



**Institute of Education**

**Doctorate in Professional Educational Child and Adolescent  
Psychology**

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People  
Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-  
Informant Case Study**

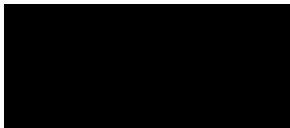
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## Student Declaration

I, Pooja Mandalia, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Signed:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the student.

Pooja Mandalia

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Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic and within national lockdowns was a very challenging endeavour. I would not have been able to complete this research without the flexibility, motivation and on-going support from all the participants involved.

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## Abstract

Gender identity is becoming a concern in the modern world especially in the lives of trans\* young people. They face negative school experiences, leading to poorer well-being and educational outcomes compared to their cisgender peers (McGuire et al., 2010). Currently, there is a lack of understanding on trans\* young people's experiences in the UK and within Alternative Education Provisions (AEPs). This study aims to generate knowledge about the experiences of trans\* young people attending an AEP, the impact the change of settings (from general to alternative) has had on their gender-related experiences including their overall learning and well-being. Additionally, there is limited knowledge on supporting trans\* young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This research provides a unique insight into the perspectives of these young people to broaden professional knowledge.

Theoretically informed by bioecological theory, a qualitative case study design was implemented using semi structured interviews with five trans\* young people, six parents and seven staff members within one AEP. Phase 1 of data collection involved preparatory work comprising of school consultations to plan data collection procedures. Phase 2 involved interviews with parents exploring their perceptions. Phase 3 involved rapport building with young people and explored their perceptions. Phase 4 explored staff perceptions on school beliefs, practices and support. All interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using the six stages promoted by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Five key themes emerged from the findings in relation to the young people's experiences within the AEP and prior mainstream school settings. These included 'school climate', 'understanding gender identity and available support', 'school

relationships', 'supporting mental well-being and additional needs' and 'preparing for adulthood'. These themes are discussed and interpreted in relation to the theoretical framing and existing literature, key implications for the AEP and educational psychology practice are also discussed.

## Impact Statement

This research has provided a unique insight into the well-being and experiences of trans\* young people with SEN, attending an AEP from multiple perspectives. The findings revealed key themes related to their experiences including 'school climate', 'understanding gender identity and available support', 'school relationships', 'supporting mental well-being and additional needs' and 'preparing for adulthood'. The findings derived from this research could have significant implications for educational psychology practice which can improve the support for trans\* young people in schools.

On an individual level, trans\* young people with SEN faced additional challenges to their mental health and well-being. Whilst attending the AEP, their mental health was prioritised and support strategies were co-produced with the young person according to what worked best for them. Therefore, it is important for Educational Psychologists (EPs) working with trans\* young people to use their training in consultation and person-centred approaches to obtain young peoples' views when considering how to support them. Existing skills can be used to elicit the voices of trans\* young people particularly those with SEN who need support to advocate for themselves.

Moreover, trans\* young people reported that they were misunderstood, not listened to, or respected in their previous schools which caused anxiety. However, staff in the AEP understood them, validated their feelings and listened to them which improved their well-being and learning experiences. EPs are well placed them using therapeutic skills such as 'containment' and interventions involving cognitive behavioural and strength-based approaches. These interventions are designed to

support the development of individual's coping strategies to increase resilience and help them manage school life despite its challenges.

On a contextual level, the findings showed differences between mainstream school contexts and the AEP which influenced the young people's well-being and gender affirmation. A key contextual factor that influenced experiences in mainstream schools included a lack of inclusion and respect for different gender identities which impacted self-confidence and sense of belonging. However, the AEP was very accepting, celebrated individual differences and used gender affirming language. EPs are skilled in working systemically and can support schools at an organisational level. They can help improve the school climate by promoting awareness of inclusive practices through training with school staff. Moreover, EPs can support the development of LGBT groups or events and upskill staff to facilitate a sense of school belonging.

Trans\* young people felt safer within the AEP due to their robust anti-bullying policies. This was lacking in their previous mainstream schools as they encountered increased levels of bullying and negative views around gender. EPs can support schools by creating anti-discrimination policies to make the environment safer. They can take part in school improvement work as a proactive measure and encourage wider policy development at a local authority level, to ensure all schools are equipped to support trans\* young people. EPs have daily interactions with parents, educational professionals and local authority representatives which puts them in a good position to educate and challenge societal views around gender.

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## **Glossary of Terms**

**Gender Identity:** *An individual's sense of their own gender including male or female binaries or something else. It may or may not correspond with their assigned sex at birth.*

**Gender Dysphoria:** *A diagnosis often given by doctors or psychologists to describe the unhappiness or distress a trans\* person is feeling due to the mismatch between their bodies and their own sense of gender identity.*

**Cisgender:** *Someone whose gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth.*

**Transgender:** *Someone whose gender identity is different to or opposite from their assigned sex at birth; including transgender men and women.*

**Trans\*:** *This is an umbrella term used to describe a group of people whose gender identity or expression varies from the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans\* people may describe themselves using a wide variety of terms e.g. transgender, gender non-conforming, gender diverse, genderless, non-binary, gender queer etc.*

**Non-Binary:** *An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity sits outside the typical gender binaries and goes beyond simply identifying as man or woman. People can identify with some aspects of gender binaries and others can reject them entirely.*

**Gender Non-Conforming:** *When a person's behaviours, characteristics or appearance does not conform to cultural and social expectations on what is appropriate for their sex and associated gender assigned at birth.*

**LGBT/Q +:** *This is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans\* or questioning people.*

The above terms and definitions were obtained from the Stonewall website (Stonewall, 2020).

**Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND):** A child has special educational needs when he or she has a learning disability or difficulty which requires special educational provision to be made for them. A child or young person may have a learning difficulty or disability if they:

- Find learning significantly more difficult than peers of the same age.
- Have a difficulty which presents as a barrier from him or her accessing the facilities that are usually provided for children of the same age in mainstream schools (SEND Code of Practice, 2015).

SEN are four broad areas of need and support:

- Communication and interaction
- Cognition and learning
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health
- Sensory and/or physical needs.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter will describe the research context, researcher's interest in this area and the factors affecting trans\* children and young people in society. The role of Alternative Education Provisions (AEPs) in the UK and the theoretical framework adopted will also be described along with the broader role of schools and educational psychologists. It will conclude with the rationale behind this study, unique contribution of this research and research questions.

### **1.1 Research Context**

This research is building upon a pilot research project which took place within my first year of training on the DEdPsy course. The aim of the research was to explore the social and emotional well-being of trans\* young people attending an Alternative Educational Provision (AEP). The research took place in a specialist AEP which particularly aims to support young people with psychological health needs. The study addressed the lack of qualitative research in the United Kingdom (UK) regarding the school experiences and well-being of trans\* young people. It was hoped that exploring young people's experiences within a unique AEP would promote greater awareness of the key issues that they face, inform good practice, training and support from Educational Psychologists (EPs).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only one non-binary young person, their parent and two staff members were available to take part in the research. The key findings from the pilot project revealed positive school practices such as anti-bullying policies and the use of inclusive language. This was important to the young person as it promoted a sense of safety and social acceptance by peers and staff. Teacher attributes,



nurturing teacher-student relationships and therapeutic practices were paramount. It provided the young person with unconditional positive regard, space to talk about their problems without judgement and this promoted self-acceptance. These findings gave an invaluable insight into the experiences of one non-binary young person within an AEP. It informed further research within the same provision and helped develop the current research project which has a broader focus on the past and present school experiences of young people with a variety of gender related issues. The rationale for the current research and its methodology are discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

### **1.1.2 Researcher's Interest**

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the UCL Institute of Education (2019-2022). I first became interested in transgender peoples' lives through increased awareness and acceptance in the media. I started to learn about individual perspectives through watching documentaries which allowed me to gain an insight into the key issues within this population. Subsequently, I was employed by MENCAP and worked closely with a unique AEP to support transgender young people apply for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This gave me an insight into the key issues that transgender young people face, their educational needs and their gender related concerns at school and within the wider community.

As a trainee EP, a vital aspect of the role is to bring about meaningful change for children and young people by advocating for them, listening to their experiences and working collaboratively with the family and school. I thereby approached the study with the goal of learning more about young people with different gender identities and their individual journeys as they transitioned into an AEP. I also wanted to

explore the views of the people who support them in order to broaden my knowledge on how best we can collaboratively support this underrepresented population at school.

## **1.2 Defining Trans\***

An individual's gender identity tends to refer to a person's sense of their own gender which may or may not correspond to the sex that they were assigned at birth. Between the ages of 3 and 5, individuals may start to develop a different gender identity to their biological sex (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Typically, the term cisgender is used to refer to someone whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth. However, the terms "transgender" or "trans\*" are used to describe individuals with different gender identities and are used interchangeably in the research literature. They are linked strongly to gender identification and entirely separate from a person's sexual orientation (Bowskill, 2017). Transgender can refer to people whose gender identity is different or opposite to their assigned sex at birth (Bowskill, 2017). For example, a transgender man would have been assigned female at birth but identifies as male. People who are transgender may also describe themselves as trans\*, an umbrella term to describe a group of people whose gender identity or expression varies (Ellis, Bailey, & McNeil, 2015).

The asterisk is used to expand the word and emphasises the inclusion of many different gender identities. However, it can also be viewed as a label aimed to categorise and group similar individuals, not all individuals prefer to use this term (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). There are many other additional labels that trans\* people may use to describe themselves including transgender, gender diverse, genderless, non-binary, gender queer and some people may identify with one or

multiple labels. It is important not to label individuals without knowing which terms they themselves use and self-identify with (Stanton, Ali, & Chaudhuri, 2017). In this research the term trans\* will be used to encompass a group of young people with different identities including some of those specified above. I explored the preferred terms with the individual participants and the term trans\* was agreed as it was a term that they also identified with. It is important to recognise that research involving trans\* populations can pose difficulties regarding comparisons across research. It is not always possible to compare due to the unique set of characteristics within this particular group of participants.

### **1.3 Gender Identity in the UK**

The subject of gender identity among children and young people have gained widespread attention across the world but particularly within western society (Van der Miesen, Cohen-Kettenis, & de Vries, 2018). Currently, there is no robust data on gender identity within the United Kingdom (UK). In 2018, it was estimated that there was approximately 200,000 to 500,000 trans\* people in the UK (Government Equalities Office, 2018). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) for England and Wales have acknowledged that there is a requirement amongst data users for information about gender identity (ONS, 2021). In 2015, they launched a public consultation asking users for their views and the feedback supported the development of census data questions on gender identity. It was implemented within the census questionnaire in March 2021. Currently, this ONS census data is set to be released in a staggered format throughout summer 2022 (ONS, 2022).

As census data 2021 is unavailable at this time, data from the Tavistock and Portman Clinic in England was reviewed. The Tavistock and Portman Clinic has

national specialised Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS) based in London and Leeds, the only one of its kind in Great Britain. Data gathered from their GIDS shows that growing numbers of young people are experiencing difficulties with their gender identity. Some young people are displaying symptoms of gender dysphoria (sense of unease due to the mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity) (GIDS, 2020). These young people are more likely to seek referrals to GIDS along with other gender related issues. In 2019/2020, the clinic announced that 2,728 referrals had been received compared to the previous year which received 2565 referrals (GIDS, 2020). The age group with the highest number of referrals were young people aged 15 followed by ages 16, 14 and 13.

In 2020/2021, the Tavistock clinic received 2242 referrals indicating a slight decrease in referrals (GIDS, 2022). However, this could also be due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties accessing national health services at this time. Prior to the pandemic, referrals were steadily increasing over the years suggesting that more young people were having difficulties with understanding their gender and needing access to support. However, there have been many complaints about the long waiting lists and access to specialised services. The demand has been difficult to maintain due to staff shortages who provide GIDS (GIDS, 2022). Therefore, it could be argued that more accessible support needs to be available for children and young people within their school environments to tackle these issues.

### **1.3.1 Gender and Positive Self-Identity**

Due to the high numbers of young people with gender related issues requiring support from GIDs, there have been concerns about these young people's development, well-being and life experiences (Bowskill, 2017; Riggle, Rostosky,

McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Vance, Boyer, Glidden, & Sevelius, 2021). Riggle et al. (2011) has shown that trans\* individuals are still capable of experiencing a positive self-identity together with good health and well-being. Identifying as trans\* can promote the development of congruency between an individual's appearance and their inner feelings, increasing feelings of being "true" to oneself and no longer needing to hide or deny their identity (Riggle et al. 2011).

Furthermore, trans\* individuals have reported an association between their identity and an increase in personal growth and resilience by overcoming both internal and external challenges, becoming more self-confident, stronger and more self-aware (Riggle et al., 2011). Following the act of disclosure, interpersonal relationships can also be strengthened with family and friends. Additionally, there are more opportunities to develop an insight among different genders and to challenge gender norms, stereotypes and educate others about trans\* experiences at school or in the wider community (Riggle et al., 2011).

#### **1.4 Trans\* Identity and Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Alongside the widespread attention around gender identity, there has also been a focus on a supposed association between trans\* identities, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the specific needs of these individuals (Strang et al., 2016). ASD is a developmental condition which involves persistent challenges in how people communicate and socially interact with the world. The effects of ASD and the severity of the condition can vary with each individual (Murphy et al. 2020). The prevalence of ASD amongst children and young people in the general population is between 1-2% with current gender ratios standing at 3:1 male: female (Sedgewick, Leppanen, & Tchanturia, 2020).

At first, clinicians who worked with both autistic and trans\* communities witnessed an overlap between gender dysphoria and autism (Murphy et al., 2020). Consistently, clinical studies on individuals referred to gender clinics have reported high numbers of clinical ASD diagnoses within trans\* samples of both children and adults. Hughes and Zucker (2015) also reported that there is a higher occurrence (26%) of autistic traits in children and adolescents identified as gender dysphoric.

Although there is evidence which suggest there is a strong association between gender dysphoria and ASD, Turban & Van Schalkwyk (2018) argue that based on the current evidence ASD is over-represented in those with gender dysphoria. A small number of studies investigating this association, used different definitions i.e. gender variant which does not indicate gender dysphoria. Additionally, the studies involved have not used appropriate symptomology scales specific to ASD which questions the diagnosis and the validity of the research findings. Other researchers suggest that increases on ASD-related measures in trans\* groups are possibly due to unspecified ASD screening tools which increases the likelihood of false positives (Turban & Van Schalkwyk, 2018).

Furthermore, Strang et al. (2014) showed that there is a higher incident of trans\* identity in children with a diagnosis of autism (5.4%) than children with neurodevelopmental disorders i.e. epilepsy (1.7%), ADHD (4.8%) or typically developing children (0-0.7%). The evidence indicates that there could be a pronounced overlap between trans\* identity and autism but more robust research is required (Murphy et al., 2020). Many existing studies have recruited from gender identity clinics included gender dysphoric individuals. Therefore, it is likely to exclude trans\* individuals who have not been diagnosed with gender dysphoria and those

without access to gender identity services, a common issue within this population (Murphy et al., 2020).

At present there is a lack of understanding as to why there is an overlap. Specific advice for trans\* individuals presenting with ASD is limited and knowledge about underlying hypotheses regarding this link are not well understood (Turban & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). Clinicians have attributed trans\* identity to ASD because some individuals with ASD are likely to become “stuck” on topics and this fixation may diminish over time. Another theory is that the autistic traits of these young people can reduce their concern for social expectations and lead them to express their gender openly and in different ways (Strang et al. 2016). Other clinicians have posited that trans\* identity and gender dysphoria can be distinct from their ASD, thus not to dismiss it or delay gender related treatment (Strang et al., 2016).

However, it is important to acknowledge that the theories constructed are proposed largely without sufficient data and without the consideration of the perspectives of autistic trans\* individuals (Strang et al., 2018). Additionally, there are relatively few research studies which have enabled children, young people or adults to talk about their experiences and are solely based on clinical samples and quantitative data. Research is required to understand and explore the individual perspectives of trans\* people with ASD or ASD traits and the impact of this on their life experiences. Strang et al. (2018) suggested that these people may be at specific risk for being misunderstood and not receiving adequate care due to the complexity of their needs, leading to poorer well-being outcomes than their typically developing peers (Strang et al., 2018). Thus, it is imperative that these people are included within new research to better understand their needs.

## 1.5 Legislation Supporting Trans\* People

In the last few decades, there has been significant improvement towards the acceptance and recognition of trans\* people in society (GIDS, 2021). The Gender Recognition Act (2004) recognises trans\* individuals gender identity and sets out a legal process that individuals must go through to change their gender at the age of 18. It allows trans\* people the right to legally change their birth certificate, get married to a person of the opposite sex to their acquired gender or be buried in their preferred gender (Glazzard, 2019). Subsequently, the Equality Act (2010) was updated to include the rights of trans\* people, thereby significantly strengthened the law that supports and defends trans\* children and young people, citing gender reassignment as a protected characteristic (GIDS, 2018).

The Department of Education (2014) also published advice for school leaders and staff in relation to the Equality Act (2010). It states that schools must not discriminate against a pupil because of their gender status. This includes indirect discrimination through school policies i.e. an inflexible school uniform rule which applies to everyone and offers no “unisex” option. Therefore, students transitioning from female to male should be able to wear trousers if they wish. It also explains that children and young people undergoing gender reassignment should be allowed to attend single sex classes if the class matches their gender identity. They also have a right to stay in a single sex school if they feel comfortable doing so. The school will not lose its single sex status for allowing a trans\* pupil to remain in the setting. It is likely that this legal protection in the community has perhaps enabled trans\* young people to feel more comfortable in revealing their gender identity to others (Freedman, 2019).



### **1.5.1 Legislation in Schools**

During the year 2000, the Department for Education introduced Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). It indicated that Sex Education should go beyond just the biological side and include 'Sex' and 'Relationship' Education (SRE) to further inform and support children and young people about personal relationships (Cavender, 2015). As a result of this, there was political criticism about the provision within schools. In 2015, statistics showed that sexual harassment and violence had doubled in schools and the government were called on to make SRE statutory in all primary and secondary schools (Cavender, 2015).

The Children and Social Work Act was introduced in March 2017. The education secretary announced an intention to put 'Relationships and Sex Education' (RSE) as part of the statutory guidance for all schools in England (Long, 2020). In June 2019, the conclusive statutory guidance on RSE was published by the Department for Education (Long, 2020). The new published guidance for schools includes gender awareness and teaches young people about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people and relationships (Long, 2020). This inclusion is, arguably, a positive outcome to support trans\* young people by raising awareness within the school community. However, there is limited research on the new curriculum and its impact in schools at present.

### **1.6 Alternative Education Provisions**

The current study is taking place within an Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in the UK. Alternative Education Provision is defined by the Department of Education

(DfE) as education arranged by local authorities for pupils who cannot access mainstream education for a variety of reasons. This includes short term or long-term illnesses, Special Educational Needs (SEN) including social, emotional and mental health issues, school exclusion and school refusal (Thomson, 2018). Pupils often stay on roll at their mainstream schools but attend AEPs either full-time or part-time, there are shorter or longer-term placements available depending on the needs of the child (Thomson, 2018). Alternative provision can be provided in a range of settings such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), academies, free schools, independent settings and hospitals. The aim of most AEPs is to reintegrate pupils back into mainstream school but this is not always suitable or in the best interests of the pupil and is assessed on a case by case basis (Graham, White, & Potter, 2019).

Local authorities are usually responsible for arranging appropriate education for pupils who are permanently excluded, or severely unwell but parents or medical professionals can also refer children and young people. Additionally, schools can arrange for pupils on a fixed-term exclusion to attend an off-site provision (PRU) to improve their behaviour (Thomson, 2018). In 2018, an investigation into alternative education showed that 22,821 pupils in the UK were educated in state funded AEP settings and 21,000 were educated in independent settings (Thomson, 2018).

However, there is limited data on AEP settings in the UK and to my knowledge, pupils gender identities have not been recorded. Therefore, it is not possible to comment on the number of trans\* young people attending AEPs in the UK.

Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson (2016) evaluated support within AEPs and findings showed that they were often nurturing and more supportive of pupils experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties compared to practices used in some

mainstream schools (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016; Macnab, Visser, & Daniels, 2008). They also stated that these settings appear to have similar characteristics including smaller classes, closer interaction between students and teachers, safer and secure environments. Along with a relevant and flexible curriculum to support the student's personal, social and academic development (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016).

Similarly, Grossman & D'Augelli (2006) conducted research involving trans\* young people's school experiences and they demonstrated that alternative education provisions were preferred compared to mainstream education. Trans\* participants felt that alternative settings were more supportive due to providing a more friendly environment for LGBT young people. Furthermore, McGuire et al. (2010) also stated that some alternative education settings can provide an education that is more inclusive of a diverse range of pupils, provide a more comfortable and secure environment with increased safety for trans\* young people. Therefore, traditional schools (otherwise known as mainstream schools) may benefit from learning best practice from these settings (McGuire et al. 2010). However, it should be noted that these findings were reported from young people in the USA which have a different education system, thus AEPs can differ greatly to those in the UK.

In the context of this study, I decided to complete the study within a specific AEP to further explore trans\* young people's experiences including any supportive actions and practices like those mentioned above. The current research takes place in a London based AEP which caters for pupils with a variety of psychological health needs. More information on the research site can be found in the methodology section in chapter 3.

## **1.7 The Role of the Educational Psychologist**

Bowskill (2017) and Sagzan (2019) state that there is limited knowledge amongst educational professionals on how to support trans\* children and young people. There is even less understanding about the support for trans\* children and young people with special educational needs (Murphy et al., 2020). It is vital that they have access to more specialised support from partner agencies including Educational Psychologists (EPs). However, research amongst the trans\* community is underrepresented in educational psychology and there is a growing need for guidance in this area for both schools and EPs (Bowskill, 2017).

Despite the lack of guidance, EPs are in a unique position to support trans\* children and young people by utilising existing skills and referring to common practice frameworks. An important aspect of the EP role is to obtain the child's or young person's views, the voice of the child permeates throughout the role and referred to within report writing and statutory work (Kelly, Woolfson, & Boyle, 2008). EPs are particularly skilled in supporting children to express their wishes and feelings using a variety of skills developed throughout their training.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) state all children have the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and should be taken seriously. Within the work of an EP, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (2015) state that children, young peoples' and their parent's views should be included in any planning and decision making around their needs (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). EPs have a role of consulting and gathering the views of the child, young person, and parent to better identify and understand their specific needs and offer evidenced based

interventions and support. They are also well placed to recognise staff needs and requirements, train the wider workforce so they can start to identify trans\* children and young people's needs and offer early intervention.

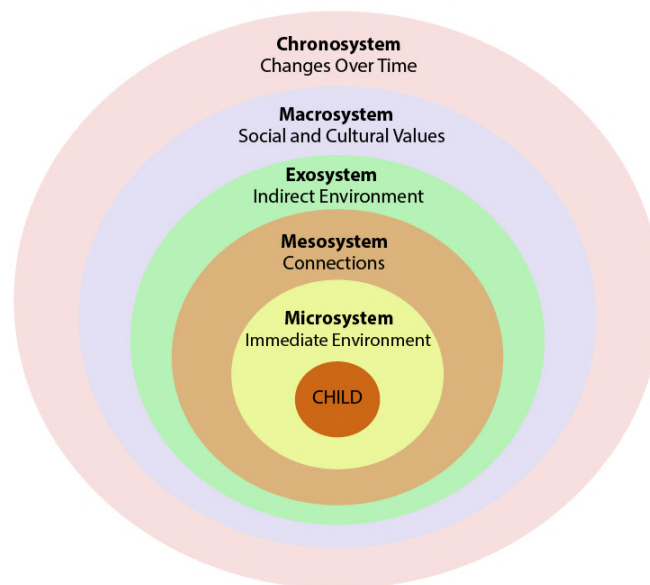
Leonard (2019) argues that EPs are most appropriate to support trans\* young people as they practice within all the systems around the child e.g. the school, family and the local authority and this allows for more impactful work to be undertaken. This is consistent with Yavuz's (2016) views, who states that EPs can use psychological perspectives to work within individual and systemic levels. Yavuz (2016) suggested using consultations or encouraging the development of whole school policies to protect trans\* young people. EPs are also in a position to promote awareness through sharing theoretical framings to professionals and educational research findings on key issues amongst trans\* young people, including best practice that may be supportive (Yavuz, 2016).

EPs can take on an important position in promoting inclusive education by supporting the removal of barriers to learning and helping attain necessary provisions enabling equal participation within school, for all children and young people (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). Additional research on the experiences of trans\* children and young people in different contexts can support educational professionals to work together to create change systemically. Establishing positive school climates can also encourage gender affirmation leading to better learning and well-being outcomes amongst trans\* young people (Bowskill, 2017). Therefore, this research aims to build on the existing knowledge by exploring the views of trans\* young people, parents and staff within a specialist alternative provision. This will

improve professional understanding on the systems that influence their development, contribute to EP knowledge and provide best practice guidelines.

## 1.8 Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1979,1994) social ecological systems theory is used broadly within the EP role. The initial theory postulated that children and young people's development is influenced by contextual factors within a variety of systems including the family, peer group, school, culture and attitudes in society (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner divided the child's environment into five important systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Model (*Psychology Notes HQ, 2019*)

The microsystem consists of what has reported to be the most directly influential level. It involves the immediate environmental setting in which the child has daily interactions including the family and school. The mesosystem is the important

interactions between the child's microsystem e.g. the interactions between home and school. The exosystem are systems that indirectly influence them and may affect one of the microsystems e.g. parental workplace or neighbourhood in which the child lives and studies. The macrosystem focuses on how cultural elements of society affect the child's life e.g. national legislation. The chronosystem involves all contextual changes and experiences throughout a child's lifetime which can directly influence their development including transitions or events such as moving house or school (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Although this theory provides an understanding of how the context affects a child's development, it also assumes that the individual plays a passive role in their development and is not capable of influencing the systems in which they live in.

