrose, [forthcoming](#)).

Our images of 'gender justice champions' used as interview prompts were familiar to some students who had watched Emma Watson's speech and studied Malala in lessons in School 3 (Coastal). Vincent (age 14, Coastal) noted that when he was 'in one of my feminine moods' a teacher recognised his alter ego Whitney by saying 'Hi Whitney'; 'He was proper accepting, and I think that's what all teachers need to be'. Millie and Alexis (both age 14, Coastal) discussed how much they valued their woman PE teacher sticking up for them when boys claimed that girls 'couldn't throw', saying that they were just as good as boys. Millie also explained:

My English teacher, she sometimes goes on about, like about the gender thing. And about us being like equal. And then there's some boys that go 'oh here she goes again about girls being equal to boys', and it's like, well we should be equal to boys because it isn't fair that boys see themselves as being higher than girls.

However, despite strong support amongst many young people for gender fluidity and for challenging gender norms, from their perspective, schools were generally structured and operated in ways that reinforced the notion of gender identity and expression as binary,

especially in regards to school uniforms, toilets and sports. There were some exceptions. For example, the coastal school, which was recently built, had gender-neutral toilets. Yet students expressed ambivalence about sharing such 'private' space across genders, as well as about the staff surveillance it allowed. Indeed, as we have shown here, the contextual contingency of gender r/evolutions continuously rubbed up against sedimented sexist, homophobic and transphobic sentiments, discrimination and violence.

Conclusion – implications of contemporary youth gender cultures for educators

It is impossible to make generalisations about the experiences of young people. Nevertheless, our findings support research from other countries which suggests that growing awareness of gender diversity is dramatically changing ideas about gender identity and equality in educational contexts and beyond, and across age groups of children and young people (Payne and Smith 2012; Meyer and Carlson 2014; Jones et al. 2016). By creating methodologies that enable gender to be explored in and across a range of spaces, places and cultures, we have emphasised how gender is constantly in process, and being made and remade in a myriad of ways amongst our participants.

Our findings offer many ways forward for educators. They show that adults who want to make changes towards practices which create and support inclusive gender cultures and address gender equity and gender justice can expect to find allies amongst the young people with whom they work. In fact, the challenge maybe in keeping pace with young people's new modes of expression and sites for learning. Indeed, never has there been a more urgent need for teacher training on critical gender sensitive pedagogies in the context of the historical and contemporary social, cultural, biological and political sex/gender/sexuality landscape (see also Smith and Payne 2016). It also follows that if educators are supported to create conducive contexts through which young people are encouraged to lead the way in some of this work, then potentially rich pedagogical encounters of why, how, where and when gender matters might be formed.

Such conducive contexts might also shift the adult-teacher, student-learner subject positions of traditional teaching and learning encounters, so that learning becomes a potentially reciprocal and co-productive process. Governments in Scotland and Wales, for example, are already promoting educational practices that foreground students as actively directing teaching and learning spaces, from content to assessment. Moreover, the Welsh Government has supported the development of a co-produced interactive resource with and for young people on creative ways to address gender and sexual diversity, equity, rights and gender-based and sexual violence via a youth-led activist toolkit (Renold 2016; Renold and McGeeney 2017). The toolkit includes examples of young people educating senior school staff about gender diversity via a 'gender snap' card game and debate (51–53) and young people delivering peer-led workshops with primary (elementary) school students on LGBTQ issues and inclusive relationships via physical and interactive theatre and drama (37–39).

Critically, however, our analysis of the contextual contingency of how gender is perceived and experienced suggests that any intervention to support and advance gender well-being and gender equality needs to be sensitive both to complex sociocultural patternings, and the shifting and contradictory ways in which gender matters to children and young people.

Notes

1. We use trans* here as an inclusive umbrella term for people who identify as any gender other than, or in addition to, the sex and gender categories they were assigned with at birth (e.g. from multiple genders or no gender at all).
2. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Office for the Children's Commissioner for England.
3. The authors would like to thank the wider research team (Victoria Edwards, Christopher Marlow, Kate Marston, Hannah Retallack and Eleanor Staples), its academic and young people's advisory groups, and the OCCE's third sector and young people's advisory group.
4. We also undertook a survey that explored participants' views about gender, how gender affects their lives, and what they want to change. However, in this particular paper, we do not draw on the survey data, so we do not discuss it here (see Renold et al. 2017).
5. All the names in this article are pseudonyms generated by the research team. Names have been chosen not only to reflect children and young people's ethnic and cultural heritage, but also their own preferred gender identity categories and pronouns. This information was sourced from participants' completion of an individual task called 'About Me', where researchers invited participants to describe (amongst other things) their 'gender'. Information regarding preferred pronouns was also sourced from how participants referred to themselves in the interviews, such as during the 'what's in a name' task (e.g. 'he', 'him', 'they' etc.).
6. The 'gamergate controversy' here refers to incidents related to the harassment and abuse of (mostly women) games developers and journalists, from 2014 onwards. It is usually seen as a right-wing backlash against progressivism in the games industry, although portrayed by supporters as about corruption in journalism.

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