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‘I just want them to feel safe and enjoy PE’: Experiences of teaching gender-questioning students in sport, physical activity and dance

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In its [2018 LGBT Action Plan](#), the UK government made a commitment to publishing updated guidance for schools on how to apply the Equality Act 2010 regarding gender-questioning pupils. In July 2019 it was further announced that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission was developing guidance for schools on supporting transgender pupils (Long & Loft, 2020). The DfE (2022) stated that it is ‘vital that staff endeavour to reduce the additional barriers faced [for children questioning their assigned gender] and provide a safe space to speak out or share their concerns with members of staff’ (no. 204). However, as of June 2023, no further guidance has been published.

Statistics show that 78 per cent of North American students who disclose their gender variances at school suffer some sort of harassment and 35 per cent experience physical harassment (Grant et al., 2011). In the European context, a survey showed that 46.2 per cent of gender non-conforming young people suffered harassment within educational contexts in Spain (Devís-Devís et al., 2017).

Teachers are increasingly faced with professional dilemmas every day in schools. The need for pupils to move and exercise remains central to wellbeing and lifelong learning (Bushell-Thornalley, 2021). So, how do professionals negotiate the needs of gender-questioning young people when the bell rings and they need to support 30-plus children to get changed, head out to a sports field or studio, and undertake meaningful physical activity?

And what if that teacher identifies as a gender other than that assigned to them at birth (see, for example, Bancroft & Greenspan, 2022)?

These are questions we are addressing through our current research, using purposive sampling of 35 participants, including physical education and dance trainee teachers from our PGCE course, mentors in our partnership schools and early career teachers. We are using an interpretive paradigm that foregrounds authentic reflections through a mixed-method approach using an anonymous online questionnaire, with nine participants additionally providing a semi-structured follow-up interview.

Early findings suggest that the staff are using innovative and creative approaches to accommodate pupils in ways that are respectful for all. Examples include creation of unisex styles of dance and flexibility of pupil choices, with different options including activities such as badminton, Kin-Ball and orienteering. Participants have discussed pupil acceptance, support for questioning around issues of gender and – inevitably – the thorny issue of changing rooms.

What we are finding strongly is that teachers are eager to share the evolution of their professional practices and that they want these to inform wider guidance and policy. They articulate strong relationships with pupils as central and share how they are finding ways to create comfortable environments for all their pupils. They affirm the value of being consulted both for themselves professionally and for their learners.

Certainly, in an Australian study, teacher positivity is shown to have significant impact on gender-diverse students' sense of connection to their school environment and on these students being more confident and motivated learners whose academic self-concept is higher (Ullman, 2017). As guidelines emerge in the UK and internationally, the nuances of discussions around this topic need to retain the voice of all stakeholders and

embrace innovative reasonable adjustments for young people and those who teach them.

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