Bronfenbrenner later updated his theory with this criticism in mind and emphasised the individual's experiences and developmental processes over time. The theory was named the bioecological theory including the Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). It acknowledges that individuals also play an active role and constantly influence their environment (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Proximal processes encompass the reciprocal interactions between a person and their immediate environment including objects, symbols and people which occur over time and are mutually influenced.

Regarding the role of the person, Bronfenbrenner argued that there were three types of personal characteristics of an individual: force, resource and demand characteristics.

Force characteristics are considered most likely to influence a person's developmental outcomes and can initiate and sustain proximal processes or disrupt

them (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). They include curiosity, the ability to engage in activities in isolation or with others, being responsive and being able to pursue longer term goals. Disruptive force characteristics incorporate aggression, impulsiveness, distractibility, unable to achieve and defer gratification.

Resource characteristics effect a person's ability to contribute and engage in proximal processes, it is associated with psychological, cognitive and emotional resources. A person must have good health, cognitive capabilities, knowledge, skills and prior experience in order to develop and engage with others.

Demand characteristics can influence reactions from other people in different social environments and impact on establishing proximal processes, including easily observed qualities such as temperament, appearance, age, gender and skin colour (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Context refers to Bronfenbrenner's earlier work including the five systems within the child's environment (Figure 1).

Time was updated from Bronfenbrenner's earlier work including the chronosystem. In the PPCT model, time is broadened and described in three different ways: microtime, mesotime and macrotime. Microtime refers to the ongoing proximal processes and daily interactions in the present. Mesotime refers to how often these interactions occur over days and weeks. Macrotime focuses on changes of events and expectations within the larger society and across generations (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The social ecological and bioecological theories are considered throughout this research in relation to trans\* young people's experiences within the AEP. In regard



to the microsystemic and mesosystemic levels, the research considers different contextual environments, the relationships between them and the effects on trans\* young people's development and well-being. It particularly focuses on change of settings, transitions over time, regular interactions with new people including family, peers and educational professionals. It also considers personal characteristics including mental state, cognitive capabilities and coping strategies. These can affect how trans\* young people engage and interact within their environment and this can influence developmental processes over time.

On a macrosystemic level and building on the earlier discussion of gender-related issues, this research views gender as a social construct which can be influenced by a range of interacting systems over time. Conceptualising gender as a social construct, can help provide insights into how gender is embodied among the individuals in relation to the contexts in which they live, as well as how gender is experienced and even problematised. Gender as a social construct will be further explored in the literature review in chapter 2.

Furthermore, the framework informs different elements of the research study. For example, when preparing interview questions and carrying out data collection, the bioecological theory encourages reflection on participants characteristics, immediate and wider environments. It also supports with framing the discussion and implications of the research findings so that the layered nature of experience and practice are addressed, this is further detailed in chapter 5.

## **1.9 Study Aim and Research Questions**

The following section will describe the aim of the study, the rationale, the unique contribution of this research and main research questions.

### **1.9.1 Aim of the study**

The study aims to generate knowledge about the experiences of trans\* young people with gender related concerns attending an AEP, the perceived impact the change of settings has had on their gender-related experiences, as well as their overall learning and well-being.

### **1.9.2 Rationale**

Many of the studies that have conducted research on trans\* children and young people's lives have been led in the USA. School systems, contexts and legislations are different within the USA. It can be argued that the research findings cannot be generalised entirely to trans\* children and young people living within the UK. There is also a limited knowledge base and understanding amongst professionals around trans\* children and young people's experiences in school. There is even less understanding on their experiences within different school contexts including alternative education provision. Additionally, there are fewer studies that gather information directly from the young people and parents due to difficulties accessing this population. This sheds light on the need for more research focusing on the voice of the participants.

Furthermore, the research that has been conducted shows that trans\* children and young people are at risk of negative school experiences and stigma which lead to poor educational and well-being outcomes (McGuire et al., 2010). However, schools can also be a safe place if professionals were more knowledgeable on how to

promote inclusive school environments. Therefore, exploring trans\* children and young people's experiences prior to and during their attendance at an AEP will help promote greater awareness of the contextual issues that can affect their overall learning and the impact of this on their well-being. The findings will help identify positive actions and experiences that could support all trans\* children and young people to feel safe and secure at school, at home and in the community.

### **1.9.3 Research Questions**

There are many views on how to construct appropriate research questions (RQs) for a study. Trowler (2016) stated that research questions should be specific to the research design, clear on what is being studied and must be capable of operationalisation i.e. what can be directly observed or measured. However, Robson (2011) states that researchers have freedom in framing and constructing research questions, he argues that realist type questions which are not directly observable in a study are also important to consider. These questions encompass individual feelings, beliefs, intentions and effects. In this study, I decided to divide the research questions systematically to cover three phases of the research including the literature review, fieldwork and discussion of the research findings. There are also clear objectives which are outlined to demonstrate how each research question will be answered.

**RQ1.** What key themes does existing literature report on the experiences of trans\* children and young people including those with special educational needs?

The following research objectives will facilitate in answering the research question:

- a) *Evaluate what has already been reported about the experiences of trans\* young people at school and the impact on their overall learning and well-being.*
- b) *Analyse key issues, if any, that have been reported about trans\* young people diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?*

**RQ2.** What are the experiences of well-being and educational support for trans\* young people in alternative education provision compared to mainstream school settings?

The following research objectives will facilitate in answering the research question:

- a) *Explore parent/carers perceptions of supportive and unsupportive school practices in both mainstream school and the AEP.*
- b) *Explore young people's perceptions regarding the support available for their gender-related issues and well-being prior to and whilst attending the AEP.*
- c) *Explore how staff at the AEP understand and support all young people with gender related issues and promote their learning and well-being.*

**RQ3.** What is the significance of the current findings and what can be learned from this research?

The following research objectives will facilitate in answering the research question:

- a) *Discuss implications for the AEP regarding good professional practice.*
- b) *Discuss implications of the research findings with regards to the role of EPs in better supporting trans\* young people and those with special educational needs.*

#### **1.9.4 Unique Contribution**

There is existing research exploring the impacts of the school climate on the educational, psychological, and social outcomes of trans\* children and young people (Bowskill, 2017; McGuire et al., 2010). However, much of the research solely focuses on the negative outcomes and does not explore the strengths, positive practices and challenges within different school contexts.

Currently, there is no previous research exploring the views of trans\* children and young people with SEN including those with social and emotional needs and ASD. This research will provide a novel insight into some of the perspectives of these young people as well as their parents. It is hoped that the findings will advise good practice within the AEP, reduce barriers to learning and broaden professional knowledge on how best to support trans\* children and young people with SEN.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter will highlight the methods applied to conduct the literature review. It will then explore current literature in relation to the socially constructed nature of gender and current key issues that affect trans\* young people within their communities. The following themes will be explored: positive experiences and school support, adverse school experiences including bullying, harassment and mental health, experiences of trans\* young people with ASD, perceptions of support in and outside of school including family and peer support.

### **2.1 Methods for the Literature Review**

#### **2.1.1 Literature Search**

A systematic literature search was undertaken using key psychological databases e.g. British Education Index, PsycINFO, ERIC and grey literature databases including PsycEXTRA. Initially terms such as “gender” and “social construct” was used to understand views around gender. Then terms such as “transgender”, “gender diverse”, “autistic”, “ASD”, “gender variant”, “non-binary or non-conforming”, “school”, “school climate”, “alternative education”, “mental health”, “well-being”, “education”, “parent”, “family”, “school professionals”, “staff” and “teacher” were combined in various ways to find relevant literature. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were identified and applied, only articles/journals written in English and from the year 2000 onwards were included in the review to ensure more up to date findings. Initially, 30 articles were found in the literature search but after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, only 25 articles were relevant to this research and reviewed.

### **2.1.2 Literature Analysis**

Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model was used to guide the review of the literature. The different systems around the child were used e.g. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem to focus the search on the influences in the child's environment for instance school, family, society and legislation. Additionally, personal characteristics such as special educational needs or ASD were reviewed which can also influence the development and the effect of the young person's ability to engage and interact within different environments.

### **2.1.3 Literature Synthesis**

The broad themes that were covered include gender as a social construct, positive and supportive experiences of trans\* young people including legislation, school policies, teacher-pupil relationships, peer support, family, parental and community factors. Conversely, it also includes adverse experiences of trans\* young people including discrimination, victimisation, mental health and poor well-being outcomes. Lastly, the association between trans\* identity and ASD is explored highlighting key issues for young people and their parents. These themes were synthesised into an overall narrative and are discussed below.

## **2.2 The Social Construction of Gender**

Gender has been described in the literature as a social construct that is imposed on children from a very young age, it can vary between cultures and change over time (World Health Organisation, 2022). In western culture, society makes a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. The term 'sex' is based on the biological characteristics or anatomy of an individual which are categorised as either male or female. The term

'gender' refers to cultural representations and meanings attached to gender roles which are prescribed attitudes, characteristics, behaviours and values that are associated with being male or female (Newman, 2002). However, there is also research on individuals born 'intersex' who are described to have both male and female anatomy and often raised female. It is argued that these individuals should not be assigned a sex at birth (Newman, 2002).

In society, gender and sex is viewed as binary, an individual's gender should be congruent with their sex and if there is an incongruence then this is referred to as 'gender dysphoria'. This was previously viewed as abnormal and known as a 'gender identity disorder' (Newman, 2002). Previous research refers to gender identity disorders as they were used as a psychiatric label to pathologise gender identities which did not conform to masculine and feminine gender binaries. However, in 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that gender incongruence of childhood is no longer classified as a disorder in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases 11<sup>th</sup> Revision (ICD-11) (World Health Organisation, 2022). It has been moved to the 'conditions related to sexual health' chapter indicating that diverse gender identities are not considered mental ill health. This change was introduced to reduce additional stigma for a condition that was already stigmatised (World Health Organisation, 2022). Social constructionists argue that societies understanding of gender and its rigid gender categories are the problem, sociocultural change and intervention is required rather than individual treatment for a disorder.

Gender roles in society stem from specific gender stereotypes which have been constructed for both male and females. Males are characterised as being independent and decisive whereas females are more caring, empathetic and helpful



(Kollmayer et al., 2018). These gender stereotypes can affect expectations from men and women regarding interests, skills and impacts upon education and occupational careers (Kollmayer et al., 2018). Gender stereotypes are learnt at a young age and promoted through engagement in specific play-based activities and toys. Gender typed play leads to promotion of different skills in children. Girls that play with dolls practice nurturing roles and boys that play with blocks and soldiers demonstrate more independent and agentic roles (Kollmayer et al., 2018). Parents continue to enforce gender stereotypes by treating children differently according to their gender. For example, buying certain clothes and toys, the colours that they choose to decorate their child's bedrooms and the stories they choose to tell them (Freedman, 2019).

Another distinct theory in the literature is Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity'. It states that no individual is born a specific gender, but we begin to identify with a gender through a collection of behaviours in which we are socialised (Douglas, Tang, & Rice, 2022). Similar to social constructionist perspectives, she believed that biology does not constitute to gender differences, culture does (Janicka, 2015). However, she argues that gender is an identity which is established through repetitive acts or behaviours that not only communicates to others some aspects of a person's identity but constructs the very identity itself. Individuals can be viewed to create an identity through social pressure to conform and through socialised behaviours and this can be harmful to young children who are still making sense of their gender and identity (Douglas et al., 2022).

Over time, society's understanding of gender identity has evolved. There is an understanding that gender is more fluid and is multidimensional, it sits along a

continuum which creates a spectrum rather than being two distinct binaries of masculinity and femininity. Society has begun to recognise that different gender identities exist and not everyone is cisgender (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018). However, a study exploring the views around gender with trans\* young people between the ages of 12 and 17 showed that although society is beginning to accept gender diversity, the perception of gender amongst the older generation remains unchanged (Bragg et al., 2018).

### **2.3 Issues Faced by Trans\* Children and Young People**

There are many issues faced by trans\* children and young people in current society. Much of the research on trans\* young people's experiences has been conducted within the USA but research has begun to emerge within the UK population. The existing research to date has focused on negative outcomes and experiences. However, the negative pathways that can lead trans\* children and young people towards adverse school experiences and poor well-being outcomes are not always clear. Whilst it is important to recognise the difficulties they encounter, it is also important to explore positive experiences and contextual factors that may buffer risk and promote well-being within different environments in which these children live and study (Jones et al., 2016). Therefore, the positive and supportive experiences of trans\* children and young people and their parents are explored to discover ideas which are working in order to develop them further. Negative experiences and outcomes faced will also be acknowledged in subsequent sections of this chapter to also highlight risk factors that lead to poorer well-being outcomes in this population.

### **2.4 Positive School Experiences and Support**

### **2.4.1 Outside of the UK**

There have been many studies investigating trans\* children and young people's school experiences in the USA. McGuire et al. (2010) conducted a mixed method study to investigate trans\* experiences within schools in California using surveys and a small focus group. Participants included 2,560 students who attended middle or high school, 68 participants identified as transgender or questioning. They found that there are some contextual factors that may increase positive school experiences for trans\* children and young people. Participants reported that queer orientated clubs within school supported them to meet like-minded peers. This greatly improved transgender children and young peoples' school experiences as it increased feelings of safety within the group, helped broaden their understanding of their gender and provided a space to discuss similar experiences. Other participants reported that having a single person advocate who validated their feelings and provided advice was also very important (McGuire et al., 2010).

Additionally, positive relationships with school staff were valued as they were supported and assisted with personal needs e.g. allowing young people to use individual bathrooms and helping dispute any injustices. This supported trans\* children and young people's well-being and increased their feelings of safety and security at school. A strength of the research was that it used quantitative and qualitative methods to gain rich data. However, California is a state which has clear anti-harassment policies in place to protect trans\* children and young people. This supported the participant group have access to better support compared to other states with no anti-harassment policies (McGuire et al., 2010).

### 2.4.2 In the UK

McCormick (2012) conducted a four-month ethnographic study on the school experiences of LGBT young people between the ages of 16 to 18 in a Christian sixth form college in England (McCormack, 2012). Data was collected from 22 semi-structured interviews as well as participant observations during lessons and free periods. Findings revealed one student generally had a positive experience coming out as transgender, school administration and teachers were supportive and used his new pronouns and preferred name. Some peers were accepting of his gender compared to others, but he did not experience any harassment from them. However, he encountered difficulties regarding the wider heteronormative policies the college adhered to including the requirement of birth names on examinations and negotiation of which toilets were appropriate for him to use which made him feel uncomfortable at school. Although, the study gathered in depth data over a long period of time and triangulated different sources of information, the research is based on a small sample size with only one transgender young person's experiences. Thus, results may not be transferrable to the wider trans\* population.

In the UK, Leonard's (2019) unpublished doctoral thesis explored the positive school experiences of three transgender young people aged between 16 and 18 using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Leonard (2019) reported that transgender young people feel happier and more accepted in and out of school if the language used to address them is gender appropriate (Leonard, 2019). The young people also reported the significance of having positive interactions with school staff. A teacher who looked out for them, provided them with support with gender related issues and

dealt with injustices at school promoted feelings of safety and school belonging (Leonard, 2019).

Additionally, participants reported the importance of standing up for themselves when facing harassment and to actively search and identify different sources of information empowered them. Furthermore, participants appreciated supportive family and friends who advocated for them, as this led to feelings of acceptance, increased self-esteem, positive mental well-being and overall life satisfaction (Leonard, 2019). Lastly, participants discussed how the use of whole school policies and systemic practices such as training for teachers on gender identity issues and anti-discrimination creates a more positive and welcoming school atmosphere (Leonard, 2019). However, these results were based on a small sample of participants and less likely to represent the wider trans\* population in the UK.

## **2.5 Adverse School Experiences**

### **2.5.1 Outside of the UK**

Majority of the existing research has focused on the adverse school experiences that negatively impact trans\* young people. As stated previously McGuire et al. (2010) conducted a large mixed method study in the USA to investigate trans\* experiences within schools in California using surveys and a small focus group. Results also highlighted nearly all participants deciding that schools were unsafe for transgender individuals (McGuire et al., 2010). They specifically expressed there were “considerable harassment and victimisation” of trans\* young people including verbal harassment, physical violence, peer and teacher rejection and this was highly prevalent in schools (McGuire et al., 2010). However, many participants in the focus

groups were between 12 and 36 years of age. Therefore, a large proportion of the sample were recollecting events retrospectively which may have led to recall bias. Survey data is also susceptible to response bias and may have affected the accuracy of the findings.

Additionally, Day, Perez-Brumer & Russell (2018) gathered the perceptions of 31,896 youth including 398 transgender children and young people aged 10 and 18 on their school climate in California. Information was obtained from cross sectional data from public schools that administered the 2013-2015 California student survey. Results from a multi-level analysis showed that transgender children and young people perceived the school climate less positively than their cisgender peers (Day, Perez-Brumer, & Russell, 2018). They were more likely to experience higher levels of victimisation and bias-based bullying, they shared that they felt unsafe at school and were more likely to truant or miss school due to depression, being excluded or to engage in substance misuse. The research had a large sample size which represented a mixture of ethnicities which was a strength of the study. However, the participants sexual orientation and gender identity were not assessed independently which could have affected the validity of the findings.

### **2.5.2 In the UK**

Research in the UK has indicated that trans\* children and young people are more likely to face negative school experiences compared to their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers. A UK survey by Youth Chances and METRO charity provided an overview of a five year research project in England about the experiences of LGBTQ youth aged 16 to 25 (Metro Charity, 2016). The project involved 7,126 young people, 956 of whom were trans\* young people. Out of the trans\* young people who

responded to the survey, 75% experienced name calling, 28% experienced physical harassment and 32% missed lessons due to fear of discrimination (Bowskill, 2017). Trans\* young people also felt the highest levels of discrimination and disadvantage and 36% reported lower overall satisfaction with their lives (Metro Charity, 2016).

Similarly, Ditch the Label, a UK based anti-bullying charity conducted a survey on 7,347 children and young people between the ages of 12 and 20 (Hackett, 2019). Within the survey, 2% of respondents identified as outside the typical gender binaries of male and female. However, up to 5% of these young people reported that they were targets for bullying at school because of their gender identity. This information indicates that trans\* children and young people are more likely to be bullied than their cisgender peers (Hackett, 2019). However, it is important to recognise that the main data collection methods used were surveys which are more susceptible to response bias thus affecting the validity of these findings.

In England, a recent study by Carlile (2020) explored transgender and non-binary children, young people and their parents experiences of healthcare provision. The participants included 65 parents and children from 27 families who attended a family support group, 7 of the children in the sample also had a diagnosis of ASD. They attended workshops and were given a range of briefs including “health”, “family”, “friends” and “education” (Carlile, 2020). Participation included collecting data by interviewing each other. A main theme that emerged from the findings included schools being problematic for both young people and parents. They were frustrated by the professionals’ lack of understanding and poor use of language in schools, as well as having issues negotiating uniform and not having access to toilet facilities. It illuminated the need for schools to listen to children and young people and their

parents' views thoroughly. Young people also felt there were not enough references to LGBT people or issues featured across the school curriculum which led to feelings of insignificance and invisibility (Carlile, 2020).

The trans\* young people with a diagnosis of ASD stated how the combination of different gender identities and autism was confusing for their NHS practitioners. It slowed down the support and therapeutic input, there were also issues collaborating with schools, gender related support was often ignored with support focused on ASD and anxiety. However, the study had a relatively small sample size and lacked diverse participants, they also came from the same support group so offered similar viewpoints. Thus, affecting the generalisability of the findings to the wider trans\* population in the UK.

## **2.6 Mental Health Disparities in Trans\* Young People**

### **2.6.1 Outside of the UK**

Trans\* children and young people have been reported to experience mental health disparities, suffering higher rates of depression and anxiety than their cisgender peers. In the USA, Reisner et al. (2015) conducted a study on 180 trans\* children and adults between the ages of 12 and 29, who attended a community health clinic and were matched with a cisgender control group. The trans\* group showed significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation (56% vs. 20%), suicide attempt (31% vs. 11%) and self-harm (30% vs. 8%) compared to the cisgender control group. Experiencing gender dysphoria and internalising the stigma young people were confronted with from an early age contributed to their adverse mental health outcomes. The findings highlighted consistent negative experiences and the stigma



among trans\* young people greatly impacted their well-being. A strength of this research was that the samples were matched on ethnicity and age which is known to influence mental illness. Conversely, a limitation of this study is that they did not report the intersection between sexual orientation and gender identity clearly. Thus, affecting the generalisability of the findings to the trans\* population.

A study by Roberts et al. (2013) explored the mental health of gender non-conforming children in the USA. The findings showed that they were at higher risk of exhibiting depressive symptoms during early adolescence than gender conforming children (Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013). Children who had self-identified as gender non-conforming prior to the age of 11 were also at significant risk of mild to moderate depression later in early adulthood (Roberts et al., 2013). Influences on children's depressive symptoms included physical and emotional abuse at home and bullying from individuals outside of the family. (Roberts et al., 2013). However, the findings from this research may not have been accurately represented as some participants withdrew from the study who had been identified as having higher depressive symptoms.

### **2.6.2 In the UK**

Similarly, Rimes et al. (2017) investigated the experiences of trans\* young people between the ages of 19 and 25. Data collection involved reviewing surveys from 'Youth Chances' study of 16-25 year olds in the UK. All participants were compared on their mental health, substance misuse and victimisation experiences. The findings showed that there was significantly worse mental health in female trans\* young people as well as more incidents of self-harm and higher rates of substance misuse than their cisgender peers. It was believed that that the high reports of child sexual

abuse in the sample and the discrimination encountered due to their gender identity could have contributed to their mental health issues. However, participants were recruited online through snowball sampling and only those who were willing to share experiences were involved in the study. Therefore, the sample may not represent the wider experiences of trans\* individuals including those who might not be willing to come forward and share their views.

Furthermore, Just Like Us a charity in the UK for LGBT+ young people have also been concerned about well-being outcomes for LGBT+ pupils. They conducted a pupil survey exploring the well-being and experiences of young people aged between 11 and 18 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Milsom, 2021). There was a total of 2,934 pupils from 375 schools and colleges across the UK who took part in the survey, 1140 of them identified as LGBT+. The findings specifically from trans\* children and young people showed that 70% felt their mental health was concerning but since the pandemic their mental health had worsened compared to 55% of cisgender young people (Milsom, 2021). There were also differences in the amount trans\* young people worry about their mental health daily (65%) and were more likely to experience tension in the place that they were living (29%). Trans\* children and young people were less likely to feel optimistic about their life and 15% said they have never felt optimistic about their future compared to 9% of their cisgender peers (Milsom, 2021). Although the study had a representative sample of different ethnicities, only 4% of the whole sample included transgender or trans\* participants. Thus, it is difficult to make general conclusions from these findings about the well-being of the wider trans\* population.

## **2.7 Experiences of Trans\* Children and Young People with ASD**

Trans\* young people with SEN are likely to have difficulties at school and require additional support. Strang et al. (2020) conducted a study which aimed to use a community based participatory research method to develop a key stakeholder driven clinical program to better support autistic trans\* young people in the USA. Thirty-one autistic gender diverse (otherwise known as trans\*) young people aged between 12-19, 46 parents and 10 expert clinical providers took part in the study. Feedback was collected over time with young people and their parents as they took part in on-going clinical group sessions and during a three-month interview with the young people. Findings revealed important priorities such as helping young people navigate gender related challenges, supporting gender expression, providing exploration opportunities and gender diverse role models.

Additionally, there were also broader support needs for this group of young people. This included targeted support for social and independent skills as well as providing safety and emotional support, as they struggled with managing their emotions. Parents also stressed a need for a support group for themselves, however, only families who had gender affirming parents were involved in the study resulting in selection bias. Therefore, the findings are not fully representative of all trans\* young people including those with families who were not supportive. These families may present another set of needs not addressed in this study.

Mental health disparities are also apparent amongst trans\* individuals with ASD. George and Stokes (2018) conducted a quantitative study exploring whether belonging to a sexual minority group or gender minority group further reduced the mental health of somebody with ASD in Australia. The study involved 261 typically developing individuals and 309 individuals with a diagnosis of ASD, the average age

of the participants was 30. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale 21 (DASS 21), Personal Well-Being Index, the Gender Identity/Dysphoria Questionnaire (GIDYQ-AA) and the scale of sexual orientation were used. Each participant's mental health was evaluated based upon their rates of anxiety, depression, stress and personal well-being. The findings revealed that if participants belonged to more than one minority group their mental health symptoms worsened ( $p < .01$ ), suggesting increased stressors within these populations. However, the sample included a larger number of adult participants and is not entirely representative of all trans\* young people with ASD.

Similarly, Mahfouda et al. (2019) explored the association between ASD, psychopathology and quality of life in gender diverse young people. Data was collected from 104 families who were registered at the gender diversity service in Australia between the years of 2017 and 2019. The Social Responsiveness Scale was distributed to parents which was used to generate a categorical diagnosis of ASD if children scored within the severe range of the Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5.) sub scale. The Achenbach Youth Self Report Scale and the Paediatric Quality of Life Inventory was also distributed to the young people and parents to complete.

The findings indicated that gender diverse children and young people with indicated ASD comprise a vulnerable group that are at higher risk of mental health difficulties, particularly anxiety, depression and poor quality of life outcomes. This included poor social and emotional well-being, physical health and school functioning compared to gender diverse participants without indicated ASD. However, the methodology of evaluating ASD diagnosis in this study was a screening tool which identified the

presence and severity of autistic traits and only an indication of a potential diagnosis. Thus, affecting the validity of the findings.

### **2.7.1 Parent Perceptions on ASD and Trans\* Identity**

Kuvalanka et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the perspectives of mothers of transgender and trans\* children with ASD between the ages of 8 and 12. Data was collected from three mothers via semi structured telephone interviews during 2012 and 2015. The findings showed themes relating to fears of a transphobic society and impacts on their children navigating the world. They also wondered about whether their children's ASD influenced or caused their gender diversity and the barriers to fully embrace their gender non-conformity (Kuvalanka et al., 2018).

Additionally, clear causes of their children's social/emotional difficulties were not identified and hard to distinguish between ASD or due to not understanding their gender. They also expressed lack of adequate support such as schools not accommodating for children's preferred gender identity and ASD difficulties, as well as lack of peer support for parents (Kuvalanka et al., 2018). Positive school support and interventions that were personalised for the child were valued by all mothers. Most specifically, helpful school actions involving changing names, intervening when discrimination occurred as well as personalised attention from teachers was important. However, the sample was extremely small and there was a lack of ethnic diversity amongst participants, thus the findings may not be representative to the wider trans\* population and those with ASD (Kuvalanka et al., 2018).

## **2.8 Perceptions of Support for Trans\* Children and Young People in School**

### **2.8.1 Outside of the UK**

Supportive practices which can improve the school experiences of trans\* young people has been documented. Bartholomaeus & Riggs (2017) published an article highlighting important whole school approaches to support transgender or gender diverse young people, parents and staff. They argued that amongst the existing literature there has been little attention on what actions could be taken to make schools more inclusive and be affirming of transgender students, including a focus on the actions of cisgender people. One of the main recommendations was having an inclusive school culture and ethos for all LGBT students. Inclusion relates to having a supportive senior leadership team, school values that celebrate all forms of diversity and specific policies that outline consequences for transphobic comments and harassment to make all students feel safe. It also included structural adaptations to the school environment such as increasing access to gender neutral toilets and creating uniform policies which will support to socially affirm a student's gender identity (Bartholomeus and Riggs, 2017).

Wider school practices and policies have also appeared to have an impact on the school climate and experiences of trans\* children and young people from the perception of educational professionals in more focused research. Russell et al. (2016) explored the presence of gender, anti-discrimination policies and teacher reports of bullying and safety within the school climate in the USA. The research merged two independent surveys including the California School Climate Survey and the California School Health Profile to collect data. During the years 2010 to 2013,

1,000 school principals and 3,000 teachers took part in the study and their reports were evaluated.

The findings showed that when policies to protect gender diverse pupils existed, teacher perceptions of the school climate were less negative, they also identified less bullying compared to schools that did not have policies in place. The research suggests that wider systemic policies can enable a safer environment for trans\* children and young people and reduce negative school experiences involving bullying and harassment. However, retrospective data was gathered and analysed for this study and it could be argued that it is not representative of the school climate at the time this research took place.

### **2.8.2 In the UK**

Gavin (2021) unpublished doctoral thesis investigated supportive practices within secondary schools by exploring the perceptions of thirty-two educational professionals including eight EPs in one specific local authority in London. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the views of participants and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed four key themes: 'ensuring a sense of safety and belonging throughout school communities', 'prioritising the voices of trans\* young people', 'education' and the overarching theme 'systems readiness to change'. Participants stated that their school's inclusive ethos was important for trans\* young people to feel safe, reduce bullying and feel respected. A vital feature was staff taking a non-judgemental approach and listening to trans\* young people's issues. This led to staff building a positive relationship with trans\* young people who enabled emotional support and sense of safety and containment whilst at school.

Additionally, the use of gender affirming language e.g. pronouns and names ensured young people feeling a sense of belonging and increased social acceptance. Professionals also stated the importance of being educated by the trans\* young people but also educating them around gender as a supportive practice. This increased awareness of trans\* issues among the school community. Furthermore, staff referred to the importance of prioritising the voices of young people when implementing tailored support but also engaging with parents. However, the findings from this research relate to the perceptions of educational professionals on supportive practice in secondary schools in one local authority and not from the trans\* young people themselves. Therefore, we cannot assume that these practices will enable positive school experiences for all trans\* young people across the UK.

## **2.9 Family and Peer Support**

Although trans\* young people including those with SEN are at risk of poorer mental health outcomes, there are protective factors that can buffer their risk and promote their well-being. For example there has been an association between peer and family support, increased feelings of acceptance, gender affirmation and life satisfaction. Weinhardt et al. (2019) explored social support and its relation to well-being and resilience among trans\* young people. Data was collected from 154 transgender and non-binary young people (13 to 21 years old) via a survey at a pride event in the USA. A focus group was also organised for 8 participants to discuss their experiences of support. Results revealed that family support was positively related to the likelihood of living as one's affirmed gender compared to support from friends and significant others which did not make a substantial difference.



Those participants with more family support were less likely to state that they had a mental health difficulty in the past year, similarly friend support was positively related to increased feelings of connectedness and finding meaning in life (Weinhardt et al., 2019a). The focus group revealed young people valued being accepted by family and peers but enacting the support with actions was more important for them e.g. parents helping them make decisions on hormone therapy but this was not always consistent (Weinhardt et al., 2019a). A strength of this research was that it used both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain robust data. However, measures used for anxiety and mental health were not clinical measures for diagnosis. Therefore, there can be many different interpretations of the results which reduces the accuracy of these findings.

### **2.9.1 Summary**

It is evident from the existing literature that trans\* young people face several issues within their school contexts. Throughout this review there was a dominant discourse of incidents of bullying and discrimination negatively impacting trans\* children and young people in all aspects of their lives. There were recurrent themes around social rejection by both adults and peers, not feeling comfortable attending school and safety concerns. The literature highlighted themes related to mental health disparities amongst trans\* young people compared to their cisgender peers.

Negative school and home experiences appeared to significantly impact mental health leading to self-harm, depression and anxiety. Additionally, when trans\* young people also had SEN to contend with such as ASD, support was difficult for them to obtain in school.

Contrastingly, some themes across the literature highlighted positive and supportive practices which can be perceived as protective factors buffering risks of poor well-being outcomes. This included inclusive school ethos, access to LGBT+ related clubs to enhance school belonging, positive relationships with both adults and peers, wider anti-discriminatory policies which ensured their safety, family acceptance and tailored support to encompass gender related issues and educational needs. In the current research, these factors were further explored with the view of informing EPs on best practice guidelines.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter begins with a discussion about the philosophical assumptions governing the research and the methods adopted. It then outlines the research design, sampling method, phases of data collection, the recruitment of participants and data analysis. Finally, it will explore the principles of validity including the trustworthiness of qualitative research and address ethical considerations.

### **3.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

The philosophical worldview are basic beliefs that guide the action of the research (Robson, 2011). It is important to discuss as it governs the research and informs decisions about what methods are undertaken. Among others, there are two key philosophical views reported within social research: ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to “the study of being” and the nature of social reality, epistemology refers to “the study of knowledge” and the ways of learning about what is possible about reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The ontological perspective adopted within this research is constructivism which assumes realities are intangible mental constructions socially, experiential based and specific in nature to the individual. Therefore, the adopted epistemological perspective assumes that social phenomena are products of “meaning-making” activities amongst groups and individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It focuses on how individuals construct meaning and interpret their experiences as it is lived and felt within their social world. Therefore, knowledge is constructed across interactions between people and their experiences, rather than having a separate existence (Robson, 2011). The current research study fits within this approach as it is taking

place within participants natural settings. It also focuses on exploring trans\* young people, parents and staff members multiple truths and experiences within the AEP. Therefore, this research assumes that knowledge and meaning is created throughout the process from interactions amongst the participants ideas, experiences and communication with others, including the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### **3.2 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research; it is about acknowledging that the researcher is part of the research process. It considers ways the research is influenced by personal beliefs, prior experiences, assumptions and biases (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019).

As I am exploring how participants gender has impacted on their school life experiences, I thought it was important that I too reflected on my own gender and how these experiences might have influenced how I conducted this research. I identify as a cisgender female; I have never questioned my gender until I started conducting this research. I was born in the UK, my parents immigrated from Africa at a young age, but they are of Indian heritage. I am the youngest of six children and as a young child growing up, I had always engaged in stereotypical female behaviours. I enjoyed playing with dolls and often wore dresses as this is what I had access to and what I viewed as “normal” from watching my three older sisters. My parent’s beliefs and ideals were very much shaped by my Indian culture which had very strong views on maintaining stereotypical gender roles and expression. My parents alluded to not wanting to be shamed or embarrassed within the family and wider community. It seemed considerably more difficult to challenge societal and cultural norms at that

time due to fears of exclusion and how that might impact on the family's prospects. Although I was not aware of it at the time, I was always encouraged albeit unintentionally, to behave and dress in a feminine way and was influenced by these cultural ideals from a very young age.

However, as I became older, my personal beliefs evolved and I did not necessarily agree with how my family perceived gender. I started to express myself in different ways, resist influences and started questioning outdated cultural norms including strict gender roles within my Indian culture. I felt strongly about advocating for myself as a female and for other individuals by encouraging them to be who they wanted to be and identify in the way that felt most right for them. I have continued to do this through my work as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) and throughout this research. Therefore, I am aware that my experiences of being cisgender, my culture and my upbringing may have influenced how I interpreted the research findings and understood the perspectives of the participants in this study.

My position may have led me to neglect the personal feelings one may have about their gender identity which can affect a trans\* person's quality of life. However, I also believe that my experiences have helped me to notice wider societal views on gender, particularly how this can impact people's understanding of gender and in turn affect young people's development. Lastly, I believe that my experiences have stimulated curiosity and enabled me to explore new perspectives in more depth to help develop my understanding in this research area.

### **3.2.1 Qualitative Methodology**

There are different types of methods which can be used to gather information for a research study. Quantitative research is the process of testing causal relationships through collecting and analysing numerical data, it is linked with a positivist paradigm which believes that an observable and objective reality exists. However, qualitative research is used to gain a deeper understanding of the individual constructs of participants and their experiences through non-numerical data. It focuses on gathering perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Robson, 2011). This type of research is linked to the constructivist paradigm which fits this study as it focuses on exploring several social constructions of meaning and knowledge, hence participants help construct reality with the researcher.

Qualitative research also acknowledges that the researcher's own values and prior experiences exist, and subjectivity is a fundamental part of the research (Robson, 2011). Therefore, qualitative methods are the most appropriate methodology to adopt for the current study. Although qualitative research can support the researcher obtain a rich understanding around the phenomenon studied, there are limitations in adopting qualitative methodologies. These comprise of issues regarding rigour, validity and reliability and these will be addressed later in this chapter.

### **3.3 Research Design**

#### **3.3.1 Case study**

A qualitative case study was adopted for this research. The "case" is often the situation, individual or organisation being studied and within this research, the case is referred to as the AEP. Yin (2012) describes the use of case studies as an ideal way to explore a phenomenon in its real life context, particularly when boundaries

between the phenomenon and context are not clear or evident (Yin, 2012). This research explores contemporary phenomenon as being trans\* young people's school experiences and well-being. However, the nature of the AEP context and the staff working within it, will undeniably affect young people's day-to-day experiences and interactions. Therefore, a case study design was selected due to the lack of clarity between the phenomenon and the context.

The study will follow a single case study design as one 'case' is involved i.e. one school. I explored the use of multiple cases such as having different schools involved e.g. a mainstream secondary school to contrast the findings. However, due to difficulties with identifying and recruiting participants from the trans\* population, a good sample size may have been difficult to achieve. I also thought that focusing on a single case would give a more comprehensive understanding of the AEP context and its' influence.

There are reported to be many strengths of using case study designs. They can be flexible which is suited to gathering qualitative information and multiple methods can be used such as observations, interviews and open-ended questions (Yin, 2012). A flexible design enables the researcher to change and adapt the research process in accordance with emerging findings albeit within the broad aim and overarching research questions (Robson, 2011). This was vital in the current study as it involved vulnerable young people with special educational needs and took place within an unprecedented pandemic. On the other hand, case study research tends to be specific in nature, its findings are not usually considered to be generalisable beyond the setting or within the wider population (Yin, 2012). However, the current research focuses on generating new information about an under researched phenomenon.

The findings are intended to be used to support staff in the setting to better understand gender related issues and develop best practice moving forward. Additionally, there is a hope that wider professionals reading the findings may apply or transfer the results to their own situation or within particular contexts. Therefore, any findings may prove useful to broaden professional knowledge on the topic.

### **3.3.2 Case Description**

Central to case study research, it is important to provide a detailed description of participants experiences within a given context. It is imperative that a description of the context is provided. The AEP in question is a unit which is part of a wider school encompassing three different sites: a behavioural PRU, an ASD Post-16 college and a mental health unit which is where the participants were recruited from. It is a small, therapeutic education provision in London which specialises in accommodating pupils between the ages of 11-18. These pupils are considered by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to be experiencing psychological health difficulties that struggle to cope in mainstream secondary schools despite all reasonable support provided.

At the time this study took place, the headteacher reported that there were 20 pupils registered that attended the mental health unit. Staff aim to provide a supportive nurturing environment with personalised education to suit the needs of the learner and pride themselves for being inclusive to all pupils. Staff working within the unit have a strong focus on building pupil's resilience and this is embedded within their curriculum. The local fair access panel, medical consultants and parents can also refer children and young people to the unit. Referrals are considered by a panel



including school staff, an educational psychologist, school nurse and a local CAMHS professional several times a year.

Staff within the unit view that students are best placed in mainstream education. Bespoke adaptations should be made to ensure access to the curriculum and social opportunities are available. They envision that some pupils can be returned to mainstream secondary school following a short period of time (6-12 weeks), so this is a significant consideration to all referrers. However, this rarely happens and most students at the provision continue to achieve their GCSE qualifications whilst in attendance.

To gain further information about the wider school, I reviewed the school website and recent Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education) Inspection Report. An Ofsted inspection took place in November 2019 and the whole school was rated as “good”. The website had a large amount of information about all three sites including the mental health unit the study takes place in, the behavioural unit and the ASD post-16 college. Several policies were also listed including anti-bullying, safeguarding and whole school policies such as ‘trauma informed schools and relationships. This indicated that the school are aware of how adverse life experiences can impact on a young person’s quality of life, capacity to learn, to relate, to behave, to achieve, to function well and follow practices to support pupils with this. The school allocate staff mentors to each pupil who check in on them regularly, the pupils also have an option to choose a specific ‘safe’ person in the school who they feel comfortable to talk to should they require support.

### **3.4 Methods for the Fieldwork**

### **3.4.1 Sampling and Selection**

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method used within qualitative research to satisfy the specific needs in a project (Robson, 2011). It involves the researcher identifying and intentionally selecting individuals or a group of individuals that are of a particular interest, have experienced a phenomenon or are knowledgeable on the topic (Robson, 2011). Purposive sampling and snowball sampling are the most common form of sampling in research involving the trans\* population. Bettinger (2010) states that the greatest difficulty that arises within research involving LGBT (including trans\*) populations is the identification and access to the participants. The LGBT population is also hard to reach since they are more opposed to identification because of possible discrimination, social isolation and other reasons (Bettinger, 2010). As a group of trans\* participants in a particular setting were already identified, purposive sampling seemed most appropriate and the above challenges to participant recruitment were also alleviated.

### **3.4.2 Selection of Site**

An AEP in London was selected for the research. It has three sites within its campus, a PRU or behavioural unit, a mental health unit and an ASD Post-16 college.

### **3.4.3 Selection of Setting**

This specific AEP was known to me in a previous role at MENCAP 6 years prior to starting the research. I had one existing connection with a staff member who reported that there were many trans\* young people attending the setting. The mental health unit was selected for participant recruitment as I was interested in its high

attendance of trans\* young people and its particular focus on supporting the mental health and well-being of its students.

Intentionally selecting this AEP had its advantages such as the ease of data collection and recruitment. I reviewed how existing relationships could support with the logistics of the data collection, especially during the pandemic when many interactions were online. However, disadvantages of this method include potential loss of objectivity and increase in researcher bias due to the close connection with the school and the fact that the participants were not chosen at random. The issues affecting validity of the research and measures used to mitigate them will be further discussed later in this chapter.

### **3.4.2 The Selection and Involvement of Participants**

This study took a multi-informant approach and aimed to not only capture the views of the trans\* young people themselves but their primary care givers and staff in the AEP. This was to gain an understanding of the young people's overall experiences within the context in more depth and from different perspectives. The inclusion criteria for the current study were young people between the ages of 11-18 with a gender identity that was different or did not match their assigned sex at birth. The young person's primary caregiver (parent/carer) and staff members at the AEP who had a good working relationship with the trans\* young people attending the setting.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdowns, in person fieldwork was prohibited during the preliminary stages of data collection. Therefore, the ethical permission for online research was submitted. Once permission was granted, I spoke to the headteacher to discuss potential participants who would fit the inclusion

criteria, eight young people, their parent/carer and seven staff members were identified. I then briefed the head teacher about the research and asked them to disseminate the information sheets and consent forms to all potential participants.

Staff members and the young people's parent/carers were informed to call or email the researcher if they were interested in the study. I then called the parents that were interested and met with staff members online to explain the research and confirm their participation. Additionally, the young people were invited to an individual introductory meeting on Zoom, so that they could become more familiar with the research, ask questions and confirm their participation in the study. Six young people agreed to take part in the research as well as their parent/carer. However, one young person left the AEP shortly after agreeing to take part due to a change of home circumstances but their carer remained in the study. Furthermore, as the data collection period started late in the summer term and continued throughout Autumn term, another young person moved from the mental health unit to the ASD Post -16 college. They remained in the AEP campus and continued with the research study.

Finally, five young people, six parent/carers and seven staff members were recruited, a total of eighteen participants took part in the study. More detailed information on the participants can be viewed in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Names have been replaced by pseudonyms to keep participants identity confidential. Table 1 below provides a description of the staff participants, their current role and the duration of time they worked within the AEP.

**Table 1.** *Participant Information for Staff Members*

<b>Staff Name</b>	<b>Description of Role</b>	<b>Duration of time at AEP</b>
Staff A	Pastoral Support Officer & Mentor	6 Years
Staff B	Pastoral Manager & Mentor	20 Years
Staff C	Head of Unit & Mentor	5 Years
Staff D	Art Teacher & Mentor	5 Years
Staff E	Learning Support Assistant & Mentor	17 Years
Staff F	Learning Support Assistant	18 Months
Staff G	Maths Teacher & Mentor	6 Years

Table 2 below provides a description of the parent/carer participants, their gender identity and their child's name.

**Table 2.** *Participant Information for Parent/Carers*

<b>Parents/Carer Name</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Child's Name</b>
Chloe	Cisgender	Jessie
Shaniya	Cisgender	Sam
Sasha	Cisgender	Frankie
Diana	Cisgender	Tom
Anita	Cisgender	Morgan
Rosie	Cisgender	Riley

Table 3 provides a description of the young people, including their age, gender identity, duration of time they attended the AEP and a description of their special educational needs. As stated earlier in this chapter, the AEP is primarily a provision

for children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Therefore, all young people had identified SEMH needs which were decided by school staff, an educational psychologist and a CAMHs professional. A confirmed ASD diagnosis was given to two participants by paediatricians whilst one participant was awaiting a diagnosis.

**Table 3.** *Participant Information for Young People*

<b>Young Person's Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Duration of time at AEP</b>	<b>SEN and Diagnoses</b>
Riley	17 Years	Non – Binary	3 Years	ASD & SEMH
Jessie	15 Years	Non-Binary	1.5 Years	ASD & SEMH
Morgan	15 Years	Non-Binary	1 Year	SEMH
Sam	16 Years	Transgender Female to Male	5 Months	SEMH
Frankie	15 Years	Non-Binary	2 Years	SEMH & Awaiting Assessment for ASD

### **3.5 Data Collection**

I decided to complete the data collection in a four phased approach. Additional time was required to plan and prepare for data collection due to the research coinciding with two national lockdowns and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also difficulties accessing the setting to complete field work due to university restrictions which prolonged data collection and plans needed to be altered to obtain good quality data.

The four phased approach to data collection also links with the main research question and associated objectives for fieldwork as stated below:

**RQ2.** What are the experiences of well-being and educational support for trans\* young people in alternative education provision compared to mainstream school settings?

The following research objectives will facilitate in answering the research question:

- a) *Explore parent/carers perceptions of supportive and unsupportive school practices in both mainstream school and the AEP.*
- b) *Explore young people’s perceptions regarding the support available for their gender-related issues and well-being prior to and whilst attending the AEP.*
- c) *Explore how staff at the AEP understand and support all young people with gender related issues and promote their well-being.*

**Table 4.** *Phases of Data Collection and Methods*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Data Collection Method</b>
(Preparation)	1	This phase of the study involved consultations with school staff particularly with the headteacher to explore data collection methods. Additionally, the young people who consented to the research were offered a short online meeting to meet me and ask any questions about the research.
2a	2	This phase involved semi-structured interviews with young peoples’ parent/carers.

- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 2b | 3 | This phase involved two meetings with the young people, the initial meeting was to build rapport with the young person and introduce an activity. The second meeting involved the semi-structured interview. |
| 2c | 4 | This phase of the study involved semi-structured interviews with staff members who worked within the AEP.  |
- 

### **3.5.1 Preparation**

I had an established relationship with the headteacher within the AEP and initial preparatory work was carried out with the school immediately. Research aims and priorities were finalised and agreed with the headteacher during initial consultations. Discussions involved continuous school changes during national lockdowns, the trans\* young people's health, well-being, general attendance and barriers to their involvement in the research moving forward. Through consultation, I aimed to seek opinions around data collection methods that were accessible and can be used to support young people's engagement and ensure high-quality data was collected. It was suggested that building a rapport was essential before any data collection took place in order to support the young people to feel comfortable with an unfamiliar adult, this was also verified by the young people themselves.

O'Reilly & Dogra (2017) state that children and young people involved in the research may require several opportunities before they have the confidence to speak, especially those with special educational needs. Building rapport with children and young people also takes time and researchers should not expect rapport to be established after one meeting (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Unfamiliar professionals



involved may also impact children and young people's willingness to be open and honest, cause anxiety and pose a power imbalance. This is why building rapport can emphasise a genuine interest in young people's views and create a safe environment (Freedman, 2019).

As a result, it was agreed that the interview will be completed over two meetings. The first meeting was considered to get to know the young person and gather preliminary information about them. This included questions around what the young person identified as to establish appropriate terms, what they were interested in and their understanding of what "feeling well" or "being well" means to them which would further inform the interview guide. The first meeting also allowed me to actively reflect on the young person's chronological age, their cognitive and communication abilities. This is essential when conducting research with young people to ensure questions asked are within their capabilities (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

Further consultations focused on gaining staff opinions about the interview methods that can be used to support and facilitate the interview process with the young people. It was suggested that abstract concepts and reflective activities should not be used as young people are very literal. Thus, concrete language and direct questions were preferred. However, the use of visual drawings was suggested to support some of the young people with ASD as drawings and comics have been used successfully to help convey their ideas. For more details on what was discussed in school consultations regarding data collection, please refer to Appendix 11.

### **3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

As the current study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, semi-structured interviews were the selected data collection method. Semi-structured interviews allows for a degree of flexibility, the researcher has a list of set topics and questions but can deviate from them to probe areas suggested by the respondent (Robson, 2011). The format also allows for the researcher to build a rapport with the participant. It aligns with the case study research design and supports an in-depth exploration on issues that may be more pertinent for the participant to discuss (Yin, 2012).

Regarding the staff interviews, I also explored the use of focus groups due to time constraints. A focus group is a group interview or an open-ended group discussion which the researcher facilitates and guides (Robson, 2011). Focus groups are useful because they produce rich data and require less time as all participants are together for the discussion. They also stimulate respondents who may otherwise have difficulty remembering events (Robson, 2011). However, it is difficult to facilitate a large group discussion, especially if a specific power dynamic forms between the participants (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, as the research topic was somewhat controversial involving views around gender, I decided to complete individual semi-structured interviews to gain more in depth and honest responses.

The success of semi-structured interviews depends on the skill of the interviewer and the interview itself can sometimes lack direction (Smith, 2015). Moreover, the lack of standardisation raises concerns about reliability and biases are also hard to rule out (Robson, 2011), although this can be done if carried out with practice. As a result, the interview guides were piloted and available prompts led the conversation back to the desired topic to support participants focus on valuable questions.

### **3.5.3 Conducting the Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone for all parent/carers and staff members within the AEP. In person interviews were conducted with the young people in the school setting once additional ethical permission was granted due to their preference. The delivery methods had to be flexible as they were dependent on the COVID-19 restrictions at the time. At the beginning of the interview, I explained the purpose of the research, the participants right to withdraw and asked whether they were happy to be audio recorded. Those who had meetings via the telephone were asked if they were in a comfortable and private location due to confidentiality reasons, all participants were then given the opportunity to ask any questions. At the end of the interviews all participants were debriefed and were informed that their audio will be transcribed with identifiable information omitted. They were also given an opportunity to opt into being contacted for an additional follow up call to discuss identified themes at a later stage.

### **3.5.4 The Use of Creative Interview Methods**

As previously mentioned, consultations with the school were carried out to prepare for data collection. It was evident within these consultations that the young people with SEN would find it challenging to express their views directly (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Some young people also had difficulties coping with unfamiliar adults and new situations. Therefore, visual and creative methods were suggested and explored to facilitate the semi-structured interviews with the young people. This was important because the focus remains on the voice of the young people, so helping them to formulate their views was essential.

The use of visual or creative methods was thought to put the young people at ease and encourage more in-depth responses to interview questions (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Two activities were offered to the young people during their introductory meeting, they could either draw a picture of their school life before and after starting at the AEP or produce a collage. This included any memories, feelings and changes they had noticed since attending. They were asked to bring their creations to the second meeting where they will be asked questions regarding their school experiences. They also had a choice to verbally answer the interview questions if they wanted to and were given an information sheet so they knew what to expect (please refer to Appendix 7).

Visual methods such as drawings and art were considered engaging as it can support children and young people to create things that may be important to them. In return, this may help the researcher to see the world through their eyes (Kleine et al. 2016). It is particularly important when discussing topics such as gender or well-being as it is difficult to define, thus being creative can support children, young people's and researchers understanding of concepts during discussions (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). This method in research is reported to be safe, inclusive and can create engaging opportunities for young people to express their views but also on deliberate strategies to assist them in the formation of their views (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). As discussed in chapter 1, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states all children have the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and should be taken seriously (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Therefore, the choice of creative and visual methods to support

communication ensured that the research was accessible for young people with SEN and that their rights were exercised.

### **3.5.5 Developing the Interview Guides**

The interview guides were informed by the literature review, Bronfenbrenner's social ecological and bioecological model, research questions and findings from the small-scale pilot study I had completed in my first year of training. Interview questions were formulated to explore feelings of well-being amongst the young people. Evidence-based guidance from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) was referred to as it separates the definition of well-being into three distinctive categories. Emotional well-being involves feeling happy, confident and less anxious or depressed (Watson, Emery, & Bayliss, 2012). Psychological well-being includes feeling listened to, problem solving skills, attentiveness, having autonomy and control over one's life. Lastly, social well-being involves having positive social relationships with others and avoiding negative behavioural patterns e.g. delinquency, bullying or violence (NICE, 2009). However, well-being continues to be a subjective concept and can be viewed differently by the young people themselves. Therefore, the concept was further explored during the initial meetings and the interview questions were adapted as appropriate and reflected the young people's own words.

### **3.5.6 Piloting the Interview Guides**

Conducting a pilot was essential to review the interview guides and creative interview methods to determine if they effectively facilitated the interview process. However, the nature of the study and issues regarding a small sample affected the

ability to carry out a robust pilot. The interview guides and drawing activities were reviewed when first used with a young person, parent and staff member.

After the initial interviews were completed, they were asked whether the questions were appropriate and if anything should be changed or altered. All participants felt that the questions and content were relevant and appropriate. However, one young person stated that their interview was slightly long. Therefore, I changed the order of the questions for the young persons' interview guide to improve the flow of the interview, prompts were reduced, and some wording was changed to reduce closed responses from interviewees. The creative methods including the drawing activities were also piloted but the young person opted out of completing this and preferred to verbally take part in the interview instead. They felt that it was a good option to have if other young people preferred to visualise their school experiences. Significant changes to the interview guides were not needed and data from all participants was used in the final analysis and other young people were given the option to take part in the drawing activity if they wished.

The duration of the interviews with the young people lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews with parents lasted between 30 to 50 minutes and the interviews with the staff were between 40 to 90 minutes on average.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

There are many approaches which can be adopted when analysing qualitative research. However, the approach to data analysis should be related to the theoretical paradigm governing the research study as this informs the research methods (Robson, 2011). The current research adopts a constructivist paradigm and

focuses on different perspectives and the unique experiences of the participant. I initially considered using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which has a dual focus of providing a detailed analysis of individual participants lived experiences and how they interpret them, as well as the pattern of meaning across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, IPA is more suited to research that has a small and homogeneous sample, the current research study has a large heterogeneous sample with three different participant groups thus, IPA was not seen as the most suitable approach.

Thematic analysis was identified to be particularly compatible with the research questions and methodology adopted. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is a more flexible approach and can be used within a variety of paradigms, although they explain that flexibility is constrained by the epistemological assumptions of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The goal of thematic analysis is to understand patterns of meanings from data on participant experiences, events and realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to become immersed in the data, it provides a process for encoding the information given, generating codes which is a phrase that captures what the data is about and producing a list of themes. A theme is a pattern found in the information that describes and interprets aspects of phenomena (Robson, 2011).

I used semantic and latent codes to thematically analyse the data. Semantic codes are related to the meaning of the data, it mirrors the participants language and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Latent codes are interpretations derived from the researchers conceptual and theoretical frameworks which depends on what each individual brings to the research. This will allow them to see particular things in the

data and interpret them in different ways (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I was aware that no two people will code and analyse data in the same way and that the codes, subthemes and themes generated in this study may be interpreted in a different way by another researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

An abductive approach was taken in this analysis which refers to using theoretical frameworks, multiple hypothesis and the mechanisms underlying them in order to seek the best possible explanation for producing the observed phenomena (Robson, 2011). I considered a data driven or inductive approach to analysis but acknowledged that is difficult to separate my preconceived ideas on what will be found. There is also a chance that concepts or theories related to the research can implicitly affect the interpretation of data (Robson, 2011). I also ensured the data itself was used to structure the analysis and the themes remained strongly linked to the data set as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The generation of codes and themes were conducted within and then across each participant interview. They were then discussed and reviewed regularly with research supervisors at each stage of analysis. It was thought that the different perspectives on the same data will encourage reflection on codes and support in the development of themes to alleviate researcher subjectivity.

Thematic analysis is viewed as an accessible research tool, particularly to student researchers and it can provide a rich and detailed account of large sets of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although this type of analysis is useful to summarise key features, it poses risks to missing nuances in the data. The process of conducting thematic analysis may also lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence if the researcher is not clear and explicit in the procedures that they use to conduct the



analysis. Braun and Clarke (2019) have reflected on how thematic analysis should be applied and suggest that the researcher use thematic analysis reflexively.

Therefore, I used a structured six step approach prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) to analyse the interview transcripts. The six steps of analysis are described in full detail in Appendix 12.

### **3.7. Trustworthiness**

It is important that flexible qualitative research designs like the one adopted in this study is conducted in a valid way. However, the principles used to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative research differs from those used for quantitative research. In quantitative research, principles of 'validity' and 'reliability' are demonstrated through producing predictable outcomes, reducing researcher bias as much as possible and replicating the findings in different contexts and under different conditions. This is not possible or should not be expected in qualitative research as it aims to explore real life phenomena with the likelihood that some aspects of the findings can be transferrable to other similar settings. Therefore, identical circumstances cannot be recreated in order to be replicated (Robson, 2011).

Furthermore, the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' are inappropriate when using flexible qualitative research designs. It is important that qualitative researchers demonstrate that their study is sound, yield findings that are valuable and have a criteria to follow to enhance the credibility of their research (Smith, 2015). Yardley (2008) argues that there are four principles that can be used to evaluate qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance (Yardley, 2008). The actions that address the threats to validity are detailed below.

### **3.7.1 Sensitivity to Context**

Yardley (2008) states that it is essential to explore the research literature around the topic of interest to formulate the research questions. The current research explored trans\* children and young people's school experiences, in particular the issues faced within their school communities, their mental health and well-being and the protective factors that could support them. Gaps in the literature encompassed studies in the UK, studies focusing on trans\* children and young people's school experiences and well-being including the perspectives of those with special educational needs and their parents. Additionally, there was a paucity of research completed within alternative educational provisions.

This research has also recognised differences in socio-cultural contexts in preceding literature which has been conducted within the USA. Views on gender may not be reflective of the values and beliefs of other cultures and school contexts within the UK. Furthermore, the participants perspective and the relationship between themselves and the researcher is important to consider (Yardley, 2008). Although the research took place during the COVID -19 pandemic, I tried to build a rapport with participants by offering numerous video calls and scheduling meetings to get to know them first and make them feel comfortable, this stressed a genuine interest in their views.

### **3.7.2 Commitment and Rigour**

Yardley (2008) states that the researcher should demonstrate commitment and engagement with the research topic. In chapter 1, I explained in a previous role that individual work with trans\* children and young people was carried out and support

was offered to staff in the AEP. Regarding rigour, I engaged with the data analysis procedure and became immersed within the data itself. Member checking was completed with the participants by inviting them to check their transcripts to ensure accuracy and that they resonate with their own experiences.

I enhanced my knowledge by exploring the six stages of thematic analysis in depth using literature published by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Furthermore, more recent guidance on reflexive thematic analysis was reviewed to ensure an updated, rigorous and systematic approach was applied. I also engaged in supervision regularly to discuss each stage and reflect on any changes that needed to be made. Further opportunities for reflection on the research was provided during university, including taking part in regular peer consultation groups. The findings were also peer reviewed during this time and reviewed by staff participants themselves which helped to reduce researcher bias during analysis.

Furthermore, the underlying philosophy which guided this research was a constructivist paradigm which value multiple perspectives and realities that people have in their minds (Robson, 2011). Therefore, to increase the validity of the current research, views were collected from not just the young people but the parents and staff within the AEP who knew them. The data was then analysed together to look for commonalities and differences to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

### **3.7.3 Coherence and Transparency**

Coherence and transparency relate to how suitable the chosen theoretical perspective, methodology and analysis are in answering the research questions and

how well they are explained (Yardley 2008). The current research was a multi-informant exploratory research study focusing on the experiences of trans\* young people with gender related issues attending an AEP. Furthermore, the impact the change of settings had on their gender affirmation and the support provided for their overall learning and well-being. Therefore, semi structured interviews and thematic analysis were used which allowed for in depth exploration and identify patterns of meaning across the participants experiences. Additionally, the methods involved within the research study have been clearly described, this includes sampling, participant recruitment procedures and the methods for the phases of data collection and analysis. Reflexivity was considered in the methodology section of the report as this is important for transparency. Furthermore, the appendices include the interview guides and the information given to the participants throughout the research.

#### **3.7.4 Impact and Importance**

Research should be carried out with a potential to make a difference or to support a deeper understanding of a phenomena, have real-world implications or be useful for policy makers and practitioners (Yardley, 2008). The well-being of vulnerable groups such as trans\* children and young people have not been represented within research, especially within their educational settings. This research is based on providing schools and the wider systems around the young person in supporting their learning and well-being in the UK. The research will be distributed to the participants, so they can acknowledge the outcomes of sharing their own experiences. The findings will also be presented to the staff at the AEP as positive actions and experiences may be useful in further supporting trans\* children and young people

within the setting. Moreover, sharing the findings from this research to fellow trainee EPs will also inform their knowledge and work within schools.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Researchers have a responsibility to protect all participants from harm or distress, have a duty to respect the rights and dignity of the participants, must follow certain moral principles and rules of conduct. As a vulnerable population was involved in this research, various ethical concerns were highlighted and addressed during the research process. All actions conducted within this study complied with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society & Ethics Committee, 2018). Initial ethical approval was granted by the Institute of Education ethical review process for online fieldwork, additional permission was granted to commence in person fieldwork as the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted at a later stage.

#### **3.8.1 Informed Consent**

The headteacher disseminated information about the research, its aims and any of the risks involved with the students, parents and school staff due to in person fieldwork being prohibited. However, informed consent was sought from all participants directly, students were given an option to attend Zoom meetings to confirm their participation. Subsequently, an initial telephone call was carried out to inform parents and clarify any questions that they had. I also attended a Zoom meeting with a group of staff members to gain their consent. All participants were told that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the interview or up to a month

after interviews were carried out as this was when data analysis was scheduled to begin.

### **3.8.2 Risks**

The interview involved difficult conversations with the young people about their past school experiences and mental health which was distressing. To reduce the likelihood of negative emotions arising, strength-based questions were used. I allowed the young people to take the lead on what they chose to bring up and discuss, they also had opportunities to have a familiar adult with them in the room for support. The option of creative activities within the interview also enabled the young people to express their views in different ways and to reduce the amount of direct questioning and eye contact during the interviews. Regular check ins were also conducted to ensure young people were feeling well enough to continue. As the young people had persistent psychological health needs, questions were given to them beforehand to reduce further anxiety around what to expect.

### **3.8.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity**

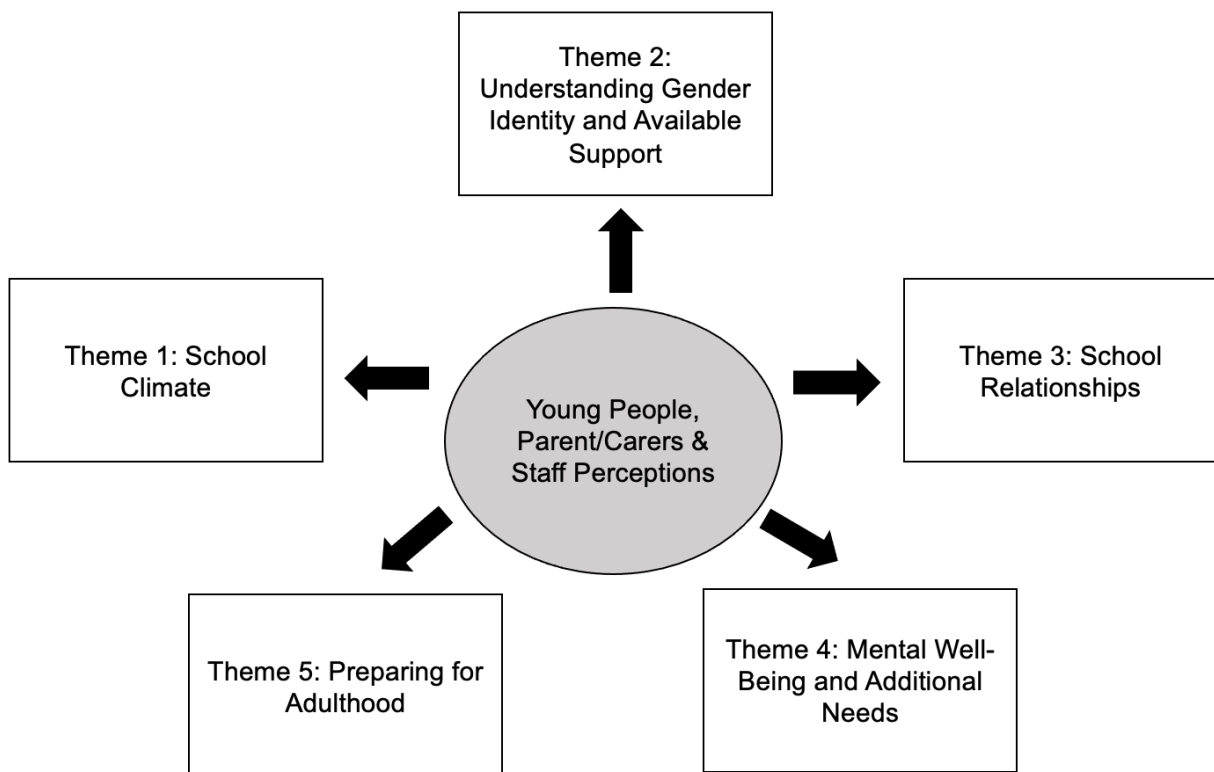
Jones et al. (2016) reported that any research involving trans\* young people need to prioritise their safety due to risks of discrimination, family and wider social acceptance. Therefore, I was extremely careful protecting the identities of those participating. Participants who took part in interviews via the telephone were asked if they could go to a private confidential space. All participants were informed that information collected will be kept private and only accessible to me and the research supervisor for the purpose of analysis. They were informed that pseudonyms will be used in any subsequent reports to protect their identity.

### **3.8.4 Debrief and Dissemination**

To ensure transparency, a full debrief was provided for all participants at the end of the interview. A summary of the findings was also disseminated to the headteacher, online meetings were offered to further discuss the findings and their implications once the research came to an end.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Data was analysed across three participant groups. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six parent/carers, five young people and seven staff members. Eighteen interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed individually and then across participants, using the six steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings for the young people, parent/carers and staff members at the AEP will be presented together in a thematic map and described in detail with accompanying quotes. Overall, five key themes with associated subthemes emerged across the participant groups, there were also one additional theme exclusive to the parent/carers.



**Figure 2.** Thematic Map of Young People's, Parent/Carers and Staff Perceptions



## **4.1 Theme 1: School Climate**

This theme encompasses the young people, parent/carers and staff members perceptions on the school climate which reflected the schools' overall attitudes, core values, beliefs, culture and environment of the classroom. All participant groups described examples of the AEP's school climate, young people and parent/carers explained how it differed from experiences in mainstream schools. Each of their responses fell within the four subthemes: 'Inclusion and Diversity', 'School Environment and Policies', 'Views on Gender' and 'Parent Engagement and Support'.

### **4.1.1 Subtheme 1: Inclusion and Diversity**

Young people and parent/carers expressed that the AEP had an inclusive ethos compared to other schools they had attended. They referenced to all students and staff being very open, understanding and accepting of each other regardless of their individual differences. This included their gender, race, sexual orientation and psychological health needs. They felt that this was a core value instilled within the school culture and directly influenced the staff and young people's attitudes.

*"I feel able to talk about my gender more to people and I could never do that in my old school because I thought they wouldn't understand and react negatively but it's more accepted here". (Frankie)*

*"And she's been accepting. She's accepted there and she's also become very accepting of others, regardless of who they are, what they are or their past. Everyone is so accepting of others and it's due to the school's values I think". (Anita-Parent)*

Young people expressed that they felt included in many school events and it was an LGBT friendly environment due to many opportunities to celebrate their differences and be a part of the school community. The structural conditions of the school environment were also emphasised including changes to the school toilets with the introduction of gender-neutral toilets to support trans\* young people feel more comfortable.

*“So, they were able to just make the toilets completely gender neutral which really helped and then they would always try, if LGBT month or trans\* week would come up they would try to make a decent thing out of it, to make the students feel included”. (Riley)*

These responses were also echoed by staff members within the AEP. They expressed that the school aimed to be inclusive, they provided support for trans\* individuals by automatically accepting their gender identity from the outset. However, if a young person decided to change genders during their attendance this is also acted upon without judgement with the support of their parents and CAMHs professionals.

*“So, if we're talking specifically in terms of gender, I think the fact that we completely accept their gender. We've had students that have really, really struggled with their gender in mainstream school, so we've got a couple of students that have come to us in the gender that they want to be treated as. We just do that and it's automatic and it is not a thing”. (Staff B)*

Staff also referenced that their school ethos included celebrating all individual differences daily. Students are recognised for who they are and many gender identities are represented in the curriculum, to increase school connectedness and further motivate them in their learning.

*“In the Maths Curriculum, I make sure that the curriculum is inclusive. So, for instance, you know, maybe a maths question will say, Gloria had 50 pounds and she spent 20 pounds etc. So, in terms of that, rather than using the name and pronouns, I make it gender inclusive. So, I will change that wording of that question and this motivates some trans\* young people to at least attempt the question”. (Staff E)*

Young people described how their experiences of inclusion were different when attending a mainstream school. The idea of being different to other peers was not accepted by students or staff. Individual differences were not acknowledged or celebrated, it was viewed as a problem and young people were made to feel inadequate which resulted in them hiding their identity.

*“There were about five sort of people that ran my secondary school and they said oh well maybe try acting a bit more normal you have special needs so maybe add in the fact that you're LGBT and trans\* might not appear helpful when making friends”. (Riley)*

*“Because it was a religious school, they didn't accept anything like that. I did come out a few weeks before I left and one or two teachers seem to be accepting, but the students weren't very accepting of it”. (Sam)*

However, parents highlighted that even though mainstream schools appeared to be accepting of the gender changes, their child was encouraged not to express their identity socially due to possible negative reactions from students.

*“They were just really fine about it and appeared to help. I mean, they're not in the business of having transgender or gay children but it was, it was perfectly acceptable in the meetings but it was kept quiet”. (Shaniya-Parent)*

#### **4.1.2 Subtheme 2: School Environment and Policies**

Young people expressed that when they started attending the AEP, they noticed that the school environment was smaller, there were more positive interactions with staff and they valued the calm atmosphere. They stated that the environment felt safe and they were more comfortable sharing their gender identity to others. Young people were also better able to learn, particularly the pupils who had sensory difficulties and ASD. Similarly, parents acknowledged that the smaller environment and increased interactions from staff in the AEP benefitted their child.

*“Again, I think it's just the environment, it just makes me want to come in more and go to lessons. Its small and very calm and I feel like I can actually learn here”.*  
*(Riley)*

*“Just by them creating like, welcoming, caring environment just like I guess helped me to eventually be able to come out and to know that there were other like trans non-binary people there that I knew it was already a safe place”. (Sam)*

Young people also had increased feelings of safety in the AEP as the school was against any form of bullying with clear consequences for pupils that engaged in

name calling or harassment. They expressed that staff dealt with bullying promptly after the event had occurred and overall, there were less instances of bullying at the AEP. This was also echoed as a strength of the AEP by the parent/carers.

*“I haven’t been bullied once here, not once. It’s golden. It’s good”. (Jessie)*

*“They talk to all the people involved and then they will like call parents if needed. Um, but most of the time, it really isn’t needed but they will like, talk to you about how it’s wrong to do like those things or like how it’s going to affect the other person”. (Morgan)*

*“They were very, very firm with them and explained to them it was not acceptable at all and even if it happened off site it wasn’t acceptable and it is unacceptable within a school environment too. They are very good with dealing with bullying”. (Rosie-Parent)*

Staff members at the AEP referenced their robust anti-bullying and behaviour policies which helped prevent trans\* young people from being harassed in and around the school campus. Staff particularly described dealing with bullying promptly and that bullying is rare within the AEP as all young people have a mutual understanding as to why it is not acceptable.

*“We have a very strong bullying policy, if there’s a whiff of any bullying in this place, it basically just gets stamped on and the students know this as they sign a contract on their behaviour before starting. That’s why they’re comfortable and feel safe here”. (Staff G)*

Staff also stated that due to the AEP's small environment, students are always being watched and bullying is more difficult to engage in. However, if a student does say something inappropriate, staff immediately call it out and make the student reflect on their behaviour to ensure that it does not happen again.

*... "So, what we do is, we call it, name it. In my classroom, if you make any comments that I know is against someone, I will name it, I will point it out, I will not hide it and explain why it is wrong, in a sense they are being watched all the time, they also reflect on their behaviour and learn from it". (Staff A)*

Young people's experiences in their previous mainstream schools were not as pleasant and they were not as supported by staff. Some of the young people struggled with the large number of children and loud atmosphere which caused them anxiety. Parent/carers also agreed that the mainstream school environments were not right for their child due to their additional needs and this impacted on their learning and well-being.

*"They just upset me I was upset by things like lots of the kids in my class were very loud and out of control, they would joke about me being their girlfriend so that was horrible...The teachers would allow me near their desk because I just hated being around other kids". (Jessie)*

*"They were bullied at mainstream, had quite severe sensory processing struggles. So, there were too many people, it was too loud, there was too much change and it just wasn't a good mix for them to learn and be happy there". (Rosie-Parent)*

Young people and parent/carers expressed that they experienced a high level of bullying in mainstream school due to their gender along with other difficulties. They explained that allegations were not taken seriously by staff when bullying was reported and due to a lack of adherence to anti-bullying policies, harassment continued which severely affected their well-being. Consequently, the school environment became an unsafe place and young people feared to disclose their identity.

*“I have osteoporosis which makes me disabled, then the learning disabilities, dyslexia, dyspraxia and also autism doesn't exactly help so I already got bullied for stuff like that. Then when they found out that I was thinking about being gay as at the time I didn't know what non-binary was, it just made the bullying so much worse and caused me to feel suicidal”. (Riley)*

*“They completely ignored policy because like. Like that's how bad it got. Like, unless it gets physical, they do not care, it really affected me and made me anxious”. (Morgan)*

*“There are lots of homophobic comments that were made which Riley felt very uncomfortable with and they felt were not particularly challenged, which again, linking in with their gender would have meant that they would never have come out as non-binary whilst in mainstream”. (Rosie-Parent)*

#### **4.1.3 Subtheme 3: Views on Gender**

The school's attitude and views around gender and gender expression was another common feature across participants. Young people and parent/carers believed that the AEP was more open to discussing gender. They acknowledged that different

gender identities exist and it was “normalised”. Staff and students appeared to be more open-minded, listened to one another and respected their preferred gender identity. Parent/carers expressed an open environment at the AEP and respect from staff allowed young people to talk about gender related issues more confidently.

*“I think the main thing is how open they are about being part of the LGBT community, which is something I wasn't used to... I think gender is talked about more openly here and being different is normalised, so you don't have to worry”. (Sam)*

*“I think it is because both transgender and non-binary children are also within the settings, obviously the percentages are higher there than they are in mainstream schools. Maybe that's just because they can say these things in this smaller and more open school environment when it comes to gender identity”. (Sasha- Parent)*

Similarly, staff members acknowledged the need to put their own personal views around gender aside and put the needs of the individual first. They valued respecting young people’s decisions around how they would like to identify and always used their preferred names and pronouns whether they agreed with it or not.

*“However, these young people see themselves, that's fine. I mean I see myself as an African, you know, the fact that my family comes from the Caribbean, some people would have an issue with that but that's how I choose to identify. So, if young people want to be addressed a certain way and want to be seen a certain way, really, you just respect it, it's as simple as that”. (Staff E)*

Young people and parent/carers did not feel that their previous mainstream schools respected different gender identities which differed from the stereotypical male and



female binaries. Some schools in question were faith schools or single sex schools and had outdated views on gender roles and expression.

*“I don't know why they did it, they tell students apart by their gender, they see them as a f\*\*\*\*\* boy or a girl and that is all they see them as”. (Jessie)*

*“I knew because when my mother told me that I was going to a girl's school, it really upset me and it dragged my mental health down a lot. I hid it for two years and I really hated myself because it was a religious school and they didn't accept anything like that”. (Sam)*

*“Yeah, they were quite behind the times... the school is really old, was like, over 100 years old it's a convent school but Sam I dunno was excellent and came forward. The school is back in present times”. (Shaniya-Parent)*

#### **4.1.4 Subtheme 4: Parent Engagement and Support**

Participants referenced how the AEP engaged with and supported parents, they expressed that there is regular contact with parents to share information on a day-to-day basis. Although the young people appreciated that their parent was highly involved in their education and that their mental health was monitored, they weren't always pleased about what information was shared. Parent/carers found the communication between home and school valuable, they commented on the extra parenting workshops that were offered. They also appreciated extra peer support groups and easy access to specialist professionals such as educational or clinical psychologists.

*“Yeah, like if something has happened at home then like, my mum can tell them and they can help sort it out. If something happened at school, they can tell my mum and then she can help sort things out when I get home and I don’t have to say that much”. (Frankie)*

*“It’s very effective when parents work with the school and the child is involved, it is the best way for me in terms of educating young people, particularly those with extra needs. So, yeah, I mean, they do that amazingly well, I think and they offer parents support with classes with a psychologist there too”. (Anita-Parent)*

Similar thoughts were echoed by staff members at the AEP. They referenced how important it was to be in contact with parents to best support the young person’s learning and development especially during the COVID-19 school closures. Staff expressed that sharing information with parents helped to inform them of strategies which they can also use at home. Additionally, staff aimed to provide wraparound support for the family as parent/carers had their own difficulties they needed support for first, in order to support their child’s well-being.

*“And I think it’s really important that the parents don’t feel isolated because on quite a few occasions, we are supporting the parents to support their children. We do find that a fair amount of parents have their own mental health issues with the students that come to our school. So, it is about that wraparound support of the parents and being kind and generous and understanding and listening. Yeah, it’s vital for the young person, it’s vital to have that relationship with parents and to support them”. (Staff C)*

However, young people had different experiences in mainstream school. There was less communication and understanding between parents and the school. Although some parents described adequate support for them and their child's needs, most parents often felt blamed and were not listened to or supported. Any actions they agreed with the school did not often materialise.

*“My mother and my nan went into school countless times to complain and despite that, I don't remember or recognise them doing anything to deal with the scenario... like it got so bad my mum and my nan got a ban of the school grounds, but they were only trying to help and communicate my issues”. (Jessie)*

*“We would be called in for meetings and several things were promised but often didn't materialise. They were quite passive aggressive at times about issues and they were quite inconsistent... it is not the way to support parents at all. Parents already feel bad if your child can't get into school and it's not the way to support parents who are doing their best to encourage the young person to get in school. Feel guilty or to, you know, to put everything onto them”. (Anita- Parent)*

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Understanding Own Gender and Available Support**

This theme captures how the young people understood their own gender identity. It highlights the type of support they received in both the AEP and mainstream school which facilitated their understanding or acted as a barrier, preventing them from accepting themselves and expressing their identity. Responses fell between the three main subthemes: 'Gender Recognition and Affirmation', 'Promoting Self-Expression' and 'Staff knowledge, Attitude and Skills'.

#### 4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Gender Recognition and Affirmation

Young people expressed how their gender identity and expression was recognised and respected within the AEP through the language used in the school community. The names and choice of pronouns were used correctly and this helped to affirm their gender. Parent/carers also agreed that staff always listened to their child, respected their gender identity and communicated any changes to the school community with permission.

*“But um, yeah, here its different because they understand us, if you come to them saying like, I would actually like to go by this name and like these pronouns, here they will understand and they listen to that and call you by your preferred name and pronouns”. (Morgan)*

*“Well, they changed names across all the paperwork immediately to the new name. They changed the pronouns straight across without any question, on registers as well as the names they chose and new pronouns, all staff were made aware promptly of the decision, they were very good”. (Sasha-Parent)*

Staff stated the importance of respecting young peoples’ gender identity and using the correct pronouns within the school environment. They expressed that they can occasionally get it wrong but being honest about mistakes helps the young person feel that their identity is viewed as important.

*“When they come in and they want to be known as ‘they’ or it may be something that happens, or they were a ‘she’ and then they want to be known as ‘he’ or vice versa. Very much just straight away, we just go with it, of course after talking*

*to parents' and CAMHs for advice first. However, out of habit we can make mistakes and we are very honest with them about it, and they are understanding". (Staff B)*

Conversely, some young people expressed that their gender identity wasn't recognised or respected in their mainstream schools. Others did not feel comfortable even revealing that they had concerns about their gender and kept it to themselves until they started attending the AEP. They expressed people did not believe their gender and due to the lack of social affirmation, they had a difficult time accepting themselves.

*"I saw them laughing and staring at me and saying that I want to be a boy when I'm not. I lost a few close friends over it and some of the teachers wouldn't use my actual name or pronouns" ... Hearing people just say nasty things to you when it's something that you didn't choose to be, it just affected me because it did take a lot of courage to tell people and it took me a long time to accept myself". (Sam)*

#### **4.2.2 Subtheme 2: Promoting Self-Expression**

Young people explained that the AEP has helped them understand their gender identity better as they were given opportunities to express themselves in a way that they felt comfortable. Although there is a uniform policy, it was very flexible and there were no rules on what each gender must wear. They were also allowed to style their hair in different ways, wear piercings if it is safe and this also helped to affirm their identity.

*"The rules at this school like the uniform policy is really not strict. So, it gives students who identify in a different way. It gives them ways to express themselves and make them feel comfortable, even though they're in uniform... they also respect*

*people's names and pronouns. And I really think that's all that a school needs to make students feel happy and safe". (Sam)*

*"It's just one of the things that tends to sort of get me down and stress me or make me feel a bit low, is not understanding myself. So, coming to terms of non-binary and using 'they' 'them' pronouns is a lot better. I think this school was a place where I was able to explore and find myself a bit more because of the open safe environment and accepting people, I can explore and be the person I want to be".*

*(Riley)*

Self-expression also echoed by staff, they particularly expressed not limiting young people in how they should dress and supported them to better understand themselves and be comfortable in their identity.

*"We have a uniform policy it is really important for us to have a uniform policy, because we feel like it keeps everybody on a level playing field, talking in terms of poverty. So, everyone's got very similar, uniform, but any of our trans\* students would be allowed to wear their chosen uniform within the remit of course". (Staff C)*

*"We also have another student that really likes quite extreme makeup and extreme piercings and all those things. We found a way of making what she wants to be as an individual fit in with the school's uniform policy, that sort of stuff. We found a way of her being able to be here and be herself". (Staff E)*

However, young people explained that whilst attending their previous mainstream school, they did not feel comfortable in their own body. They were forced to conform to gender stereotypes and staff embedded strict uniform policies which did not take their feelings and concerns into account. Whilst some young people expressed their

concerns to staff, others were left feeling that they did not have a choice which then impacted on the way they perceived themselves. Parent/carers reported similar views about school uniform policies and how it negatively impacted on their child's well-being and gender identity.

*“I didn't even feel comfortable in my own body later so that really didn't help in my old secondary school. They forced a girl to wear a skirt, such outdated stereotypes. I was clearly uncomfortable in my skirt. I didn't want to be in my skirt. I would want to be in trousers. But I did not have a say in the matter, so I was given a massive f\*\*\* you”. (Jessie)*

*“...because that was probably the only school in London which wouldn't allow children to wear trousers, and it really upset Sam at the time but now they're wearing them because of him stepping up”. (Shaniya-Parent)*

#### **4.2.3 Subtheme 3: Staff Knowledge, Attitude and Skills**

Participants described examples of staff knowledge, their attitude towards trans\* issues and the skills and attributes they demonstrated. Young people and parents expressed that staff were very supportive and non-judgemental in the AEP. They referenced that staff genuinely cared for students in the setting and were very empathetic towards them. Regarding trans\* issues, staff were honest about their knowledge and were always willing to learn about it.

*“They were real really supportive when I came out and my old school very much was not that... the teachers were very honest they said this is sort of the first time we have experienced this but whatever you need we will do. Sort of that*

*willingness in that sort of just being eager to learn about gender and LGBT”.*

*(Frankie)*

*“I think I remember having the conversation, she'd never had a student who's non-binary and so they were, well, in terms of their instant reactions were utterly supportive of Riley and listened. I think was the main thing they did and asked questions sensitively to learn more about it and they just accepted it with no judgements made”. (Anita-Parent)*

Some staff members also appeared more knowledgeable on what support trans\* young people could access outside of the school. They supported young people by helping them understand different aspects of their gender and sexuality, providing them with the language to better understand who they were. Parents also described how staff were skilled and equipped to handle a range of difficulties as it was a specialist setting.

*“Staff were very good, kind of did some sort of pie chart which Riley found really helpful as it was very visual, in terms of how much they felt for each gender, it was kind of leaning towards that they did feel female at times but they felt non-binary at times. You know, it was a clever way of doing that for Riley I think because they have autism as well. So that was a really helpful process and then they taught them about Tavistock and METRO charity which we have applied for too and Riley accesses support groups now online”. (Rosie-Parent)*

Staff expressed that although they were not experts in supporting trans\* students, they supported all the young people by being approachable, caring and available when they needed help. They tried to be honest, validated their feelings and listened



to what support they needed. Lastly, they were also educated by the young people themselves on how they wanted to be supported and reflected on what had worked well which improved their practice.

*“I don't think it's for us as a school to advise them, necessarily, I wouldn't feel comfortable advising them with what they're feeling, like how to go ahead with what they're doing. However, I will listen to them, validate them and talk to them and ask them any questions that I can in a very factual way to be more educated in the area. Now I'm really aware, you know, and I think we could always become more aware, we should always think more, there is always more that we can learn. They are told we care about them and we want them to be happy with whoever they are, and whoever they are, is perfectly good enough”. (Staff G)*

Several staff members also commented on how they were only available to support young people's well-being because they themselves felt supported within the team. Staff debrief was important, as it was a daily meeting where staff obtained emotional support to deal with the difficulties they face in school. It was also a place they could share ideas and problem solve together to improve practice.

*“Debrief is great, we get to share our suggestions around a problem. But also, you know, if something's worried me during the day, debrief is a chance to thrash it out. If something's upset me during the day, because, sometimes things happen, which are quite upsetting here. Then it's a chance to talk that through, debrief is definitely as much for us as it is for students”. (Staff F)*

However, responses from young people emphasised that not all staff at their mainstream schools showed support or understood how to help them. They came

across one or two staff members who were very supportive of their difficulties whether it was regarding their mental health or their gender related issues. This response was echoed by parent/carers.

*“This one teacher that I really liked, she did try her best to help me feel more comfortable because we had to wear only skirts as our uniform. She said that if I wanted to, I could wear my PE kit. Yeah, I think that’s the main thing”. (Sam)*

### **4.3 Theme 3: School Relationships**

This theme encompasses participants perceptions on building relationships within the school. This includes the type of relationships they encountered with peers and teachers, the social support that was provided or was lacking in both the AEP and mainstream schools they attended. Responses fell within two main subthemes: ‘Pupil Relationships’ and ‘Student-Teacher Relationships’.

#### **4.3.1 Subtheme 1: Pupil Relationships**

Participants expressed that their relationships with peers were positive in the AEP, they felt listened to, supported and shared their concerns around gender more openly. Similarly, parents had noticed a change in their child’s attitude towards school. They felt that they had either made friends for the first time or were more socially aware and had like-minded peers to talk to. This wasn’t always viewed positively by the young people when it was regarding their mental health.

*“When I was getting to know them, a lot of them were LGBT besides one of them, I think it was a group of five of us and four out of five were all LGBT. It was just sort of quite a nice, like shock and surprise. So, we sort of understood each other*

*from sort of where we've come from and how we sort of feel about our identities and why it can be a pain in the a\*\* sometimes". (Riley)*

*"A positive is going out without me and now being more independent as they finally have some friends which is good. The negative is if something happens within that friendship group, then there's a possibility of self-harm". (Shaniya-Parent)*

Staff members also referenced the positive friendship groups that were formed amongst the trans\* young people and how this appeared to motivate them to come into school as they felt accepted and safe.

*"They are more independent inside their friendship groups, for me that makes them feel safe. For me that the thing that brings them to school often, they do have struggles and difficulties coming to school. That's why they're here in the first place. But we keep talking about this a lot in our conversations with staff members, that the kids come here to see their friends". (Staff A)*

Many of the young people expressed that they did not have good relationships with peers in mainstream schools, they were not trustworthy and caused high levels of anxiety. They explained that they either lost friendships due to their gender identity or mental health difficulties and were perceived negatively by their peers, this made them feel inadequate.

*"I didn't have good relationships with the students. I didn't really have many friends. I had really bad anxiety due to the bullying about my gender. So, it prevented me from making friends in that school as I didn't trust anyone". (Sam)*

*“They didn’t have any friends; my child has social communication issues and anxiety and were bullied so it was difficult for them to interact with others”. (Chloe-Parent)*

#### **4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Student-Teacher Relationships**

Participants expressed that all staff within the AEP tried to build positive relationships with students, they were always supportive, understanding, trusting and available for students if they needed help. Staff responded to young people’s concerns seriously and offered support, it appeared that they genuinely cared about students and treated them as family.

*“They are really supportive, they understand how I feel at certain times and genuinely care like, they know when something is wrong. Once a teacher opened up to me about like, his childhood and how he knows how it feels. He explained exactly how I was feeling and it just felt like he understood what I was going through”.*  
*(Morgan)*

Staff described how important it was to build positive relationships to support young people and relationships were talked about as a central part of the school ethos. Staff expressed that transparency and consistency with all young people and parents was essential to build trust and increase feelings of safety. It was also important to have a genuine interest in the young person in order know how to support them better.

*“If they tell us something that needs to be passed on, we tell them that needs to be passed on. We’re very straightforward with them because our students are talking to us about self-harm. They’re talking to us about their feelings about feeling*

*anxious, sometimes they're feeling suicidal. We have a very clear system of what we do and I think that does make them feel safe because they know when they come to us, they know what we're going to do. They know we're going to be kind, but they know we're going to act on what they tell us. I think there is a safety in that and I think they do start to open up and trust us. Those relationships get formed pretty quickly in here actually". (Staff B)*

Young people described how they had a few teachers in their mainstream schools who supported them with their gender related concerns. However, they were not always available to the young person and only intervened when situations got worse. The sheer capacity of their roles meant that staff didn't have the time to support the young people with their difficulties. This response also resonated with the parent/carers.

*"It was just a lot of the teachers never really seem to properly care, there was one teacher actually a few teachers that did care but the main one who did was my Spanish teacher who's also my tutor in year seven, she was also the Senco. So, kind of naturally helped me with my extra needs but she wasn't available when I needed her and then things got worse for me". (Riley)*

*"There was too much change. They didn't have relationships with teachers that they would have liked, I think the consistency from teachers was the hardest and them not being available". (Rosie- Parent)*

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Mental Well-Being and Additional Needs**

This theme encompasses the participants perceptions of how their mental health and well-being was supported in the AEP and mainstream school settings. It also

references support that was provided for their special educational needs, independence and learning. The concept of containment also emerged during the interviews and this theory will be further discussed in Chapter 5. The responses fell within the three main subthemes: 'Co-Producing Person-Centred Strategies', 'Promoting Well-Being and Self-Confidence' and 'Psychological Safety, Security and Containment'.

#### **4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Co-Producing Person-Centred Strategies**

Young people and parent/carers referred to how support strategies were created at the AEP. They expressed that staff thoroughly got to know the young people and involved them when planning support including any changes to their gender identity.

*"They've asked me what my strategies are and I've told them what works for me, like they asked every few months and like they ask every student every few months, just in case things have changed or anything". (Morgan)*

*"Well, when their place was offered, they came out. They spoke to him at home, spoke to myself a few times prior to get all the information I could share with them about his like and dislikes, what makes them comfortable etc.". (Chloe-Parent)*

Staff commented on the support they provide, they expressed that instead of imposing strategies on young people, staff got to know students, ask what strategies already worked and build upon them. Staff reviewed strategies regularly to encompass any changes and the support offered was flexible and dependent on need.

*“We know that if they need to talk to somebody that we can provide the right sort of person for them to talk to, we also encourage them to use strategies. So, when they're feeling anxious, overloaded or feeling a range of things, we've got a list of their strategies that they can use to help themselves calm down...and then it's also about getting to know them as well”. (Staff D)*

Young people and parent/carers referred to how support was provided to them within their previous mainstream schools. They expressed that staff suggested strategies but these were not usually helpful or consistent. They did not always feel listened to or involved in developing the support strategies.

*“Yeah, I mean, they did do some things. I had like half a day to come in and do work and then I had my lessons in like a separate room from everyone else, like a separate building but it wasn't that helpful I just felt isolated after and couldn't do much work, no one supervised me”. (Morgan)*

*“It was much easier to kind of shift Riley into reception or send them home than do any sort of proper pastoral or continual work. I think they felt a bit overwhelmed by Riley's needs because they also have medical needs as well dyslexia, gender concerns and ASD, you know, so I think they found the needs very challenging and the support was not always helpful or right for Riley. Sometimes they were but not always”. (Rosie-Parent)*

#### **4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Promoting Well-Being and Self-Confidence**

Young people felt happier and more in control of their mental health due to the AEP's nurturing and supportive environment. They described they had higher self-esteem, felt more independent and better understood their gender. Furthermore, young

people felt more optimistic about their life and future. Parent/carers saw a positive change in their child's well-being and attitude towards school once starting at the AEP.

*"I think like besides the LGBT identity, like how much work the AEP has done with me just showed me a lot more responsibility, just a lot more of feeling responsible and mature. They've just helped me to sort of feel good about myself more, sort of trust my instincts more and not to always doubt myself. This sort of made me feel like I can, I don't know, have and achieve happiness". (Riley)*

*"I've just noticed that the school is a great cushion for Sam and they are brilliant at support...what I've noticed is that it's normal and I want normal in Sam's life, he's finally happy and more independent". (Shaniya-Parent)*

A common theme staff were strategies to promote young people's well-being. They focused on building their confidence and independence, so that they could cope with their emotions. Staff expressed that young people's past experiences have been challenging. In order for them to be confident learners', young people's mental health needed to be prioritised. Staff expressed that they try to build on young people's strengths and capabilities to increase self-esteem.

*"It is just talking to them and basically trying to encourage them, telling them to be proud of who you are and not to let anyone tell you that you are less of a person. Just generally encouraging them, speaking to them, building their confidence and resilience to try everything. We help their self-esteem by being positive, it's about being consistent, it's about recognising strengths and giving praise when it's genuinely deserved". (Staff E)*



Parent/carers felt mainstream schools did not prioritise their children's well-being. Although it was acknowledged that some additional and complex mental health needs required specialised support, they expressed that their previous mainstream schools were more focused on the curriculum.

*“Well, you know, Tom’s previous school was a very structured school around the curriculum and everything was about the curriculum. However, with some children and Tom as well, the curriculum can’t always take preference because of his anxieties, and mental health and insecurities which really wasn’t considered”.*

*(Diana-Parent)*

#### **4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Psychological Safety, Security and Containment**

The AEP was referred to as a nurturing environment by the young people and parent/carers. They expressed how the staff within the AEP supported them emotionally, they listened to concerns, showed empathy and helped them to feel reassured and understood. This allowed the participants to feel safe and secure in expressing their feelings without fear of judgement.

*“Like, if I need help, they’re always there to listen to my, like, struggles and they help with that and have time for it”.* (Morgan)

*“Well, like you are more comfortable and not scared to talk to them about things such as my gender because they want to understand, won’t judge you and actually want to help and give you like different ways to cope”.* (Frankie)

*“Well, they are always there to listen. I mean, I had a rough time personally. A couple of weeks ago, I think I may have said something like, I’m fed up. What’s the*

*point of living? They were really concerned, empathetic, understanding and after did call my mother. She's next of kin on Sam's form and they told her". (Shaniya-Parent).*

Staff reported that they provided support to young people, by listening to their concerns and making them feel heard. This was not exclusive to trans\* young people but a widely adopted strategy in the AEP. They expressed that consistency and reliability from adults is essential to help the young people to feel safe and to reduce their anxieties around leaning.

*"I think probably the main thing is being kind, listening to them, making them feel heard, being consistent with them. Making them feel cared for building trust with them. What I mean by that is letting them know that if they disclose anything to us, we'll it'll kind of get reported on and be very consistent with that. So that they feel like they know what the boundaries are and where they sit in those boundaries". (Staff C)*

However, all young people referenced that in mainstream schools, they did not feel physically or emotionally safe. Their needs were too overwhelming for staff and very challenging to understand thus, adequate support was not offered. Young people expressed that they did not have the coping strategies or support to manage school life which resulted in school dropout. This response also resonated with parent/carers.

*"They did do some things to help me, but I wasn't happy because my primary school didn't deal with my issues good either and then secondary school ending up being hell on earth and I didn't feel safe, it drove me to the point of like suicide it was mad, I felt like my life was crumbling and that's when I stopped going to school". (Jessie)*

*“It was so difficult for all of us, I think back to when they couldn't literally, you know, manage in school at all and they couldn't get through the door. They couldn't you know and when they were there, the anxiety was so high that it was so detrimental to their health”. (Anita-Parent)*

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Preparing for Adulthood**

This theme encompasses participants responses regarding the support provided to help young people to become more independent, navigate daily life and empower them to make their own choices and decisions. These skills were essential to help them prepare for adulthood and leave the AEP successfully. Responses fell within two subthemes: ‘Post-16 Transition Planning and Support’ and ‘Promoting a Sense of Agency’.

##### **4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Post-16 Transition Planning and Support**

The AEP helped prepare transitions to Post-16 colleges, this was an upcoming change for the participants involved. It included support with identifying their aspirations, finding a college course and supporting them to cope with the change of settings ahead of time and reduce their anxieties.

*“I think they probably suggest colleges and stuff and what I need to do here in that sense and what courses I need to focus on basically. We also go to college on Thursdays to help us get used to the whole change and experience a college environment, I think it's helpful and I love it”. (Frankie)*

Staff understood the importance of preparing young people for real life experiences. This is because college is a very different context and young people are more

protected at the AEP. To support the development of independent skills, staff expressed that they arranged a network of support, liaised with parents and worked together with colleges to make the transition as successful as possible.

*“We work really hard to find the right place and some really good conversations with parents and there's workshops that happen. Yeah, that's more preparation for college life rather than their mental health which probably is the impact of the mental health anyway. If they feel comfortable and knowledgeable and safe going into a setting and we've done that work before they will be better off staying there”. (Staff C)*

#### **4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Promoting Sense of Agency**

Young people commented on the support they received in the AEP to become more independent, be confident to make decisions and not to rely on adults. They expressed that due to their mental health needs, coping strategies were taught and they were encouraged to use these. This was also echoed by the parent/carers.

*“They don't just like send you off and be like, bye you know, they will like talk to you about like leaving and stuff. They will give you like extra support to cope with real life things and not rely on others but to use what we have learnt and stuff like that”. (Morgan)*

Staff participants ensured that young people were supported when they needed it. However, they also helped them to recognise that they are capable of learning and empowered young people to take control over decisions regarding their life. They explained that they encouraged young people to be proud of who they are, draw from their strengths and acknowledge what they have to offer the world.

*“Our doors are always open; they know that they can come and speak to anybody at any time. And if that is the case, and there is a need then we will help them but we support our kids how to cope. We are trying to get them to be more independent, own their own mental health, think about it and to be proud of it in a sense, where they can manage and cope themselves but we're always here to talk if they need to”. (Staff C)*

## **4.6 Themes Exclusive to Parent/Carers**

### **4.6.1 Theme 1: Family and Community Support**

This theme encompasses the support available for trans\* young people’s mental health and gender related concerns at home and within the community. Responses fell into two subthemes: ‘Family Support’ and Multi-Agency Support’.

#### **4.6.1 Subtheme 1: Family Support**

Most parent/carers commented on how they provided a supportive home environment for their child. They expressed that they were fully supportive about their child’s decisions on their gender identity. There was also an open and non-judgemental atmosphere for them to express themselves to share any concerns around their mental health or their gender identity.

*“I would say we're quite an open family, you know, we were aware of gender issues and struggles because of our own work, my eldest identifies as non-binary and bisexual and so Riley gets a lot of support from them. So, I would describe us as quite a liberal household, quite an aware household around issues. I think Riley*

*benefits just from feeling quite free to talk about issues to express and try things out. You know, we supported them a lot around accessing METRO too". (Rosie-Parent)*

#### **4.6.2 Subtheme 2: Multi-Agency Support**

Parents referenced to having access to multi-professional support for their child outside of school. This included the Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS) and numerous charities such as Mermaids and METRO charity which was signposted by the school to support young people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the support available. Parent/carers expressed the importance of having access to additional support with children who present such complex needs.

*"I know that my child has spoken to Mermaids, again, because of the whole of the COVID situation. Obviously, a meet and greet was very, very hard to come by. She is also referred to the Gender Identity Service for children but there are delays with that and has CAHMS involvement and I think it's really important that there is access to all these services". (Anita- Parent)*

#### **4.7 Summary of Research Findings**

The key research findings demonstrate that trans\* young people and parent/carers have had consistently positive experiences within the AEP. They reported a plethora of strengths within the school relating to an inclusive school climate, robust policies and supportive relationships with staff and peers, this also resonated with all staff members. In contrast, it was evident that mainstream schools involved mainly negative experiences for trans\* young people. This severely impacted their self-perceptions, gender affirmation and further exacerbated their mental health

difficulties. Lastly, additional themes from parent/carers described the importance of support outside of school including family acceptance and multi-professional involvement which also supported their gender affirmation and well-being. In chapter 5, the impact of these findings will be discussed and interpreted in comparison to existing literature and psychological frameworks.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1 Overview

This research was developed following a small-scale pilot study exploring the perceptions of one trans\* young person, their parent and two staff members within a specialist AEP. The findings revealed that there were many positive and supportive school practices which supported the well-being of trans\* individuals within the AEP compared to the young person's mainstream school setting. Subsequently, these preliminary findings informed further case study research within the same AEP involving a much larger sample of participants to gain a wider perspective of the phenomena. The current research aimed to generate knowledge about the experiences of trans\* young people with gender related concerns attending an AEP, the perceived impact the change of settings had on their gender-related experiences as well as their overall learning and well-being. This research intended to explore the following research questions:

***RQ 1.** What key themes does existing literature report on the experiences of trans\* children and young people including those with special educational needs?*

***RQ 2.** What are the experiences of well-being and educational support for trans' young people in alternative education provision compared to mainstream school settings?*

***RQ 3.** What is the significance of the current findings and what can be learned from this research?*



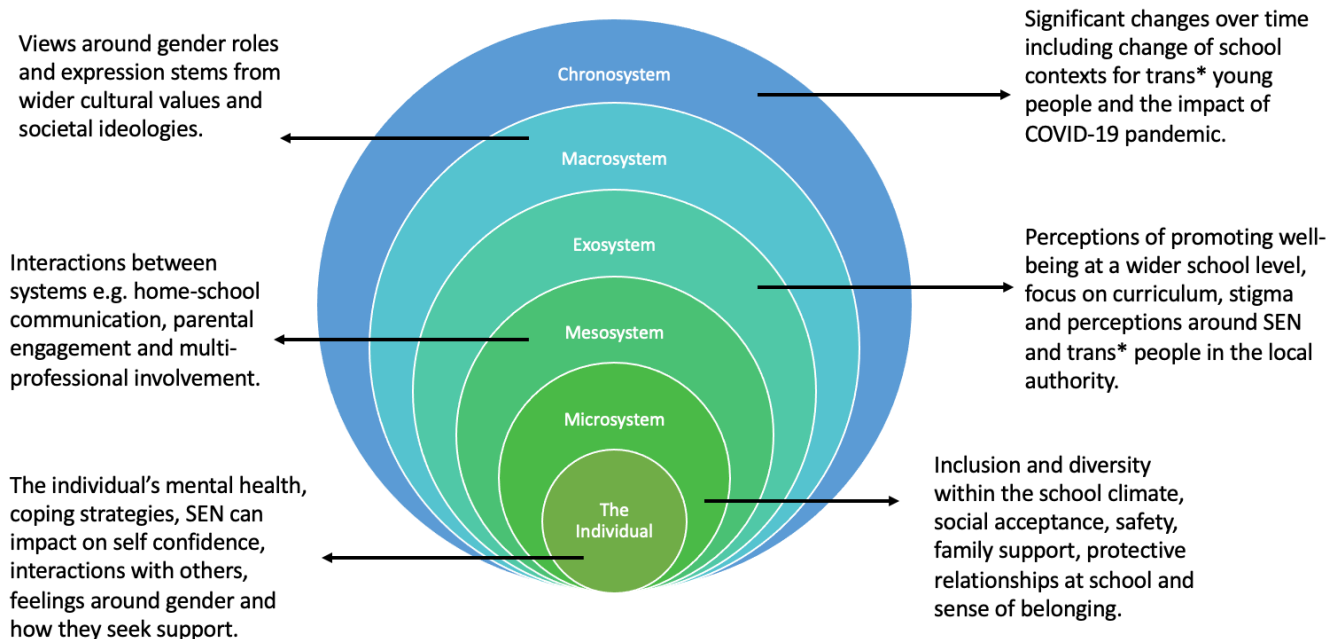
RQ 1 was explored in Chapter 2 which focused on the existing literature on the experiences of trans\* young people. This chapter intends to synthesise and interpret the findings section with the existing literature to address RQ 2 for all participant groups. RQ 3 involving the implications of the research for the AEP and educational psychology practice will also be addressed. Subsequently, strengths and potential constraints of the study will be discussed, directions for future research and researcher reflections.

## **5.2 Framework for The Research Findings**

The key research findings that emerged from the interviews with the trans\* young people, parent/carers and staff members within the AEP will be interpreted using subheadings of Bronfenbrenner's social ecological systems model (Micro-Meso-Exo-Macro-Chrono) and the later updated bioecological systems model (Person, Process, Context and Time). The focus of the research was exploring trans\* young people's experiences and well-being within the AEP and mainstream school contexts, thus examining the individual and micro-system. However, a few themes also appear to fit within the wider systems surrounding the young people.

The concentric circles in Figure 2 attempts to capture the immediate and wider contextual influences that impact upon trans\* young people's development and understanding of their own gender. It also considers young people's characteristics and interactions within contexts and how they impact on their experiences at school and the support provided to them. It is important to note that the findings have been organised this way as the theory tends to encourage a division of themes. However, experiences do not necessarily fit easily into one or the other. Researchers and

practitioners should not assume singular influences and explore young people's lives from a range of perspectives.



**Figure 3.** Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Illustrating Research Findings

**5.3 RQ 2: What are the experiences of well-being and educational support for trans\* young people in alternative education provision compared to mainstream school settings?**

**5.4 The Individual**

A key theme that emerged from the research findings related to personal characteristics which affect a person's ability to engage in interactions within contexts. These included the trans\* young people's SEN, cognitive and emotional resources and are referred to as resource characteristics which significantly impacted on their overall school experiences and understanding of their gender. Young people and their parent/carers recognised difficulties coping within their

mainstream school setting to their underlying SEMH needs. This included extreme anxiety, self-harm and characteristics of ASD. Parent/carers were not sure if the SEMH needs stemmed from difficulties understanding their gender or if they were related to their ASD traits. However, it appeared that the young people were already finding mainstream school difficult to manage but additional concerns about their gender identity, along with several contextual factors contributed to poor well-being in mainstream schools. Due to these difficulties, trans\* young people had poor coping mechanisms which acted as a barrier to access learning and attending school.

There is a paucity of robust literature focusing on trans\* people with SEN and gender related concerns in schools. However, the findings are consistent with Mahfouda et al. (2019) who showed that gender diverse young people with ASD are at higher risk of mental health difficulties and poor school functioning than trans\* peers without ASD. George and Stokes (2018) research also showed that there are considerable mental health disparities in trans\* individuals with ASD who also belong to a sexual minority group and a gender minority group. These individuals showed poorer mental health and quality of life outcomes compared to cisgender individuals with ASD. This was evident amongst the current research findings as two of the trans\* young people with ASD who had gender related concerns and questioned their sexuality, appeared to have more significant mental health difficulties including an increase in suicidal attempts.

However, young people and parent/carers stated that their mental health drastically improved when moving to the AEP and this improved their quality of life. A particular supportive practice within the AEP was that staff understood how to support young

people with psychological health needs and ASD. Staff consulted with young people and co-produced strategies dependent on the individual need and created an environment that was ASD friendly e.g. the use of routine and visuals. Trans\* young people recognised that this helped them cope with their emotions and they felt that their views were respected in relation to their gender identity or ASD, resulting in improved learning experiences. Additionally, once young people felt that they had adequate support in place, it increased their sense of safety and security and they were more able to interact with others, build positive relationships and feel comfortable to discuss their gender identity openly to adults and peers. These findings are consistent with Gavin's (2021) research which also revealed that staff found it important to prioritise the voice of the trans\* young people when considering any support around their needs as it made them feel respected and more in control.

In regard to staff, findings revealed that they provided emotional support and containment not just to the trans\* young people but all students by creating a nurturing environment within the AEP. Staff listened to concerns, showed empathy and validated young people's feelings so they felt reassured and understood. These practices relate to the concept of psychological containment and this was an important feature of support reported from all participants involved. The theory of containment was established by Bion (1962), it was developed from the infant and carer relationship. The infant is perceived as not having the capacity to deal with difficult or upsetting emotions, the mother provides a holding environment where she absorbs the infant's distress without becoming overwhelmed herself and this provides temporary emotional comfort.

Bion (1962) states that when mothers contain the infant's negative feelings, they have the capacity to explore, engage in learning and develop independence. As the child grows and attends school, secondary attachment figures are formed with the school staff and this process of containment is adopted by key adults around the child. It is important that school staff listen and respect the feelings of children as this allows them to deal with difficult emotions and face challenges which promotes learning (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 2018).

In the context of the current research findings, when trans\* young people were processing emotions or had difficulties understanding their gender identity, the containment that was offered by school staff allowed them to recognise other unmet needs. This included focusing on understanding their learning requirements, building social connections, and exploring their true identity without feeling distracted or overwhelmed. Although it is not explicitly stated, this theory of containment is reflected within existing findings in the literature. McGuire (2010) revealed that trans\* young people felt supported at school by having a single person to talk to, who could validate their feelings. Additionally, Gavin (2021) found that educational professionals also referred to the importance of offering containment for trans\* young people, so they can disclose their concerns to staff members and know that they will be listened to which supported their well-being.

Furthermore, staff in the AEP promoted the well-being and mental health amongst trans\* young people by fostering individual self-confidence and focusing on young people's strengths and capabilities. They acknowledged that all students have had challenging past school experiences and these adverse experiences with additional concerns around gender can significantly impact self-esteem and confidence. The

findings can be interpreted using frameworks related to positive psychology and strengths-based approaches developed by Seligman (1998). Strength based approaches move away from a medicalised model grounded in pathology but instead it views the individual holistically including ‘what works for the child?’ and ‘what are the child’s strengths?’. This is central to strength-based approaches and is associated with cultivating positive feelings about oneself (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015). Therefore, to support trans\* young people’s self-esteem, staff actively praised trans\* young people when it was deserved, built on individual strengths in order to encourage them and instil hopefulness which is important for psychological well-being.

#### **5.4.1 Implications for the AEP**

The research findings have demonstrated that the AEP already have supportive practices in place that positively support trans\* young people at an individual level. However, the most significant and valued support that emerged from the findings related to containment. Recommendations derived from the findings are described below for school staff:

- Provide trans\* young people with therapeutic support involving ample opportunities or ‘space to talk’ during the day with a trusted adult and this should be prioritised.
- Actively listen to students and make them aware that their well-being is taken seriously.
- Make every effort to obtain trans\* young people’s voices and involve them in planning and decision making around the support required for their needs,

including their gender if required. They should avoid imposing universal strategies of support which might not be useful to that specific individual.

- Use genuine praise and strength-based approaches such as discussing what the young person is good at and building on these to support their difficulties. This will encourage and motivate trans\* young people and give them a sense of success, it will increase self-esteem and optimism for the future so they can better manage school life.
- Be mindful of ASD friendly support strategies within the provision such as using routines, visual schedules, adapting the sensory environment, emotion regulation and accessible methods of communication to support them with SEN. Additional training around ASD related support from the local Educational Psychology Service (EPS) may also be beneficial for staff.

#### **5.4.2 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice**

The SEND code of Practice (2015) states that educational professionals should obtain the views of young people when deciding how best to support their needs. Trans\* young people in the current research had clear views around the support they require and what is currently working well for them in the AEP. Therefore, it is important that their views are included when developing plans to support them along with key adults such as parents who know them well. EPs are skilled at using person centred approaches to obtain the views of children and young people by utilizing different methods learnt from professional training and continuing development throughout their careers. These existing skills can be used to elicit the voice of trans\* young people particularly those with SEN, who need additional support expressing their views due to anxiety or social communication difficulties.

EPs are well placed to support the social and emotional development of trans\* young people. It was evident from the findings that trans\* young people with SEN have poorer mental health outcomes. Recent research from Just Like Us charity also shows that trans\* young people's mental health has worsened over the pandemic. Therefore, EPs can offer early therapeutic interventions including cognitive behavioural approaches. This will be useful to those who also have negative perceptions of themselves such as low self-esteem and anxiety related difficulties. Furthermore, a key feature that emerged from the findings was psychological safety and containment. EPs are skilled in holding the distressing feelings of others and can use these therapeutic skills when working closely with trans\* young people and offer strength-based approaches to encourage them to develop coping strategies. Thus, helping to increase their resilience and to be able to manage school life challenges.

### **5.5 Microsystem**

A key finding that increased positive experiences at the AEP was the school's culture and ethos. Young people felt their gender identity was instantly accepted and there were no negative reactions, bullying or harassment from peers or staff. They also felt accepted regardless of their gender, SEN, psychological health needs or past experiences and staff members actively reinforced the school ethos. Similarly, Gavin's (2021) research showed that educational professionals perceived the best support for trans\* young people was an inclusive school ethos which helped them to feel safe, reduce bullying and feel respected. It was also a supportive factor within the literature by Bartholomaeus & Riggs (2017).

Staff within the AEP adapted the school environment so that all toilets were gender neutral. Staff also addressed that they tried to represent LGBT people within the



curriculum to increase recognition and self-confidence. There were even options to attend LGBT clubs, take part in daily open discussions about LGBT issues and celebrate trans\* awareness week which made young people feel socially accepted within the school community. These contextual factors enabled opportunities for young people to feel confident and safe enough to discuss their gender concerns with others leading to a better understanding of their gender. The findings are congruent with McGuire (2010) who discovered participants valued queer orientated clubs within the school and this greatly improved their school experiences. Similarly, Bartholomaeus & Riggs (2017) also suggested that gender neutral toilets and the inclusion of LGBT in the curriculum are important for the inclusion of trans\* young people.

Another supportive practice was using gender affirming language throughout the AEP. Staff immediately used trans\* young people's new pronouns and preferred names when they disclosed their gender. Staff expressed that they never assumed a student's gender and always asked what their preferred pronouns were from the outset. The use of correct pronouns and new names were communicated throughout the school community promptly, this socially affirmed trans\* young people's identity and instantly made them feel recognised and supported. These findings were also reflected in existing literature, Leonard (2019) stated that young people felt more accepted and had positive school experiences when the language used to address them was gender appropriate. Gavin's (2021) findings demonstrated the importance of staff using correct pronouns to increase a sense of belonging for trans\* young people.

A key theme that emerged from the findings was related to trans\* young people understanding their gender and having opportunities to explore and express their identity with support from staff. Young people valued that the AEP's school uniform policy was flexible and they could wear clothes that helped them affirm their gender socially and feel comfortable within their own bodies. This was in line with existing research which suggested that supportive factors for trans\* young people included non-gendered uniform policies (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Furthermore, staff at the AEP were described as knowledgeable on trans\* issues and complex needs. They were aware of support available but also used their skills and creativity to help young people to understand their gender better. They did this by using different resources, providing young people with key information or ways to communicate how they were feeling to others. These findings are not reflected in the literature but Gavin (2021) did show that staff educating young people about trans\* issues can be a supportive practice if carried out sensitively and if staff are equipped with the correct knowledge and training.

Wider school environment and policies were also discussed by the young people, the AEP was small and quieter for those with ASD. There were also robust anti-bullying policies and swift protocols for dealing with such incidents and this enabled a supportive and safer school environment for all students. These findings are congruent with Bartholomaeus & Riggs (2017) and Russell et al. (2016) who found that wider anti-discrimination policies were related to less bullying as it protected trans\* young people within the school.

Young people stated that they had good relationships with staff in the AEP and staff were always available, they had time for daily interactions and this supported the

development of trusted relationships. Staff were described as genuinely caring, non-judgemental and understanding about gender related difficulties, thus offering support and advice where appropriate. The importance of protective relationship building was echoed by staff as an integral part of the school ethos, they also stated that they were more able to support students as they also felt supported themselves. These findings were reflected in the literature by McGuire (2010) and Leonard (2019) who found trans\* young people had better experiences at school if there were positive interactions with school staff who supported them and dealt with any injustices. Positive relationships with trans\* young people were also perceived by staff as supportive in Gavin's (2021) findings.

Young people highly valued the relationships they had with peers in the AEP. Peers were very understanding of each other's difficulties as they had similar needs, young people who did not have friends were able to make friends whilst attending the AEP and some were also a part of the LGBT community. These findings related to an increased sense of belonging which positively influenced their mental health. School belonging is important for psychological well-being, it is created by the proximal processes and daily interactions that make children and young people feel accepted, respected and supported (Allen, Boyle, & Roffey, 2019). An enhanced sense of belonging offers psychological and educational benefits which explains why trans\* young people's mental health had improved, they were learning more and began to value school life (Allen et al., 2019).

Parents also revealed that they provided support at home and fully accepted their child and their gender identity showing, unconditional positive regard. The context and proximal processes within the microsystem such as having positive daily

interactions with supportive family, staff and peers at school was important for young people's mental well-being. These findings were also reflected in Weinhardt et al. (2019) and Leonard's (2019) studies who showed supportive family and friends led to increased positive psychological well-being and overall life satisfaction.

Contrastingly, young people had more negative experiences in mainstream school. They had daily incidents of verbal harassment and bullying from peers when they disclosed their gender and staff did not appear to accept their differences including their SEN at the time. This made some of the young people feel unsafe to disclose their true gender identity due to fear of rejection and further harassment which affected their self-acceptance and mental health in the long-term. These experiences of harassment were also reflected in the literature with trans\* young people more at risk of being bullied and 75% being victims of name calling (Metro Charity, 2016). McGuire (2010) also found that young people viewed the school context as an unsafe place for transgender individuals due to high prevalence of harassment and victimisation.

Additionally, not all young people had positive relationships with staff or peers at school which impacted on their sense of belonging. Mainstream schools were larger which influenced how often they had interactions over days and weeks with supportive staff (mesotime). Therefore, building relationships and trust was difficult to achieve with staff. There were also concerns about staff not taking bullying seriously which made young people feel unsafe, resulting in an increase in bullying leading to poor mental health. These findings were reflected in the literature which showed that trans\* young people were experiencing significantly worse mental health due to discrimination (McGuire et al. 2010, Rimes et al. 2017).

A key factor that affected young people's gender affirmation was the strict and rigid uniform policy which negatively impacted on how they felt about themselves and their gender. These issues were highlighted in Carlile's (2020) study which explored factors trans\* young people and their parents found problematic in school life.

Therefore, it is evident that contextual factors present within the microsystem and the proximal processes within them can significantly impact upon trans\* young people's gender affirmation, well-being and learning experiences.

### **5.5.1 Implications for the AEP**

The school culture and ethos at the AEP appear to be very inclusive and supportive for trans\* young people. Therefore, the main recommendation derived from the findings are for the school to continue this practice but also consider the following:

- Prioritise relationship building and develop trust with trans\* young people from the outset as this will allow them to feel safe and approach staff if there are any difficulties.
- Continue to use pronouns and preferred names but in consultation with parents so there is a shared understanding and agreement. Consistency between home and school is important for gender affirmation. Consider creating a policy which has details on what the process entails if a young person discloses their gender identify whilst in attendance and how the transition is supported.
- The school appear to have a robust general anti-bullying policy across the provision. However, it might be beneficial to consider adding protocols for transphobic or homophobic comments or harassment so staff know how it

should be dealt with and what the consequences for this behaviour should be.

- Provide trans\* students safe spaces to talk, clubs and events to attend which they can openly discuss their experiences with similar minded peers and increase their sense of belonging.
- All new staff to be trained on trans\* awareness and accurate information on how to support them in the form of signposting to external agencies. The local EPS can be used to develop and deliver training according to need.
- Celebrate diversity within the school community, obtain books with LGBT representation, continue to adapt the whole curriculum so it is more representative of trans\* people and provide gender neutral examples.

### **5.5.2 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice**

EPs are well placed in working systemically and can support schools at an organisational level. EPs may attempt to work on the system by looking for opportunities that interest the schools that they work in daily. For example, improving the school climate by considering the following:

- Discuss if school staff have the adequate training and awareness on supporting the well-being of trans\* young people. If not, develop and deliver whole school training initiatives using evidenced based research and involving interpersonal skills such as active listening.
- Consider the use of Video interactive Guidance (VIG) when supporting staff develop interpersonal skills.
- Promote inclusion by discussing trans\* young people at termly planning meetings to make sure that support for this group is being considered,

particularly those with associated SEN. EPs to be mindful on how they discuss trans\* individuals with professionals and use correct pronouns and names especially in relation to paperwork which is shared with schools and parents to ensure their gender is being affirmed.

- EPs can support schools to design, create and implement wider anti-discrimination and well-being policies with specific protocols for vulnerable groups such as the LGBT population.
- They can provide supervision for staff to explore any difficulties they may be facing. If staff well-being is prioritised, they will be in a better position to support the emotional needs of trans\* young people.
- EPs can train and supervise staff to deliver support groups for trans\* young people within school.
- EPs as researchers can undertake research on effective school improvement in their schools and identify what is required to best support the trans\* population.

## **5.6 Mesosystem**

Parental engagement and support were particularly important amongst participants and a new finding according to the existing literature. I interpreted this as two microsystems interacting, relationships being strengthened and positively influencing the young person's development. Young people and parent/carers found consistent engagement with parents supportive in the AEP as it promoted young people's overall learning and well-being. The AEP had well-defined protocols that they used to maintain regular home school communication even within the COVID-19 pandemic. Relationship building with parents was also an essential part of the school

ethos as a clear understanding of any difficulties was established and important information regarding the young person's learning and mental health was shared.

Good home-school communication is key to supporting children and young people's learning. Systemic theory states that problems are not located within individuals but the system around the individuals who are trying to make sense of the behaviour (Dowling & Osborne, 2003). Therefore, having regular contact with parents can help develop a better understanding of the meaning behind certain behaviours. It can also help to identify support that young people may need to reduce ambiguity between home and school contexts.

Additionally, staff also recognised that parent/carers had their own mental health needs and related difficulties at home. Therefore, staff provided wraparound support for the entire family to further promote young people's learning and well-being. They offered regular parent workshops and peer support with specialist EPs and clinical psychologists which was highly valued by parents. Although this is a new finding and not stated within the existing literature, similar themes were highlighted in Kuvalanka et al. (2018) study where parents referred to wanting more access to parent support networks as it would be helpful to discuss similar experiences.

In contrast, a few parents revealed that mainstream schools did not appear to have good levels of communication and engagement with parent/carers. A possible reason for this could be due to the sheer number of students attending mainstream schools and staff not having the resources to maintain regular contact with parents. However, young people and parent/carers remained unhappy with the lack of support and engagement even when they did receive it. Parents felt they were not listened to and were made to feel responsible for their child's difficulties during



meetings, this led to a breakdown in communication and lack of a shared understanding of how to support the child. This is likely to have negatively influenced young people's development and attitude towards school.

### **5.6.1 Implications for the AEP**

As a result of the emerging findings, recommendations for the school are to continue to engage in regular and supportive interactions with parents and carers as this was important to them. This will ensure that both staff and parents have a shared understanding of the difficulties and parents can consistently implement support at home and monitor the well-being of their child. Additionally, school staff may want to explore what type of parent support is required in the current climate since the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced parent needs. It may be beneficial to work closely with the EP and other specialist professionals to provide termly peer support networks for informal discussions, create specific training and other workshops regarding information on gender related issues or SEN.

### **5.6.2 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice**

A core aspect of the EP role is consultation, it provides an opportunity for children and young people, parents and professionals to identify meanings linked to patterns of behaviour and create a shared understanding. Findings from the current research showed that parents were not always happy during school meetings, were not listened to and occasionally blamed for their child's difficulties. EPs can support schools by using their skills to facilitate structured consultations to discuss trans\* young people's needs and develop outcomes moving forward. It is a good opportunity for EPs to use solution focused approaches to avoid a 'blame culture'

developing within meetings (Copeland & Geil, 1996). These approaches can support parents and adults who know the young person to think more positively, empower them and can provide clear goals to be working towards that can create a sense of hopefulness (Dowling & Osborne, 2003). Moreover, EPs can also bring together people from across different levels and facilitate dialogue from different viewpoints which may encourage a broader understanding of the issues faced by trans\* young people.

Additionally, parents in this study valued support for themselves, EPs can create and deliver bespoke workshops and training to meet the specific needs of parents. EPs can provide a safe space to talk for parents to deal with difficult emotions. They can draw from evidence based interventions and research, share psychological knowledge to support parents understand their child's needs and this can be delivered in collaboration with school staff (Kelly et al., 2008).

## **5.7 Exosystem**

Amongst the key findings, parents referenced that mainstream schools were predominantly focused on the curriculum along with academic attainment which was not helpful in supporting young people with complex needs. Parents perceived that these attitudes put unnecessary pressure on trans\* young people with SEN and negatively affected their overall school experiences and mental health. The local authority (LA) together with Ofsted assesses the public sector services relating to children and young people who commonly use a framework of inspection when evaluating schools (Ofsted, 2022). This includes quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, leadership and management. It is evident that the

framework has a broader focus of academic achievement and quality of teaching instead of pupil's mental health and well-being in school.

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its impact on children and young people's mental health, recent additions to the framework have been added including components of emotional well-being and self-confidence (Innovating Minds, 2021). Therefore, it can be suggested that trans\* young people's mental health was not prioritised or supported well enough in mainstream school as the wider systems which govern school initiatives had a greater emphasis on academic attainment. This led to staff in mainstream schools promoting a more curriculum focused ethos as they were being judged on these criteria. In contrast, trans\* experiences at the AEP were more positive as the setting was a specialised unit for young people with enduring psychological and mental health needs. Although Ofsted use the same framework to inspect AEPs, AEPs have specific aims and are allowed a more flexible person-centred curriculum which in this case, supported the well-being of all students first and foremost. This resulted in improved overall learning experiences for trans\* young people with SEN.

### **5.7.1 Implications for the AEP and Educational Psychology Practice**

The current climate is changing, and the well-being of all children and young is being prioritised due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a significant recommendation derived from the findings is that the AEP should have an emphasis of promoting all young people's mental health and well-being as a preventative rather than a reactive stance. This in turn, may also avoid school dropout amongst trans\* young people. School staff should be mindful of trans\* young people coming into the setting as they are more likely to have poorer mental health due to potential

prior bullying, family breakdowns and low self-confidence regarding their confusion about their identity.

EPs can be used to support school staff with implementing screening tools which could support the identification of risk factors and explore protective factors e.g. what is working well for the young person by consulting with them directly at the earliest opportunity. A support plan including individualised support and outcomes could be created together to help build trans\* young people's resilience. EPs can direct school staff to access more information about mental health screening tools, practical resources and whole school approaches through their knowledge base. For example, the mentally healthy school's website created by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2022).

## **5.8 Macrosystem**

A theme within the findings related to school staff perspectives and understanding of gender identity. The mainstream schools that the trans\* young people attended were mostly religious or 'faith' schools and one participant attended a single sex girls' school prior to starting at the AEP. Young people and parent/carers both expressed how staff within those mainstream schools had outdated views on gender. Staff were not as accepting of trans\* students and some staff were less likely to respect decisions about pronouns and name changes, compared to the staff within the AEP. It could be argued that staff perspectives around gender are associated with wider cultural views embedded within society on gender binaries and this is likely to influence the overall school ethos, uniform policies and affect staff attitudes. Staff of an older generation may continue to believe an incongruence between sex and gender is abnormal and may be quick to judge when trans\* young people openly

declare their gender identity at school. However, societies understanding of gender has evolved and changed over time with the increase of trans\* people in the media, it is beginning to become more normalised.

Research by Bragg et al. (2018) has shown that individuals' perspectives are moving towards recognising that different gender identities exist. However, respecting an individual's decisions about their identity and putting personal opinions aside in order to support them is more important which is the perspective that staff within the AEP adopted. These findings are relatable to McCormack's (2012) study who showed the experiences of one transgender young person attending a religious sixth form was generally positive. However, due to wider heteronormative policies which stems from society's understanding of gender and sex, he encountered difficulties regarding birth names on examinations and the use of gendered toilets.

Furthermore, additional sub themes from the current research also related to the mainstream schools' perceptions of SEN. Many of the young people and parent/carers stated that the mainstream schools could not manage the complexity of trans\* young people's needs. They tended to shift the young people around with a lack of consistent intervention and support. Some staff suggested that the young person should be referred to a specialist AEP so their needs could be met. It could be argued that staff's attitude of shifting young people out of mainstream schools into special schools or alternative provisions stem from society's wider perceptions around learning disabilities and SEN. The social model of disability states that people are disabled by the barriers in society not by their impairments or differences. Barriers can be physical or caused by people's attitudes such as assuming those

with learning disabilities cannot learn effectively like their peers and do not belong in a mainstream school (Frederickson & Cline, 2015).

Although the SEN code of practice (2015) states that schools should make reasonable adjustments to support and include children with SEN in all learning opportunities, inclusive education is not always taking place and there are different interpretations of what inclusion means. Inclusive education refers to a shift from seeing a difference as a problem to be fixed to celebrating diversity. This was not demonstrated in some of the trans\* young people's experiences of mainstream school where they were told to behave normally to fit in. Contrastingly, staff at the AEP appeared to have a different attitude and were celebrating the differences of all young people regardless of their gender or SEN which created a positive and inclusive atmosphere for trans\* young people.

### **5.8.1 Implications for the AEP and Educational Psychology Practice**

The school should be mindful of wider attitudes and perspectives of educational professionals as not every individual will have the same understanding around gender. Therefore, these views are likely to influence the support staff may deem necessary for trans\* young people, a shared understanding can be developed through policies that outline appropriate support. It can be argued that the role of the EP could be to challenge negative attitudes and historic stereotypes which may perpetuate stigma around trans\* young people. Additionally, they could educate professionals on inclusive education at a wider systemic level and within local authorities. This may help decipher what good inclusive practices may look like for trans\* young people with SEN to support policy development and reduce the barriers that prevent them to access learning.

## **5.9 Chronosystem**

Another key theme in the findings showed that young people were being prepared and supported for major changes and transitions in the present and over time, this refers to microtime and macrotime. The findings showed that these changes had a major influence on trans\* young people's development and well-being. Young people expressed that they felt supported throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to schooling and for upcoming transitions to college in the AEP.

Staff ensured trans\* young people had the time to prepare for changes, build relationships with others at their new settings and feel confident in their identity after leaving the AEP. Staff focused on providing them with key life skills and improving their independence and sense of agency thus, in time they can manage life outside of school without support. This related to the Preparing for Adulthood guidance as stated in the SEND code of practice (2015) which focuses on the young person's future life goals. It is important for all young people with SEN to move into adulthood with choice and control over their lives. The staff at the AEP ensured they were fully supported so they had opportunities for good life outcomes by the time they finished at the AEP. These findings were not found in previous literature as it did not highlight the importance of supporting trans\* young people's future well-being within different contexts, therefore it is a useful extension of the literature.

### **5.9.1 Implications for the AEP and Educational Psychology Practice**

The school should continue to be aware of changes in the trans\* young person's life including past events, key transition points and environmental events as these are likely to influence their development and attitude towards learning. Staff should

provide adequate support for key transitions particularly when moving from one context to another. They should consider the following when planning transitions:

- Giving young people opportunities to build relationships and become more familiar with their new context as it is likely to make them feel more comfortable, if others are already aware of their gender.
- Additional transition planning for those with SEN who may have significant anxiety around changes and uncertainty.

Regarding EPs, they can use their consultative skills to facilitate smoother transitions during these key times. EPs can support staff with transition planning by obtaining the voice of the trans\* young person, so they are fully involved in decisions around their future. Macrotime may also influence how EPs support schools as society's changing views around gender identity mean that it is likely that new policies and legislation will emerge. Therefore, EPs should stay up to date with these changes to inform their work.

## **6. Review**

This research study will now be reviewed through a discussion of strengths and potential constraints.

### **6.1 Strengths**

There is limited research in the UK exploring the perceptions of trans\* young people and their school experiences. The existing literature focuses more on the perceptions of transgender individuals (individuals whose gender identity is opposite from their assigned sex at birth) compared with trans\* individuals who have a variety



of gender identities (Freedman, 2019; Leonard, 2019). Moreover, there is also limited knowledge on the experiences and perspectives of trans\* young people with gender related concerns and SEN. Therefore, interviewing trans\* young people with SEN in the current study has provided significant insights on a wide range of school experiences from their own perspective.

Additionally, gathering parent/carers and staff views enabled me to gain a broader picture of the young people's experiences from different perspectives. Parents often explained similar events that their child had discussed but in more detail. They also described personal experiences that the young person may have felt uncomfortable sharing with me due to a lack of trust. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to expand on topics that they felt were more relevant to discuss. It allowed for flexibility within the interview as I may not have thought about certain topics due to being cisgender.

Furthermore, the methodology used within this study considered several factors such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's mental well-being and their SEN. The research involved a preparation phase to support the engagement of young people. The close contact with the AEP and several consultations with the headteacher ensured that good quality data was obtained whilst also securing the young people's rights to express their views. The additional meetings and options to take part in creative activities supported young people to build rapport with me, as well as feel more comfortable to express their views if direct verbal responses were too difficult. Moreover, young people and parent/carers expressed that having the questions sent in advance and an opportunity to draw prior to the interview was a

positive experience for them. It appeared to ease some of their anxieties which contributed to more in depth responses.

## **6.2 Potential Constraints**

Purposive sampling methods were used in this research as the AEP and participant groups were known to me. Consequently, the sample within this study may have been biased as I had a keen interest in the case school and had made relationships with staff members while working with them planning the research. Additionally, staff who opted to participate may have done so because they felt more confident in supporting trans\* young people with SEN. Therefore, the sample may not entirely represent the perceptions of all staff members within the AEP. However, it can be argued that as there is limited research on trans\* young people with SEN in the UK. The findings gathered from this case are still useful and provide a better understanding of the phenomena.

Data collection took place within the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The data collection procedures were flexible and completed in four stages to adhere to university and government restrictions. Therefore, not all participants were offered a face-to-face interview, instead they were given a choice to take part in interviews using various technologies. Parents and staff opted to conduct their interview over the telephone. Whilst this was an easier and cheaper option for both participants and the researcher, it has its disadvantages (Robson, 2011). The lack of face-to-face interactions during the interview removed the opportunity to develop a rapport. Additionally, it was not possible to read participants facial expressions and body language to gain an insight on how the interview was progressing especially when discussing sensitive topics i.e. personal views around gender. However, it can be

argued that if face-to-face interviews commenced during a period of high COVID-19 infections, face coverings would have been essential and anxieties around safety could have potentially distracted participants and impacted on the quality of data.

Furthermore, prior to the research taking place, I was informed by the headteacher of the AEP that the young people participating in the research had difficulties trusting unfamiliar adults and experience high levels of anxiety. Initially, it was suggested that I should visit the setting on numerous occasions to help the young people feel more comfortable, but this was not an option due to school closures at the time. Therefore, the young people were only able to meet me over two meetings. Although a good level of rapport was built in a short amount of time, more meaningful and trusting relationships with the young people may have yielded detailed responses, resulting in a better understanding of their personal experiences.

### **6.3 Future Research**

The trans\* young people who took part in the current study were asked to retrospectively discuss their mainstream school experiences. Further research in this field may want to focus on larger comparative studies exploring trans\* young people's current secondary school experiences and the support provided for their mental health and well-being. Additionally, it would be beneficial to also obtain mainstream school staff perceptions of supporting trans\* young people, particularly those with SEN.

Alternatively, further research may want to consider including a larger sample with participants from across the UK. It could involve participants from different backgrounds and educational settings or from a range of alternative educational

provisions. To further explore the commonalities and disparities across settings as there is a paucity of research within these contexts.

#### **6.4 Researcher Reflections**

The process of conducting this research was a very valuable learning opportunity for me. Conducting research in an unprecedented pandemic was challenging at best. However, it encouraged me to think creatively and use different methods including technology which contributed to my professional development. I was able to build a very good relationship with the headteacher at the AEP through numerous video and phone calls, this contribution to the planning and execution of the data collection phase was invaluable. It made me reflect on how EPs should consider conducting participatory research with young people themselves as this process can be empowering for them and may also yield better outcomes. I was able to build rapport with young people with SEN in only two meetings. This demonstrated that if there is a trusting adult who is genuinely interested in their views, trans\* young people are willing to share their experiences. It is also important that young people have a choice of how they would like to communicate their views, especially those who may have social communication difficulties.

Whilst undertaking this research, I have realised that there are gaps in knowledge across the EP profession. I have come across many colleagues and fellow trainees who have requested my support and advice on how to manage casework relating to trans\* children and young people. I hope that the current research findings can help improve EP knowledge and have useful and practical implications for the profession moving forward.

## 6.5 Conclusions

This research has provided a novel insight into the experiences and well-being of trans\* young people with SEN attending an AEP. It highlighted that on an individual level trans\* young people with SEN face additional challenges to their mental health and well-being, impacting on how they cope with school and personal life. However, it was not clear whether their social and emotional difficulties resulted from their SEN or whether they stemmed from difficulties understanding their gender.

Nevertheless, this research demonstrated that there were several contextual factors that appeared to negatively influence their well-being and gender affirmation. These factors included bullying, peer rejection, lack of recognition and inclusion, poor understanding and insufficient support from teachers for gender related concerns and educational needs. Contrastingly, contextual factors that supported well-being included inclusive and nurturing school ethos and practices, robust anti-discrimination policies which increased safety, opportunities for self-expression, therapeutic practices such as containment, supportive and understanding staff, family and peers who respected their gender and had more modern societal views around gender identity. This increased self-acceptance and affirmed their gender which positively influenced their mental health.

The findings derived from this research have significant implications for educational psychology practice. It has highlighted ways in which EPs can work across different systems, including individualised support for young people and parents, local service provision such as promoting inclusive practices and training in schools. Additionally, school improvement work and wider policy development at a local authority level can also educate and challenge societal views on gender over time. It is hoped that this

will promote change and improve the educational experiences of the trans\* population in the UK.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Young Person Information Sheet

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study.**

**Young Person Information Sheet**

Hi, my name is Pooja. I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. I often work with schools and young people to find out what helps them with their learning.

I am going to give you information about my research and ask if you would like to take part.

You can talk about this with your parents. You do not have to make a decision straight away.

You might have the following questions about the research. I have tried to answer them below.



**Why are you doing this research?**

I would like to find out about the experiences of young people who have concerns about gender or are interested in gender related issues, explore how they feel about school and what helps them to do their best.

**Why are you asking me?**

I am interested in what your experiences have been before attending your current school, how things have changed for you now and what support you receive to help you feel happy and do your best. It is very important to get your views.





### **Do I have to take part?**

It's up to you if you would like to take part in this research. If you do not want to take part in the study, you do not have to. If your parents agree, but you don't then you don't have to take part. If you say yes now, you can still change your mind later and that's OK.



### **Will you tell anyone what I say?**

I will not tell other people that you are taking part. I will not tell your parents or your school what we talk about, unless you say something that makes me worried about your safety, then I may need to speak to someone to make sure you are safe.

Some things you tell me will be used in a report, but your name will not be used. When the research is finished, I can meet with you to tell you the findings if you want me to.



### **What will happen if I take part?**

You will be asked to meet me so we can get to know each other better, this might take place online or in person. I will then give you a fun activity to do before we meet again to talk some more.

During the second meeting I will ask you some questions about your experiences at school. You can choose if you want me to send you the questions before to help you prepare. We will also do some more activities and talk about them. You do not have to answer every question or do all the activities if you do not want to. If you agree, I may audio record what we talk about, but only me and my supervisors will listen to the recording and it will be kept private.

## Data Protection Privacy Notice

If you are worried about how your personal information will be used, please ask your parents to contact UCL or email them at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

For more information, please visit this website:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice>

### Who can I talk to or ask questions?



You can ask your parents questions if you want to. Your parents also have my email address if you want to ask me any questions.



**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for thinking**



## Appendix 2: Parent Information Sheet

### Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study

#### Parent/Carer Information Sheet

**Department:** Psychology and Human Development

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher:** Pooja Mandalia,  
[pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk)

My name is Pooja Mandalia, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education, I am inviting you to take in part in my Doctoral Research Project.

I am hoping to find out about the experiences of young people whose gender may not be the same, or sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth (and may identify as trans\*). My focus is on the well-being of these young people who attend an Alternative Education Provision. Your child's participation is voluntary, and you should understand why the research is being done and what it will involve before deciding whether they should take part. Further information about the project is given in the answers to the questions below. This information sheet will try and answer any questions but please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know. Thank you for reading this.

**Additional note\*** Please also talk about this research to your child and discuss whether they would like to take part. I will seek consent from the young person directly and make it clear that they can drop out at any point without any negative consequences.

#### 1. What is the purpose of the research?

This is a doctoral research project. The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of young people who have gender related concerns and are attending an Alternative Education Provision. This will include their journey to the provision, what support they receive around their gender, how the provision has impacted their learning and well-being in school. This information is important to know as it can increase our knowledge on how best to support young people who have gender related concerns or issues in school.

#### 2. Why is my child being invited to take part?

Your child has been invited to take part in this research as they may have had discussions on gender related issues at school, and I am interested in exploring their experiences and how they feel about attending the school. As well as young people,

parents and school staff will be invited to take part to gain a broad overview of the young people's experiences within the provision.

### **3. What will happen if my child chooses to take part?**

If your child would like to participate, they will be offered a short drop-in session with me either in person or online. At this session we will get to know each other, and I will ask them about what they understand "doing well" and "feeling well" at school means to them. The first session is likely to last 15-20 minutes. I will then set them a creative activity to go away and complete before we meet for a longer conversation. The activity will include drawing a meaningful picture about the school and their experience or to take photos of a few things in school which are important to them.

During the second session we will have a longer conversation about their journey to the provision and their current experiences attending the school. The conversation will involve some activities to support your child express their views including talking about the pictures they completed. Each session is likely to last 45 to 60 minutes.

### **5. Will my child be recorded and how will the recording be used?**

During the interview, and with their consent, your child will be audio recorded and the audio recording will be used to help me draw out key themes from the interview (such as the things that have helped them at school). Only my research supervisors and I will have access to the recordings or transcriptions of the interviews. They will not be shared with anyone outside of the project and no other use will be made of it without your or your child's written permission. If after the interviews, you or your child wish to withdraw the recordings, you can do so within one month after the interviews have taken place as this is when I will start to anonymise the data.

### **6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no foreseen disadvantages or risks of taking part in the research and I will be giving your child a full debrief following the interview. Any unexpected discomforts, disadvantages, or risks during the research that you identify should be brought immediately to my attention. If your child does experience any discomfort or wishes to stop the interview at any point, they are entitled to do so. They will then, if needed, be signposted to the appropriate pastoral care available in the school and parents and school staff will be notified.

### **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There may not be any immediate benefits for those who choose to participate in the project, it is hoped that this research will inform the work of professionals working with young people and their families who are concerned about gender-related issues and identify ways to further support them.

### **8. Will my child's data in this project be kept confidential?**

The information that is collected during the course of the research will be kept confidential. Only my research supervisors and I will have access to your child's information. Any information your child shares during the course of the research and within the interview will be anonymised using pseudonyms and they will not be identified. If direct quotes are used within following reports or presentations, they will also be anonymised. All data gathered will be stored securely and encrypted.

### **9.Limits to confidentiality**

Confidentiality will be maintained if possible. However, if during the interview I hear anything which makes me worried that your child might be at risk of harm; I may have to disclose this information to relevant people within the school.

### **10. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

I plan on presenting the research findings within my doctoral research report and within presentations to professionals. At a later date the results may be written as an article for publication in an academic journal. A summary of key findings will be accessible for participants once the research has been completed.

### **11.Does my child have to take part?**

Taking part in this research is voluntary, so your child does not have to take part, it is entirely up to them. After discussing the research with your child, if they decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, your child can withdraw at any time during the research or up to one month after both interviews have taken place without giving a reason. If they withdraw, they will be asked what they would like to happen to the data they have provided up to that point. We hope that if your child does choose to be involved then they will find it a valuable experience.

### **12. Data Protection Privacy Notice**

The information to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: 'Public task' for personal data. We will be collecting personal data such as: names, phone numbers and email addresses to set up virtual or telephone interviews if required.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we can anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data, we will undertake this and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible. If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk).

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our policies &

'general' privacy notice at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice>

If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>

### **13. Contact for further information**

If you would like to ask any questions before you decide to take part, please email Pooja Mandalia who will provide as much information as possible. Alternatively, you can also email the research supervisor, Ian Warwick at [i.warwick@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:i.warwick@ucl.ac.uk).

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form, and return to [pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk).

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Ethics Review Process.

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research study.**





## Appendix 3: Staff Information Sheet

### Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study

#### Staff Information Sheet

**Department:** Psychology and Human Development

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher:** Pooja Mandalia,  
[pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk)

My name is Pooja Mandalia, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education, I am inviting you to take in part in my Doctoral Research Project.

I am hoping to find out about the experiences of young people whose gender may not be the same, or sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth (and may identify as trans\*). My focus is on the well-being of these young people who attend an Alternative Education Provision. As a member of school staff, your views, and experiences of how you support these young people is also important. If you want to know more about this research and what it will involve, further information about the project is given in the answers to the questions below. This information sheet will try and answer any questions but please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know. Thank you for reading this.

#### 1. What is the purpose of the Research?

This is a doctoral research project. The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of young people who may have gender related concerns and are attending an Alternative Education Provision. This will include their journey to the provision, what support they receive around their gender, how the provision has impacted their learning and well-being in school. This information is important to know as it can increase our knowledge on how best to support young people who have gender related concerns or issues in school.

#### 2. Why am I being invited to take part?

Staff at the provision are being invited to take part in this research because I am interested in exploring how the provision supports young people with gender related issues, how they promote their well-being and help them to do their best in school. As well as staff, parents and young people will be invited to take part to gain a broad overview of the young people's experiences within the provision.

#### 3. What will happen if I choose to take part?

If you would like to participate, you will take part in an individual interview online or in person. Each interview is likely to last between 30 to 45 minutes. In the interview you will be asked general questions about your role, information about school systems, culture and ethos and more specific questions on supporting trans\* young people you work closely with. You may also be observed within the school setting doing your normal day to day activities.

#### **4. Will I be recorded and how will the recording be used?**

During the interview, and with your consent, you will be audio recorded and the audio recording will be used to help me draw out key themes from the interview (such as the things that have helped young people at school). Only my research supervisors and I will have access to the recordings or transcriptions of the interviews. They will not be shared with anyone outside of the project and no other use will be made of it without your written permission. If after the interviews, you wish to withdraw the recordings, you can do so within a month after the interview has taken place as this is when I will start to anonymise the data.

#### **5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no foreseen disadvantages or risks of taking part in the research and I will be giving a debrief following the interview. Any unexpected discomforts, disadvantages or risks during the research should be brought immediately to my attention. If you do experience any discomfort or wish to stop the interview at any point, you are entitled to do so. You will then be signposted to the appropriate pastoral care available.

#### **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

This research may help inform best practice and whole school policy on how best to support trans\* young people with their learning and well-being at school and any areas for development.

#### **8. Will my data in this project be kept confidential?**

The information that is collected during the research will be kept confidential. Only my research supervisors and I will have access to your information. Any information you share during the research and within the interview will be anonymised using pseudonyms and you will not be identified. If direct quotes are used within following reports or presentations, they will also be anonymised. All data gathered will be stored securely and encrypted.

#### **9. Limits to confidentiality**

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless during the interviews I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be at risk of harm; in that instance I might have to inform relevant people within the school.

## **10. What will happen to the results?**

The results of the research project will be presented within a doctoral research report and within presentations. The results may be written as an article for publication in an academic journal. A summary of key findings will be accessible for participants once the research has been completed.

## **11. Do I have to take part?**

Taking part in this research is voluntary, so you do not have to take part, it is entirely up to you. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you can withdraw at any time during the research or up to one month after the interviews have taken place without giving a reason. If you withdraw, you will be asked what you would like to happen to the data you have provided up to that point. We hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience.

## **12. Data Privacy Notice**

The information to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: 'Public task' for personal data. We will be collecting personal data such as: names, phone numbers and email addresses to set up virtual or telephone interviews if required.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we can anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data, we will undertake this and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible. If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk).

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice>

If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>

## **13. Contact for further information**

If you would like to ask any questions before you decide to take part, please email Pooja Mandalia who will provide as much information as possible. Alternatively, you can also email the research supervisor, Ian Warwick at [i.warwick@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:i.warwick@ucl.ac.uk).

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form, and return to [pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:pooja.mandalia.19@ucl.ac.uk).

This research has been approved by the UCL IOE Ethical Review Process.

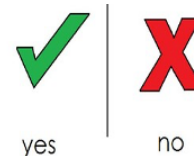
**Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in the study.**








Appendix 4: Young Person Consent Form

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study**

**Young Person Consent Form**

Please read the statements below and tick either YES or NO.



	I understand what this research is about, and I know I can discuss it with an adult if I need to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I know that I don't have to answer any questions and can stop being involved in the research at any time during the interview or until one month after without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I understand that anything I speak about will not be shared with my school or parents unless it is related to something dangerous or harmful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I understand that what I say may be written in Pooja's report, but my name will not be used.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I am happy to take part in activities with Pooja related to this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I agree that what I say can be audio-recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I know that I can ask Pooja anything about the research, in person or in an email.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I agree to take part in the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Contact Details/ Phone number:

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**Appendix 5: Parent Consent Form**

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study**

**Parent Consent Form**

Please read the statements below and choose the option that is most appropriate for you:

**YES | NO**

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet about the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw from the research up to one month after the interview and if I do, I can choose if any data I have contributed can be used or not.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that I can withdraw from the interview at any point.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the information I have submitted will be written up in a doctoral research project and that the findings may be used in the future for publication purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be audio recorded during the interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that short direct quotes may be used in reports or presentations (these will be anonymised).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have understood how my data will be protected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if it was felt that a child was at risk of harm.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am aware of who I should contact for further enquiries.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Contact Details/ Phone Number:

Print Name and Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 6: Staff Consent Form

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young People Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study**

**Staff Consent Form**

Please read the statements below and choose the option that is most appropriate for you:

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet about the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw from the research up to one month after the interview and if I do, I can choose if any data I have contributed can be used or not.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that I can withdraw from the interview at any point.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the information I have submitted will be written up in a doctoral research project and that the findings may be used in the future for publication purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be audio recorded during the interview and possibly be observed in the setting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that short direct quotes may be used in reports or presentations (these will be anonymised).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have understood how my data will be protected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example due to safeguarding concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am aware of who I should contact for further enquiries.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Role/Contact Details/ Phone Number:

Print Name and Signature

Date

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Appendix 7: Young Person’s Activity Sheet

**Exploring the Experiences of Trans\* Young Attending an Alternative Education Provision: A Multi-Informant Case Study.**

**Young Person’s Research Activity**

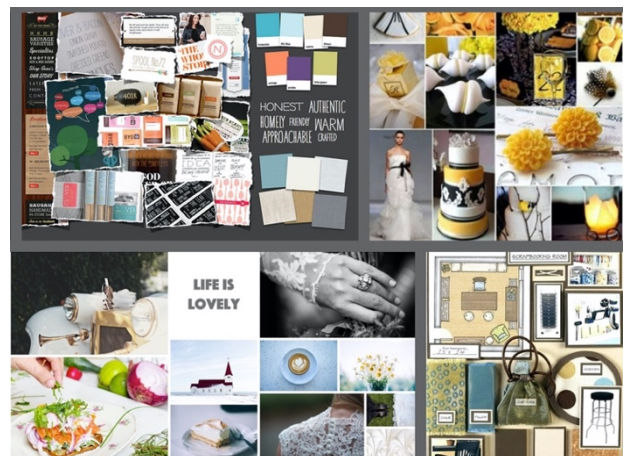
Before we meet again next week, if you want to, can you draw a picture of your school life **before** and **after** you started at x school. You might want to think about the following things to help you:

- Things you enjoyed
- Things you found difficult
- Your feelings about school
- Your feelings about yourself or your gender
- Relationships with teachers, friends, parents
- Important memories you feel comfortable sharing.
- Changes you have noticed
- Anything that has made going to school worse or better.



If you do not want to draw, you can also create a collage of different pictures, materials and text which relate to your thoughts and feelings around school life **before** and **after** you started at x school.

If you choose an activity, I will meet you again and we will talk about what you have drawn/created to help you answer some questions. If you prefer to just talk and answer the questions that is also fine.





## **Research Questions**

*I will be asking you the following questions when we meet next:*

1. What were you doing before coming to x school?
2. What was good about your previous school/s?
3. What did you struggle with or find challenging at your previous school/s?
4. How do you feel about being at x school?
5. How have teachers or other adults supported you to feel positive and do your best in school?
6. I understand that you are particularly concerned about your gender or interested in gender related issues. Could you tell me what issues you have talked about at school or at home?
7. What support have you received at school around gender or any gender-related issues you may have experienced?
8. How have teachers and students helped you to feel more confident and open about your gender?
9. What support have you received outside of school?
10. Have you thought about what you might want to do after you leave this school?

## Appendix 8: Interview Guide for Parent

### Interview Guide for Parents

#### Introduction:

- *Thank you for agreeing to take part*
- *Reminder of purpose of study*
- *Consent – talk through, agree and their right to withdraw.*
- *Reminder of confidentiality explain what anonymity is, what the implications are and how I am going to ensure it.*
- *Reminder to ask clarifying questions if there is anything, they are unsure about during interview.*
- *Check they are still happy to take part and to be audio recorded.*

#### Rapport Building

- Can you tell me how old your child is and what year group they are in?
- How long has your child been at this alternative provision?

#### Questions

1. What brought your child to this school?
  - i. *What events happened prior to attending this school?*
  - ii. *Why do you think they are here?*
  
2. Can you tell me about your child's experiences at their previous school/setting?
  - i. *How were they coping or managing learning in that setting?*
  - ii. *How supportive was the school in regard to their learning needs?*
  - iii. *In regard to issues with their gender identity?*
  - iv. *What would you have liked them to do differently to better support your child?*
  - v. *Better support you as a parent?*
  
3. What were your expectations for your child's current school?
  - i. *In regard to specific support available to meet your child's needs.*
  - ii. *In regard to specific support for young people with gender related issues?*
  - iii. *Support and communication with parents.*
  
4. What would you say are you child's learning needs?
  - i. *Do they have any particular diagnoses – such as medical or by the school/EdPsych?*
  - ii. *What are they particularly good at?*
  - iii. *What challenges do they face when at school?*
  - iv. *How does your child understand their difficulties?*
  
5. Can you tell me about your child's concerns or interests in regard to their gender?
  - i. *How do they feel about their gender?*
  - ii. *What questions, if any, do they have about their gender?*

- iii. *When did you notice they had issues about their gender identity?*
  - iv. *What has helped them?*
6. If your child has already transitioned to their preferred gender.
- i. *How did it happen? i.e. the process, at this school/previous school.*
  - ii. *How did they tell other people e.g. family/school staff/peers?*
  - iii. *How do you feel about the changes to their gender and the impact on their school and family life?*
7. What support have you provided for your child at home?
- Prompts*
- i. *In relation to their learning or additional needs?*
  - ii. *In regard to their gender identity?*
  - iii. *During the COVID-19 Pandemic?*
8. What does the school do well?
- i. In regard to supporting your child in general i.e. learning and doing their best?
    - a. *Promoting positive feelings towards school, feeling well and happy at school?*
  - ii. *Supporting you as a parent/carer understand your child's difficulties and support their learning and development?*
    - b. *During the COVID-19 Pandemic and home schooling?*
    - c. *Why is this important?*
  - iii. In regard to supporting your child with gender related issues.
    - a. *Bullying and discrimination, understanding their gender etc.*
    - b. *Inclusion and social acceptance.*
    - c. *Promoting confidence in their gender?*
    - d. *Why is this important?*
  - i. Supporting you as a parent/carer deal with gender related issues and conversations at home?
    - a. *Why is this important?*
  - iv. What types of support is offered to you or your child? e.g. referrals or signposting.
    - a. *How has this been helpful?*
9. What do you think the school could do differently to better support you and your child?
- i. *In regard to their learning at school and doing their best?*
  - ii. *In regard to supporting and addressing any gender related issues?*
  - iii. *In regard to their feelings towards school, feeling well and happy?*
  - iv. *Supporting you as a parent?*
  - v. *The types of support offered to you or your child.*
  - vi. *During COVID-19 Pandemic and home schooling?*

10. What changes, if any, have you noticed in your child since they started attending this school?

- i. How do they feel about themselves and their confidence in their gender?*
- ii. Impact on learning and attitude towards school*
- iii. Impact on social relationships e.g. child's friends/ peers/adults.*
- iv. How do they deal with problems and overcome challenges? In general, and in relation to gender.*

11. What are the best ways in communicating and engaging with your child in their interview?

- i. How do they usually engage with new adults?*
- ii. What helps them to feel comfortable?*
- iii. What communication strategies have worked well in the past?*

**Thank the participant and ask if there are any further requests regarding supplying them with more details.**

## Appendix 9: Interview Guide for Young Person

### Interview Guide for Young Person

- Welcome the young person, ask about their day and how they are feeling, reminder of study etc.
- *Thank you for agreeing to take part*
- *Reminder of purpose of study*
- *Consent – talk through, agree and their right to withdraw.*
- *Reminder of confidentiality explain what anonymity is, what the implications are and how I am going to ensure it.*
- *Reminder to ask clarifying questions if there is anything, they are unsure about during interview.*
- *Check they are still happy to take part and to be audio recorded.*

#### **Activity: Reintroduce the collage/drawing task**

(Share important pictures which they drew and discuss, intertwine the questions when talking where relevant)

Can we talk about the photos or the drawing you have completed about school?

- i. *Why have you chosen these pictures?*
- ii. *Can you describe what you have drawn?*

11. What were you doing before coming to x school?

*Prompts*

- i. *Why do you think you are here now?*

12. What was good about your previous school?

*Prompts*

- i. *How did you feel about attending your previous school?*
- ii. *How were your relationships with teachers and the students?*
- iii. *What could have been better about your previous school?*

13. What did you struggle with or find challenging at your previous school?

*Prompts*

- i. *In regard to relationships with teachers/students, schoolwork, school environment etc.*
- ii. *What support was available to you at school?*
- iii. *Tell me about a time you needed help and how staff/students responded?*
- iv. *If anything, what do you think they could have done differently to support you better?*

14. How do you feel about being at this school?

*Prompts*

- i. *What is good about this school?*
- ii. *How do you get on with teachers and students?*
- iii. *What do you find challenging at this school?*

15. How have staff supported you to feel positive and do your best at school?

*Prompts*

- i. How have they tried to get to know you and what you need?*
- ii. How have they helped you to feel well and happy?*
- iii. How does the school make you to feel safe? e.g., preventing bullying/discrimination.*
- iv. How have they helped you deal with problems at school?*
- v. How have they helped you during the COVID-19 Lockdowns?*
- vi. What could they to better support you?*

16. A reason that I was interested in talking with you was because school staff have said you are particularly concerned about gender or interested in gender related issues. Could you tell me what issues you have talked about?

*Prompts*

- i. Why have you talked about these issues?*
- ii. What has been helpful and supportive when discussing these issues at school?*
- iii. What topics or issues would you like to talk more about and why?*

17. What support have you received at school around gender or any gender-related issues you have experienced?

*Prompts.*

- i. If you changed gender identity at this school, how did the school support you and manage this?*
- ii. Tell me how school staff support you if you are upset, if someone doesn't understand your gender or misunderstands you?*
- iii. How do they make you feel accepted and included in all school activities? Can you give an example?*
- iv. How have they supported you or your parents at home or in the community?*
- v. What could the school do to better support young people who want to talk about gender related issues?*
  - a. Why would this be helpful?*

18. How have staff and students in this school supported you to feel confident expressing your gender?

*Prompts*

- i. Tell me about how gender is talked about in this school?*
- ii. How do teachers or students talk about gender with you?*
- iii. What support, if any has the school offered to help you better understand your gender identity and therefore make you feel confident?*
- iv. How have they helped you to think positively about gender related issues?*
- v. Are your experiences talking about gender different in this school compared to your previous school or setting? If so, why?*
- vi. Why is this important?*

19. What support have you received outside of school?

- i. In regard to learning, ASD, gender related issues etc.*

- ii. At home.*
- iii. In the community?*
- iv. What support would you have liked and found helpful?*

20. Have you thought about what you might want to do after you leave this school?

- i. If so, what are your aspirations?*
- ii. How do you feel the school have prepared you for when you leave?*
  - a. To do well and feel well*
  - b. To feel ok about your gender*
- iii. What support do you feel you might need to be better prepared?*

21. Is there anything else I haven't asked about that you feel is important for me to know?

**Thank the participant and ask if there are any further requests regarding supplying them with more details.**

## Appendix 10: Interview Guide for Staff

### Interview Guide - Staff

#### Introduction

- *Thank you for agreeing to take part*
- *Reminder of purpose of study*
- *Consent – talk through, agree and their right to withdraw.*
- *Reminder of confidentiality explain what anonymity is, what the implications are and how I am going to ensure it.*
- *Reminder to ask clarifying questions if there is anything, they are unsure about during interview.*
- *Check they are still happy to take part and to be audio recorded.*

#### *General Questions to start with...*

- Can you describe your role at this provision?
  - How long have you worked at the provision?
1. I understand that there are young people within the provision who have issues related to their gender identity along with other needs. Can you tell me what you perceive the range of needs are for this group of young people?
    - i. *In relation to mental health*
    - ii. *In relation to ASD and learning*
    - iii. *How are the range of needs different or similar to other young people in the provision who don't have issues related to their gender?*
  2. What strategies and practices are used to build positive relationships with the young people you support?
    - i. *How do support the young people to engage and communicate with you?*
    - ii. *Why is it important to do this?*
    - iii. *Is there anything different you do to engage with young people who have issues related to gender? Young people with ASD?*
    - iv. *How have you helped young people retain a sense of connection to the school and staff during the Covid-19 Pandemic?*
  3. How does the school design support strategies for prospective young people when they start at the school?
    - i. *How do you find out about the young person's needs and plan for their arrival?*
    - ii. *What strategies are in place to support them to settle into school?*
    - iii. *Support for young people who have issues related to gender.*
    - iv. *Strategies for young people who have additional needs i.e., mental health and ASD.*
  4. How do you support young people to do their best at school?
    - i. *What support strategies are in place and how are these decided?*
    - ii. *How do you support them to learn and achieve?*
      - a. *In general, and throughout Covid-19...*
    - iii. *How do you support them to overcome challenges at school?*



- iv. *How do you support them to feel confident and happy?*
  - v. *Are there any specific support strategies used with young people with gender related issues and those with ASD?*
  - vi. *How have you supported young people remain positive and hopeful to come back to school during Covid-19?*
  - vii. *What has worked well? Are there any areas for improvement?*
5. What are the school's views or perspectives on gender and gender identity?
- i. *How do you understand gender?*
  - ii. *How does this perspective inform your work with young people?*
  - iii. *How is the topic discussed within school i.e. with teachers/students?*
  - iv. *Is the topic currently a part of the national curriculum?*
6. How does the school support young people who are experiencing gender-related difficulties?
- i. *What strategies are used to make these young people feel their decisions are respected and listened to?*
  - ii. *What do you do if they need help to understand their gender?*
  - iii. *What do you do to help ensure they are included in the school community?*
  - iv. *How do you support young people feel positive and confident to talk to you with regard to gender-related issues?*
    - a. *Why this way? How successful? Areas for improvement?*
7. What school systems and practices are in place to deal with bullying and discrimination amongst young people?
- i. *How do you support young people to feel safe in and around school?*
  - ii. *Is there anything different you do to help young people experiencing gender related issues or with ASD?*
  - iii. *In what other ways do you try to promote young people's safety in school and within the home or community?*
    - a. *Why this way? How successful? Areas for improvement?*
8. What are the current school practices around communicating and supporting parents?
- v. *How does the school engage and interact with parents?*
    - a. *Why this way? How successful? Areas for improvement?*
  - vi. *Support them with their child's learning and development?*
  - vii. *During the COVID-19 pandemic*
    - a. *Support home-schooling?*
  - viii. *Why do you think this is important?*
  - ix. *How successful? Areas for improvement?*
9. How does the school prepare young people to leave the setting?
- i. *How do you support their aspirations?*
  - ii. *What strategies and practices are used to help them feel confident and do well?*
  - iii. *Are there particular strategies used for those concerned about their own gender-related issues?*

10. During the research process, what strategies did you find helpful which supported the involvement of school staff, young people and parents?
- i. How did you feel about being involved in the research planning?*
  - ii. How do you feel this impacted on the quality of information obtained?*
  - iii. What were the benefits of being involved?*
  - iv. What else do you think could have supported participant engagement?*
11. Is there anything else that we haven't covered and is important for me to know?

**Thank the participant and ask if there are any further requests regarding supplying them with more details.**

## Appendix 11: School Consultation Record

Consultations	Main Discussion Points	Actions
1 <sup>st</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreed the research and identified priorities to match the school’s development plan to reduce barriers to learning for trans* children and young people.</li> <li>• Clarified the number of potential participants that would take part, their gender identity, additional needs and diagnosis.</li> </ul>	<p>Researcher to keep school updated on research agenda.</p>
2 <sup>nd</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussed the children and young people’s diagnosis and new potential participants arriving at the setting.</li> <li>• Discussed the importance of building rapport with children and young people before any interviews starts.</li> <li>• Short introductory session discussed as a good first step.</li> <li>• Discussed possibility to meet children and young people virtually or in person whichever option is available.</li> </ul>	<p>Researcher to check with university whether in person research is still going ahead.</p>
3 <sup>rd</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussed Covid-19 related issues to conduct in person research and the lockdowns impact on the young people including barriers towards attendance, learning and participation.</li> <li>• Information shared on how best to engage with children and young people online e.g. they don’t like using the camera online, instant message may be an option or use of telephone calls</li> <li>• Discussed any opportunities to observe the staff debriefs and share school policies.</li> <li>• Data collection method of using “river of life” shared with school.</li> </ul>	<p>School to review data collection method and check its suitability.</p> <p>School to check in with young people about how they feel talking about their past and present school experiences with an unfamiliar adult.</p>

4 <sup>th</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Started to plan for data collection during COVID-19 pandemic as infections had risen and national lockdown started.</li> <li>• Discussed Plan A to conduct telephone interviews with parents and virtual meetings with students and staff.</li> <li>• Plan B was in person meetings with young people as this was preferred by both students and staff when possible, to help build rapport.</li> </ul>	<p>Researcher to decide which plan to move forward with.</p>
5 <sup>th</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update on children and young people returning to school and interest in taking part in the research.</li> <li>• Discussion about research agenda and ethical considerations.</li> <li>• Discussion about using concepts like the “river of life” but this was not a good idea due to the children and young people being very literal and having ASD. Drawings and photography within the interview were agreed as it works well with this group of children and young people.</li> <li>• Discussed the research title being changed to not deter children and young people from taking part who don’t like the trans* label.</li> <li>• Planned research starting with parents first and in person/virtual visits taking place after GCSEs and by the end of summer term with the children and young people in year 11 as they due to leave.</li> <li>• Discussed that the school will hand out information and consent sheets to participants</li> </ul>	<p>Researcher to update school on ethical application being approved.</p> <p>Send consent and information sheets to be disseminated by school.</p>

	and provide children and young people with a chance to meet me online if they wished to discuss the research.	
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## Appendix 12: Description of Thematic Analysis

Step	Description of Step
<i>Step 1: Familiarisation of Data</i>	<p>The researcher conducted the interviews, so some familiarity with the data had already been established. After each interview, points of interest were noted. The researcher then transcribed the audio recordings which involved using a transcribing software to produce the initial transcript. The researcher reviewed the transcripts and listened to the audio several times to make sure they were accurate, correct any mistakes and omit any identifiable names or locations. The researcher also sent transcripts to participants to review and check for accuracy. This allowed the researcher to become more immersed in the data.</p> <p>Whilst transcription was taking place, the researcher also used supervision sessions to reflect on emerging concepts with supervisors to aid the generation of codes.</p>
<i>Step 2: Generating Initial Codes</i>	<p>NVivo is a data analysis computer software and it was used to support the development of initial codes. Specific folders were made for each participant and the transcript was uploaded to it. The researcher then reviewed the individual transcripts and meaningful parts of data were labelled as a 'code' matching the participants language where possible.</p> <p>For each of the transcripts the researcher then categorised the existing codes into similar groups or concepts and labelled them as a subtheme. These subthemes allowed for the development of possible themes in the next stage.</p>
<i>Step 3: Generating Themes</i>	<p>The researcher reviewed the subthemes across all individual transcripts and across each participant group e.g. young people, parent, staff and started to generate possible themes on 'post it' notes. These were arranged and rearranged until a physical thematic map was produced.</p> <p>The researcher reviewed the initial codes and sub themes once again to ensure important data was included. Once the researcher was happy with the potential themes and sub themes and its organisation. The researcher then created a thematic map on NVivo to share the themes with supervisors electronically.</p>

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<i>Step 4: Reviewing Themes</i>	<p>The researchers' supervisors were sent thematic maps for each participant group e.g. young people, parent and staff along with extracts from a transcript to review codes, sub themes and overarching themes. This was to reflect on the interpretations and reduce any researcher bias. Supervision sessions were used to talk through the themes, rename and change them.</p>
<i>Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes</i>	<p>Due to time constraints only staff participants were offered an opportunity to reflect on the themes and subthemes. The pastoral manager (Staff B) and a new head teacher who did not take part in the research attended the meeting. A one-hour meeting was held on Microsoft Teams to discuss their thoughts on the findings and if anything had surprised them. The staff reported that the findings were interesting, but nothing had surprised them. They had queries for one subtheme but after discussing what it represented, they felt it resonated with the culture of the AEP. No changes were made as they agreed with all themes.</p>
<i>Step 6: Finalising and writing the report</i>	<p>Chapter 4 displays an account of the findings, and they are further discussed in comparison to previous literature and research questions in Chapter 5.</p>

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Appendix 13: Example of Coded Transcript Transcription of Interview with Riley	Codes	Sub Themes	Themes
<p>Pooja Mandalia Can you tell me about how you felt when you moved to XX school what was going well for you there?</p> <p>Riley Well, I remember thinking it will be like any school, it's going to be shit, I'm going to get bullied I'm going to hate it. Then I just remember going there and there was not well there's not many people in XXX and thought it's too small, this isn't right surely loads of kids aren't in today or something but no just was always sort of like that and all the teachers always actually cared about you and your all your sort of mental health and well-being and you know, they were happy for you when you were happy or when you were sad they got sad. And they physically and emotionally cared for us which was good. I just knew I was in a in a safe place and a lot of that stress depression went away still anxiety, but I mean I still face that every bloody day so that has nothing to do with school but just a lot of the anxiety a lot of distress and depression really calmed down.</p> <p>Pooja Mandalia Why do you think that is? What did the teachers do specifically to make that happen?</p> <p>Riley Well at first it wasn't so much the teachers or so much the students weren't like you know dickheads like they were decent</p>	<p>Small comfortable environment for learning</p> <p>Teachers genuinely care about you</p> <p>Students are nice.</p>	<p>School Environment and Policy</p> <p>Student-Teacher Relationships</p> <p>Psychologically Safety, Security and Containment</p>	<p>School Climate</p> <p>School Relationships</p> <p>Mental Well-being and Additional Needs</p>



<p>people just like decent nice people, like you know they weren't rude they actually you know, sort of cared about the other students wasn't getting bullied so that's when I just started to calm down.</p>	<p>Students support and understand each other as they are all similar</p>	<p>Peer Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>
<p>Every time there was something that went a little bit wrong, or I was naturally just having a bad day I was able to identify multiple members of staff that I can connect with and talk to which made me feel safe because at my previous school if my mum emailed regarding a situation that I found tricky. It might take them almost a week or two to even just respond in the email, but you know people at XXX just do it that night or that day you know so if my mum emailed at 2.30 you get a response at 5 that evening. It would always be you know that day you'll get a response back or if it was too late you would get a response back in the morning, so the teachers cared about the work they do, they'll actually be nice, and they always made sure they always checked up on us and always made sure we felt safe or calm. It's a very quiet and calm environment to be and learn in and it was very positive.</p>	<p>Available and Reliable Staff</p>	<p>Student- Teacher Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>
<p>Pooja Mandalia So, you said the students made you feel calm? And how did they do that? Did they do anything specific for you to feel that way?</p>	<p>Prompt and Consistent Support</p>	<p>Psychological Safety, Security and Containment</p>	<p>Mental Well-Being and Additional Needs</p>
<p>Riley Well not really just because everyone who has been at XXX roughly has experienced the same sort of thing as me, they may have experienced them harder or not as hard as me, but we all had come from some sort of certain place. We sort of knew what can give like tick us off or sort of what could go bad.</p>	<p>Small comfortable environment for learning</p>	<p>School Environment and Policy</p>	<p>School Climate</p>
<p></p>	<p>Students support and understand each</p>	<p>Peer Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>

<p>Then just in any time, you know, a member of staff might have got something wrong or whoever is teaching us they would just always apologise if it's made us stressed or anxious, just you know the number of times they check in with us, the amount of times they try and make it very secure and a small environment. Just seeing people in the class and then you sometimes get broken up and taken outside or into a different class and so it doesn't feel crowded. And it's just a lot of small, calm lessons. Like they tried to make sure the lessons are quiet and there isn't too much going on. We were allowed to have breaks if we need to some at last school would think I would be trying to slack off in the lesson and have a break but XXX understood if I need a break, I need a break and they always just taken ideas from the students and just always tried to include everyone and listen to what they need.</p> <p>Pooja Mandalia Okay, yeah, that sounds really good and did you have any friendships at XXX? And how did that help you?</p> <p>Riley Yeah, I did. I got close with I think someone in year nine, which unfortunately split into sort of a big drama for the whole time was that it's up and down, up and down, up and down but I also had a really good group of friends too that really helped make my experience at this school better.</p> <p>Pooja Mandalia And how did they make you feel included? And, you know, were you able to express yourself in terms of the way you feel inside about your gender and sexuality?</p>	<p>other as they are all similar</p> <p>Constant Checking in on Students</p> <p>Small comfortable environment for learning</p> <p>Positive interactions with peers</p>	<p>Psychologically Safety, Security and Containment</p> <p>Co-producing Person-Centred Strategies</p> <p>School Environment and Policy</p> <p>Peer Relationships</p>	<p>Mental Well-being and Additional Needs</p> <p>School Climate</p> <p>School Relationships</p>
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<p>Riley Weirdly enough, like it wasn't my plan this way at all. But you sort of realise. Yes, and sort of getting to know each other was a lot of them were LGBT. Besides, besides one of them, I think was a group of five of us and four out of five, were all LGBT, it was just sort of quite a nice, like shock and surprise. So, we sort of understood each other from sort of where we've come from, and how we sort of feel about our identities and why it and did they do anything else specific to sort of help you with anything, or make you feel a little bit more comfortable?</p>	<p>Students support and understand each other as they are all similar</p>	<p>Peer Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>
<p>Riley They just listened to me when I was feeling upset. You know, they wouldn't sort of you know, listen to me for five seconds, then start talking about themselves. So, they like cared and they would listen to you. And that just made me feel sort of accepted as I was and wanted.</p>	<p>All students and staff respect each other</p>	<p>Inclusion and Diversity</p>	<p>School Climate</p>
<p>Pooja Mandalia And what my relationships with the staff members was how was that? Can you explain or describe relationships with them?</p>	<p>Accepting of Individual Differences and LGBT Friendly</p>	<p>Peer Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>
<p>Riley I got close to two of them mostly my mentor. That's what we had at mentors, my mentors. Luckily, the head of XX, so that worked perfectly so if I needed something done, he could get something done. Then the other person needs to talk to was the pastoral manager who everybody talked to. She was lovely. so those are sort of my two main people I'd always go to when I was stressed and you know when one is busy. I would be able to go to the other even after that. So, it's just a lot of good</p>	<p>Students support and understand each other as they are all similar</p>	<p>Student-Teacher Relationships</p>	<p>School Relationships</p>
	<p>Available and Reliable</p>		
	<p>Genuinely Care about you</p>		

<p>support for me. Adults who work there, they care about the students, and they treat you like their own kids which is nice.</p> <p>Pooja Mandalia Did they do anything specific to support you with understanding your gender?</p> <p>Riley It was December I think it was 2018. I had a lot of chats with my sibling who's now non-binary as well. Like they came up after me and we had chats about identity. So I concluded that I was non-binary and we told my parents and then the first people I wanted to tell before sort of outside of school friends and family was school because they've experienced a transgender student year before me, so I knew like they were ready for something like this. So, I remember going in a few days after coming back from Christmas told XX about it, she had a meeting with my mum and dad in about a week. They've got my pronouns, got the name Riley, they spread it to all the classes and to all the teachers and it was just like that it's just a really smooth transition they made. So far there have only been a couple of other ones I think trans students came to the school. So, I think that was like blue door for the boys toilets and I think maybe a pink door for the girls toilets. I can't remember what colour but they just painted the doors the same colour and just stuck the name whatever on there, so they were able to just make the toilets completely gender neutral which really helped and then they would always try and you know, if LGBT month or trans week would come up they would try to make a decent thing out of it to make the students feel included.</p>	<p>Accepting of Individual Differences and LGBT Friendly</p> <p>Use of language and correct pronouns</p> <p>Normalising Gender Differences</p> <p>Accepting of Individual Differences and LGBT Friendly</p>	<p>Inclusion and Diversity</p> <p>Views around Gender</p>	<p>School Climate</p>
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